

# The Top 10 Rules for Managing Your Time

*The best of Business Management Daily's advice*

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**Why is it that with all the technology we've developed  
in the last fifty years...  
...and all the efficiencies we've discovered...  
we spend just as many hours working as our parents  
and grandparents did?**

**In this special report, we've collected the best of  
Business Management Daily's advice on dealing with  
the never-ceasing time crushes that stress us out and  
make us feel we're getting nowhere. Block out a little  
time now to read so you can conserve more later!**





## **Rule #1 Set hard boundaries**

Ever looked into a cat's eyes and quickly understood that it would allow you no closer than a certain boundary? Corporate speaker and trainer Fred Kniggendorf says that there's a certain genius to that brand of iciness. Cats tend to draw lines in the sand, cast a baleful eye at unwelcome intrusion and cling steadfast to their top priorities. When it comes to time management, you could do worse than emulating the way they set norms and adhere to them.

Even now someone is approaching your office with a problem—it's either going to be a productive 12-second conversation or a 12-minute infinite loop. Will you put up boundaries like a cat would, or will you watch the minutes just tick away while emails mount and another time-eating problem without a solution is laid at your feet?

### **Establish and protect your norm**

Time management begins with deciding what you want normal to look like, then visualizing it. Write out a wish list on paper. It might read:

- "I wish Accounting would know how to do some of the things I do."
- "I wish Everett would respect my privacy."
- "I wish I could stop accepting roles on committees that don't do much of anything."

When your list is done, it's time to go into "full warrior mode." Announce your decision to start streamlining your time to anyone who might be affected by it; this way they understand the importance of what you're trying to do, plus you're more likely to adhere to a program you've broadcast to the world. The arc of your lifestyle change begins here. Imagine what your typical day will look like when the transformation is complete: That's the arc's end, the ideal to keep in mind throughout this journey.

Now, back to that wish list: One by one, identify the source of each problem. Chances are, you know exactly who's to blame, even if sometimes it's yourself. To begin with, stop letting the office be a giant game of Whack-a-Mole, with you quashing every little issue that springs up. Thinking in terms of "If *this* happens, *here* is what I'm going to do," decide on a strong default position to adopt when a

minor problem is dropped at your door. Make those who drop it embrace a very clunky but very useful acronym: DBMPBMS – Don't bring me problems, bring me solutions. It looks great on a sign; try it.

“Teach people to fish,” Kniggendorf says, “because control breeds dependency.” The more you solve things for others, the more comfortable they become never having to think about them. Don't patch a problem just to get through till next month; create a solution for it so it'll never haunt you again. If you solve the same problem for two different people on two different days, you should hear a giant buzzer go off in your mind. Behavior tolerated is behavior approved.

### **De-access**

After deciding how you're going to thwart your co-workers from stealing your time, examine what else is slowing you down. Sit at your desk and look around you. “Clutter breeds confusion,” Kniggendorf advises; to beat it, try sometime to literally move everything out of your office. As each object tries to get back in, examine it heartlessly and make it justify itself to your workday.

Abandon sentimentality. We all have sacred cows we hate to get rid of, but as Kniggendorf likes to say, “Sacred cows often make the best burgers.” If that giant procedures binder you worked for three years to complete has no actual use anymore, kiss it goodbye. You can talk about those three years fondly around a campfire sometime, but the binder is now clutter.

### **Save your steps**

If you've ever been on crutches, you're familiar with the concept of grouping your tasks when you're challenged to hobble from the living room to the kitchen. In the office life, this doesn't just mean asking the right questions at meetings so you don't have to suffer through another one. Think of your emails, and how in trying to provide information you can leave the conversation open to creating long chains of thank-yous or clarifications. Take the lead and let people know exactly what you intend to do about an issue, and by what time, if you don't hear back from them.

Think even of your voice mail message—does it demand what you really want to know from people? “Please leave your name, number, the reason you're calling, what you need and when you'll be available for a call-back.” That's assertive, clear and resolute, as is “No reply needed” on an email message. Eliminate terms like “urgent” and “ASAP”; get *specific* and steps will be saved. You might even try an ‘EOM’ in a subject line, meaning “end of message.” If it's visible in a pop-up when

the email comes through, you just saved someone the trouble of even having to open it.

### **Beat your soft addictions**

“Stop glorifying the concept of ‘busy’,” Kniggendorf advises. There are many ways to feel like you’re doing something when you’re really not. LinkedIn, email, Twitter, shopping online for stuff you really do need ... those are the easy targets to hone in on. But consider also whether you’ve become someone *else’s* soft addiction. Do you listen too much to co-workers’ stories? Do you allow them to triangulate their complaints, acting as a sympathetic sounding board for them rather than insisting they take their issue directly to the one person who can actually help them?

