

Smart time management: Key to success

TAKING STOCK Classifying tasks into quadrants is essential for effective utilisation of time in a busy schedule

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Do you find yourself running after deadlines, targets, and asking for extensions or finishing tasks, at the last minute? Are you generally late for your meetings? Are you compelled to work on a weekend? Do you generally come home completely stressed out and exhausted? And on a weekend, do you still feel drained out and prefer to stay at home, instead of fun and frolic activities with family?

If your answer is 'yes' to any of the above questions, then there is reason to analyse your time management skills. A good way to understand and practice 'time management' is to study your routine for a week (or any period) and classify tasks into different quadrants as recommended by eminent author Stephen Covey:

- **Important and urgent:** Tasks vital to business.
- **Important and not urgent:** Tasks that you need to do but with focus.
- **Urgent and unimportant (routine):** Tasks which you can try delegating.

■ **Unimportant and not urgent:** Tasks having no relevance to productivity taking most of your time.

Classifying the tasks into the quadrants isn't easy and requires critical questioning to confirm the correct position in the quadrants. Urgent tasks can come disguised as important too and vice-versa.

Dealing with quadrants

Quadrant 1:

■ Test check activities and reconfirm whether they are indeed important and urgent. One good way is to ask, what would happen if this weren't done now?

■ Tasks in this quadrant are emergencies, crisis issues, deadline oriented projects, meetings, customer complaints etc.

Quadrant 2

■ The very purpose of time management is to spend more time in this quadrant, as tasks in this quadrant are most critical to success. Most planned tasks in this quadrant do not happen, because of distractions from quadrant 1 and 3. People in top management, often do budgeting, strategising, away from office. The idea is to get the right

focus devoid of distractions.

■ We must also note that the higher we go up in hierarchy, greater is the time spent here.

Quadrant 3

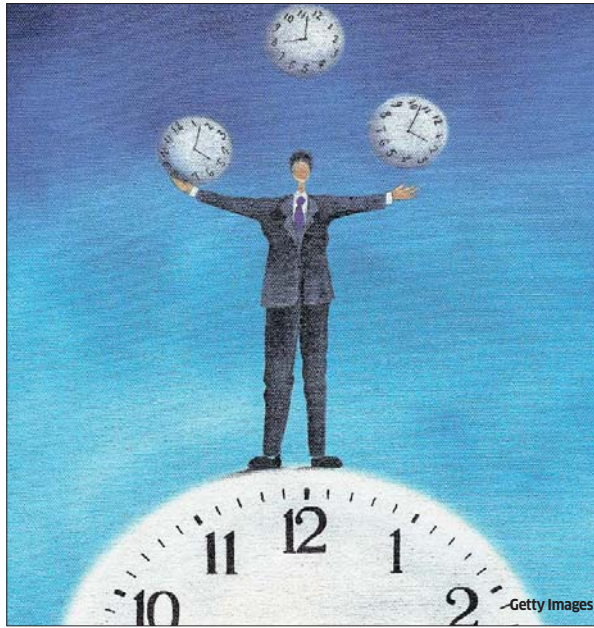
■ First thing to realise is that these are not important tasks but might come in the disguise of being urgent to grab your attention and time. Customers and employees often escalate trivial issues to get instant relief.

While many of these have to be quickly dealt with, you must identify which of these can be delegated.

■ Where such tasks are repetitive, create a system for these tasks to happen routinely, without becoming a crisis. A typical example would be a request for a new report from marketing to IT, or a customer clarification, which if part of a system, would get the attention by the right people.

Quadrant 4

■ Examine the tasks that you classified in this quadrant critically and you may be surprised to find that these are not even worth being called as tasks, as they have no relevance to your productivity. However,



be aware that these are the activities taking up a large chunk of your time and hence this quadrant presents maximum scope to save and utilise time better, specifically in quadrant 2.

■ Typical activities in this quadrant are personal phone calls and messages, email alerts from networking sites, office gossips, coffee and smoking breaks, extended lunches, unplanned birthday and other office celebrations, which could take even two hours or 25 per cent of our daily time.

The challenges in the management of time are due to complications of setting priorities between important and urgent tasks. Often the focus is on doing urgent things, in the mistaken notion that they are important. Setting priorities is to decide when to do what and how much time to spend in each quadrant. Carry out tasks that are creative or in the nature of strategising, when you are at your best in terms of productivity. For example, as you start your day, the focus can be on urgent tasks.

A management professional might do important tasks in the afternoon, whereas a music

composer or a writer might do most of their creative work during the night. In other words, everyone should make a daily or weekly list of tasks and sequence them appropriately.

Time management tips

■ Start time management by defining your professional goals. Now think of methods and tasks required to achieve those goals.

■ List your tasks for a previous period (may be a week) and record the time spent in any format you feel comfortable such as a planner, digital or printed diary, smart phones, Microsoft Outlook etc.

Evaluate your current pattern of time utilisation and identify the loopholes.

■ Classify or prioritise your tasks according to importance and urgency. Breakdown major tasks into smaller components and assign deadlines for each.

■ Begin your day with a 'to do list' in the format of your choice. Try to finish your tasks, before end of the day.

Think aloud why do you procrastinate and for what kind of tasks?

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The importance of time management...

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Mostly people put off doing something and choose to do tasks, more enjoyable. Get rid of procrastination behavior by battling with your self. Unfinished tasks however, have to be carried forward and rescheduled.

- Find your most productive time of the day and schedule your most important, creative tasks for this slot.

- Keep an eye on 'time wasters' in quadrant 4, such as telephone calls, intruding colleagues, delayed and extended meetings, personal emails, internet surfing etc. Don't allow others to eat into your time, and do not spend excessive time on routine tasks like emails.

- Don't plan rigidly and allow some flexibility to accommodate last minute changes. Don't depend on your memory and set reminders for important tasks.

- Observe and interact, with your CEO's or mentors to understand how they function. Ensure that you have the right people under you, who are dependable. Help them to work better, by effective delegation.

- Certain tasks can be best done on a single day, with due focus. For example, if you need to hire people, don't interview everyday; instead schedule all interviews on a particular day.

- Know the monetary value of your time to the organisation and spend your time profitably. For example, the hourly cost of sales professional to the organ-

isation may be Rs 200, and hence the focus should be deriving benefits accordingly.

- Organize files on your PC in folders especially avoiding clutter on your desktop. Deal with things like routine reports (action or file or trash it) or emails, instantly.

- Time management is not all about work and a peaceful personal life is important too. Also, don't sit late and take this as an excuse to arrive late the next day.

Such practices are not healthy from an organisational point of view and should only be in exceptional and rare cases. Work efficiently on weekdays, devoting weekends to family and self.

An active personal life, and keeping healthy and fit is essential, for general well being.

Efficient time management practiced over period becomes a routine and hence tough to follow, but the incentive is high productivity.

Being well organised and focused reduces stress and an increase in motivation levels. To summarise, we can achieve a healthy balance of work and family time.

Michael Altshuler, the well-known motivational speaker expressed the gist of time management most beautifully, by saying "The bad news is time flies. The good news is you're the pilot".

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