

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

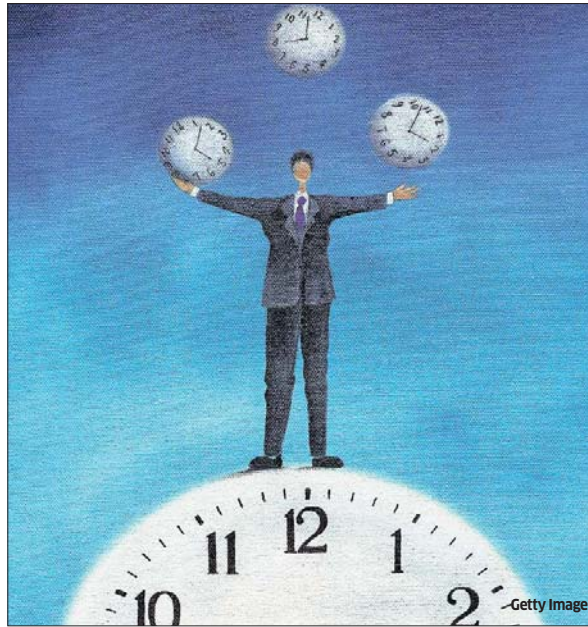
■ First thing to realise is that these are not important tasks but might come in the disguise of being urgent to grab your attention and time. Customers and employees often escalate trivial issues to get instant relief.

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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