Are you doing the same thing at home, wasting time by making your family listen to work problems they can’t possibly solve, because you’ve become addicted to their empathy? Office drama itself can make us feel busy even as it produces nothing, so lose it.

### **Massage your to-do lists**

To-do lists truly are an excellent daily snapshot of what you need to get done, and it can feel mighty fine to cross out each item. An efficient list should consist of three simple categories:

- *Important AND urgent*
- *Important but NOT urgent*
- *Nice to do* (Ah ha! A category of items you should be delegating to your interrupters—those folks who likely popped up on your original wish list.)

And with any to-do list, remember the Two-Minute Rule: If something will take less than two minutes to complete, do it now rather than making the list longer. Never feed the beast if you don’t have to ...



## **Rule #2 Make conscious choices**

“One of my employees was struggling with her time management.

“She just wasn’t getting the work done in an effective way. She tends to get stressed, saying yes, yes, yes to every request or assignment until she’s overwhelmed.

“I’ve always thought that time management comes down to the choices that you make, and the process has to be intentional. So I asked her, ‘What are the most important things that need to happen? How much must you personally do? Who else can you leverage to get things done? What can you defer?’

“In addition, I modeled good time management for her. Every morning, I reserve five to 10 minutes to set my priorities for the day. I make conscious choices instead of letting events dictate what I do.

“I use color-coding in my calendar. If it’s red, it cannot be moved under any circumstances. If it’s purple, I’ll aim to get it done but if I have to, I can move it. If it’s gray, it’s great if I get to it but OK if I don’t.

“One day, I said to her, ‘I see you’re really busy. You seem like you’re running at 110 miles per hour. Here’s what I do to prioritize ...’

“Then I shared my color-coding system with her. I was direct about it, letting her see how I do it.

“I view myself as a coach. By sharing with her how I manage my workday, I was able to get her to adopt a similar approach.”

– *Jennifer Knickerbocker, managing partner, Deloitte, Nashville, Tenn.*



## **Rule #3 Get organized**

Answer the following questions “yes” or “no” to get a quick assessment of just how organized you are.

1. Do you keep a daily to-do list and cross off items as you complete them?
2. Do you schedule weekly meetings with your boss(es) to review the status of the workload, update each other, discuss objectives, set priorities, give and get feedback and express your concerns?
3. If you have more than one boss, do you have structures for prioritizing their work?
4. Have you established a procedure for covering the bases when you're unavailable?
5. Do you make effective use of your colleagues and support staff to handle emergencies and other overloads?
6. Are your databases, online networks and filing systems meeting your current needs? Can you retrieve what you need immediately?
7. Are you making effective use of calendars, either electronic or paper, for noting and tracking appointments and meetings and staying on schedule?
8. Do you and your boss set realistic deadlines? Do you schedule checkpoints where both of you can assess how projects are going?
9. Do you have a practical method for managing interruptions? Are you completely comfortable with asking people to come back later or phrase their need in an email? Are you effectively deflecting people when they intrude upon the flow of your day with things that don't really need your attention?
10. Do you group tasks that can easily overlap, e.g., dropping off a report on the way to lunch or reading while waiting for a meeting to begin?
11. Do you know your limits and heed signals that it's time to take a break, change tasks or enlist assistance?

12. Do you break problems into manageable pieces to handle in small steps?

Unless you could honestly answer “yes” to every question, you have room to improve your organizational skills. Pay special attention to questions 1 and 7—the ones that challenge you to develop a specific process for tracking your tasks. Without processes, the swamp can get deep very fast!



## **Rule #4** Ask one question to buy yourself time and peace

A manageable life is about instinctively knowing what to take on and what to set aside, but very few of us have a firm hand when it comes to rejecting time-wasting or soul-depleting tasks and obligations. Today, for example, you will be presented with dozens and dozens of choices—everything from where you want to eat breakfast to which projects you want to tackle at work—and many of the decisions you make will be unduly influenced by politeness, tradition or the fear of dealing with the fallout from “no.”

Try this to better streamline your days: For every friendship or business connection you adopt, every project you become involved in, every product you buy, ask yourself one very simple question: *“What does this get me, and what does it cost me?”*

Going to a movie, volunteering, adopting a new hobby, even making the bed ... too often we simply fall into the next choice without analyzing the sacrifice v. benefit calculation up front. We get in over our heads because the benefits of our decisions tend to be granted quickly, with the murkier costs slowly mounting over time—and therefore they don’t seem as real until they eventually land on you.

*“What does this get me, and what does it cost me?”* The next time an old friend wants to reconnect on Facebook, or you’re asked to sit on a panel at a conference, ask the question. It’s an effective reminder that everything comes with a price in time, money or stress, and it will make you confront that price *before* you make a hasty decision, not down the line when the regrets have started to pile up.



## **Rule #5 Kill those time vampires**

Wondering where all the time goes? Well, let's see if you recognize these potentially problematic behaviors.

How many minutes this week did you spend...

...searching for notes you took but misplaced?

...patching a not-quite-perfect procedure yet again instead of setting up a system so it's solid forever?

...figuring out what to eat for lunch?

...deleting emails you have no intention of reading?

...sitting in traffic and not moving anywhere?

...getting involved in conversations that didn't make you feel better about anything?

...reading and watching news headlines that you couldn't affect at all?

...posting on social media just because you hadn't posted for a while?

...mediating petty employee gripes?

...complaining about things without offering any solutions?

...getting bogged down in making the office look nice?

...showing up for meetings you don't really need to be involved in?

...brooding on a mistake at work rather than moving on?

...chasing "self-improvement" because you think you *should* be a different person—not because you really *want* to be.



## **Rule #6 Define your days better**

If you feel as though you're doing more but getting less done, it may be because you're still multitasking.

Leadership expert Stever Robbins may have put his finger on why: You like to multitask. "Just don't expect to accomplish very much doing it," he says.

Robbins has developed a system that can help you maintain concentration and do more in less time. Divide your life into "focus," "admin" and "spirit" days.

**1. Focus days** require a strong emphasis on your core work, including strategy sessions, reviews of research and employee evaluations.

Stay focused on focus days. Even though you'll have more concentrated time for critical projects, you still have to pay attention. Dedicate separate time for each topic. Ignore everything else—even if that means turning off the BlackBerry for two hours.

**2. Admin days** usually have lots of different content but similar, routine kinds of tasks, such as signing papers, returning phone calls and running errands.

Admin days require lots of picking things up and putting them down. They also involve organizing and setting your calendar. They rarely require deep thought. Group tasks so that paperwork is together, as are errands and appointments. Clue in your support staff about admin days so they will be ready.

**3. Spirit days** nurture the soul. Set them aside for friends and family, reading and reflection. They used to call these days "the weekend."

Schedule slack time. Besides spirit days, you also need plain old slack time. Generally, it will be soaked up with small crises and spillover on projects. But schedule it strictly for slack. Don't think of specific things to slot in, like your kids' games or your routine fitness program. Those need to be scheduled separately.

If you feel it's unrealistic to set aside a whole day for one type of task, start with half days. But it's better to begin with whole admin days, and as you find you're

getting done sooner, add half-days of focus time—professional networking leaps to mind.

— Adapted from *Get-It-Done Guy's 9 Steps to Work Less and Do More*, Stever Robbins, St. Martin's Griffin.



## **Rule #7 Be on time for others**

A little tardiness never hurt anyone, right? After all, you're capable of catching up on your work. But consider the impression projected by someone who is consistently late:

**Message #1: "This is about me!"** The late arriver seems to be redefining the moment by making the last entrance, or forcing others to adapt to them. It feels like a passive-aggressive power move. "Now we can begin," is what others hear, "because I am the last piece in this puzzle."

**Message #2: "I can't get my act together."** The tardy person is telling the group that even with advance notice and modern technology constantly making us hyperaware of the time and date, they lack the organizational skills necessary to arrange their schedule properly. Is this the person anyone wants to get involved in an important project with?

**Message #3: "You're not important enough to me."** A late arriver has clearly dropped the thing they're late for down in their priority list. The people waiting on them can't help but feel just a bit slighted. (Note how many times a latecomer will arrive holding a coffee they just stopped for. How does that make people feel?)

Unavoidable delays happen, yes, but they don't seem to happen nearly as much to people who take their jobs and colleagues seriously. These people have a way of getting where they need to be on time, and in so doing make themselves seem more promotable.



## **Rule #8** Work better by 'managing delay'

Frank Partnoy is a professor of law and finance and the author of a book called *Wait: The Art and Science of Delay*. In a chapter dedicated to procrastination, he says that procrastination, or "managing delay," is actually an important element in life and business. It's delaying gratification. People and businesses make better decisions when they're able to delay gratification.

And yet, other theorists define procrastination as the triumph of instant urge gratification.

So, is procrastination an impulsive or a regulating action? Possibly both. The good news is: procrastination does not necessarily point to weakness, laziness, slack morals or self-defeating behavior. It's a complex way of arranging discomfort that goes beyond simply trying to bully your brain into better time management. Habits require examination.

Some tips for avoiding the quicksand of procrastination and turning it around:

**Ask: What's my best time?** All of us have times of the day when we're more productive. As much as you can, try to actively leverage those hours.

**Turn off.** You surely knew this was coming. Take several hours during your workday to ignore your social media accounts. Close your email. Tell your staff to hold your calls for a specified period. Use that Outlook calendar to communicate your schedule to employees when you'd like to block off time. You may not be able to implement all of these things every working day, but think about what boundaries might help you tackle something you've been putting off.

**Rip the Band-Aid off.** Eat that frog. These mean essentially the same thing, which is to get something you're dreading out of the way as part of your first order of business. That's a great energizer. Tell yourself, "By lunchtime I can be totally in the clear of this!"

**Whip up some pressure.** Inventing due dates is a thing. Assign yourself a deadline. See if that feels different, or if it changes the way you deal with the bulkier items on your plate.



## **Rule #9** Snag others' time effectively

Here's a situation every manager runs into: You absolutely have to see your senior manager for advice, an approval, resources, etc., yet he or she is overloaded with appointments. You're confident that your need is legitimate, but the trick is convincing your busy boss.

Start with a three-part "persuasion package" you can deliver by memo, email, phone or in person:

**1. The subject matter.** Succinctly state what it's all about, why it's important and why you need your manager's time. For example, a major customer needs some confidential information to make up his mind about a large order, and only your manager can release that data.

**2. Your agenda.** Briefly spell out what you need to do during the meeting, what sort of response you need from your manager and how long it's likely to take. In the example above, for instance, you'd need 10 minutes to explain the data needed, and your manager would then need only to sign an authorization or make a call to the appropriate department.

**3. Alternatives.** Busy people love options that save them time. In our data request scenario, for example, you could point out that you wouldn't need a meeting at all if your manager would accept your judgment that the data should be released.



## **Rule #10** Stay focused in a time of chaos

The pandemic of 2020 caused many people to throw their hands up in the air in frustration about how to get everything done and still stay sane. Some tips to keep a level head and plow through the tasks that are still expected of you:

**1. Put news in its place.** We absorb a lot of unnecessary information during a crisis while getting swept up in conjecture, opinion or analyses of worst-case scenarios. Stop worrying about missing important developments in the world—that information will find you whether you like it or not when the time comes.

**2. Trim your goals list.** How many of the things you feel you “need” to do are really long-term projects that can safely be put out of mind for the moment? Turn the job into a one-day-at-a-time proposition. What can you accomplish today by lunchtime? By the time you leave today? Imagine your job simply starting over each day, with no long-term plans or prospects. What’s most important and can be taken care of *now*?

**3. Flee into your headphones.** Retreat into your musical “safety zone.” As you work, blot out the office by cuing up some longtime favorite tunes. Listening to the news or debate about current events will likely cause you ever more stress; instead, create a playlist that’s peaceful, beautiful or brings back awesome memories.

**4. Separate yourself from the doomsayers.** Every office has people who want to wallow in what could happen. Doomsayers aren’t necessarily negative people; they just let their imagination run a little too wild. This is not the influence you need right now. Stay close and listen to realistic, pragmatic co-workers.

**5. Allot “worry time.”** If you grow anxious thinking about all the work that awaits you, then reserve blocks of time to indulge yourself in worry. Don’t let these thoughts creep into the rest of your day—or you may wind up worrying about a job rather than doing it.

Set aside 15 minutes after lunch as your private “worry time.” Have a pen and paper ready and list your anxieties, numbering them in order of importance. This exercise will help you clear your head—and maybe even reprioritize—so that you can return to work free of mental distractions.



## ***Bonus rule*** Make the most of 'quality moments'

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Time management consultant Alan Lakein says there's more to handling time well than just being efficient. You also need to be alert for "quality moments" when you're having exceptionally valuable experiences. Some examples:

- An expert is giving you ideas or insights that could change your life.
- You're suddenly applying your skills in exciting and progressive ways.
- You are being recognized for an exceptional contribution or idea.
- You realize you've arrived in a place where you can learn significant things.

With this outlook, you can capitalize on those rare moments when you can make exceptional progress quickly.

— Adapted from *Give Me a Moment and I'll Change Your Life*, Alan Lakein, Andrews McMeel.