

Make Time To Get Things Done

5 Ways to Take Charge of Your Life

by Marta Wilson, PhD with Cynthia Schilling

I'll never forget the things my mother did when I was a child to help me show up at school. Unfortunately, I was slow to stir, and I thought I could create time. It was a recipe for disaster. Left to my own devices, I would have arrived mid-day if at all!

To ensure my success, Mom played lively music every morning to help me wake up. At breakfast, she talked to me about how much fun I would have at school that day and reminded me that I was well-prepared because I had completed my homework the night before. Somehow, she always worked the miracle of getting me out the door and in my desk before the final bell rang.

My punctuality and discipline suffered when I went away to college. I was late for almost every class and put off all of my homework assignments until the last minute. Needless to say, this lack of time management was reflected in my grades. It wasn't until the end of my sophomore year that I realized I had to take charge of my life. That summer, I bought my first day planner and began my ongoing quest to make the most of my time.

This article offers timesaving tips in five areas. These guidelines are drawn from personal experience and from the resources listed on page 5 of this article. Read on to discover more about:

- ❑ Getting Ahead of Procrastination
- ❑ Creating a Successful To-Do List
- ❑ Minimizing Your Paper Clutter
- ❑ Making Email Work for You
- ❑ Using Smart Telephone Tactic

Get Ahead of Procrastination

No time management technique will work if you continuously put things off. Granted, living close to the edge can sometimes improve, rather than diminish, quality. But be warned, people who live on the edge of a cliff sometimes fall off. Instead of creating unneeded urgency in your life, here are some ways you can get ahead of the power curve.

- ❑ **Just start.** Start the project early. Take the first step. Write down your preliminary ideas or make a few sketches and then file them for later use. Then, while you're absorbed with other projects, your unconscious mind is chugging away, producing

information, concepts, and new ideas as well as discarding flawed or superfluous ideas.

- ❑ **Prepare mentally.** Instead of letting the disaster tapes play in your head, visualize yourself performing exactly as you wish. For some great athletes, this ability seems to be a natural gift, like speed, strength, and coordination. They talk about actually seeing themselves sinking a difficult putt or hitting the home run. So can you.
- ❑ **Prepare physically.** Are the materials you need laid out conveniently? Have all your tools assembled and accessible before you begin the job. Stake out a specific place for the work, where you can keep everything you need within easy reach and leave stuff out between work sessions. That way, you eliminate time setting up your project area.
- ❑ **Just stop.** It's better to stop before you get too tired and before you reach a snag. If you wait until you're stuck or exhausted to stop, you carry that sense of defeat with you until the next work session, building up dread for the task.

Create a Successful To-Do List

Here are some easy ways to make your to-do list a powerful tool that helps you get all of your jobs done.

- ❑ **Don't try to remember everything.** Write it down. If the tasks are written down, your mind is freed to solve problems, not just remember them. The brain works like a parallel processor, doing foreground tasks and background tasks simultaneously. Once you write something down, your brain can transfer it to a background task and start working on the problem even though you're not consciously aware of it.
- ❑ **Limit the items on your list.** Have you ever created a to-do list with no breathing room? What happens if you lose a few seconds in your schedule due to an unexpected event? Your day becomes an exercise in chaos! Put some space in your schedule. Overestimate travel time to and from work. Factor in the time it takes to get from one meeting to the next. Put rejuvenation breaks on your list to help you maintain a steady, efficient work pace. Be realistic in your expectations and time estimates. Otherwise, you'll run late, run scared, or just flat-out run!

- ❑ **Check your list regularly.** Periodically review your list. Look at it first thing in the morning, without fail. If you make sure that everything you intend to do gets on your comprehensive list—and if you check that list regularly—there is little chance that anything will fail to be done just because you forgot about it.
- ❑ **Order smartly.** Start with the most important task and work down. If you accomplish nothing other than your number one priority, you'll be ahead. Avoid the temptation to tackle fun or easy tasks first just because you like shorter lists.
- ❑ **Assign a date and time for the items on your list.** Most people use their planning diaries for meetings and appointments only. Use yours to schedule tasks as well. If you put only appointments and meetings on your planner, when someone calls and wants to meet with you, if nothing is written down, the entire day seems to be available. That's a big mistake! Important tasks should be logged in as well as appointments and meetings.

Minimize Your Paper Clutter

Paper clutter can be a real barrier to getting things done. Here are some great ways you can tackle the paper clutter in your work space.

- ❑ **Clear your desk...now.** Every piece of paper on the top of your desk is a decision you haven't made. Despite what some people believe, a cluttered desk does not indicate genius. It signals confusion and creates stress. Even mini-clutter will grow and eventually fill every inch. To decide where to put what, ask yourself: What do I use every day? Every week, month, year? Never?
- ❑ **Touch it once.** The first time you handle any document, decide what to do with it. Then do it. You can: reroute, respond, read, or recycle. Start by asking: Do I want or need to deal with this? If not, does anybody need to? If so, reroute. If not, recycle. Keep a supply of routing slips and whatever else you need to send the stuff on its way. And keep a receptacle for recycling within easy reach. For anything that makes it past the first cut, create a simple system for categorizing every piece of paper you encounter. You may need no more than three files: DO, READ, and FILE.
- ❑ **Make it disappear.** There's only one thing better than getting rid of it as soon as you touch it, and that's never having to touch it at all. Never automatically renew a subscription without balancing the periodical's worth to you with the time it takes to process it. Ask to be taken off mailing lists and routing slips. For a wholesale purge of third-class mail, contact the Direct Marketing Association at www.the-dma.org.
- ❑ **Respond real time.** If the paper needs only a brief response, do it right now. Create a speed response: a personalized post-it note; a note written on the bottom of the original letter or memo; a half-sheet of business letterhead for a short note; or a phone call if appropriate.
- ❑ **File responsibly.** Do you really need to keep it? Most of us never read or even touch three quarters of what we file. Why take the time to file it now and to fumble over it dozens or hundreds of times? Practice source-point pollution control. If you do need to hang onto it, put it in the FILE folder. Then schedule a short filing session once a week.

Make Email Work for You

The average business email user spends at least two hours per day dealing with email. There is no better time to take control of your email than right now. Remember there is no "right" way to manage your email. Pick and choose from the following tips, develop a system that works best for you, and use it every day.

- ❑ **Develop a routine.** Studies show that unless you specifically set aside a block of time for a task and schedule it, you're unlikely to complete that task on time or at all. The same holds true with email. Schedule a specific time of day to process email, and stick to your schedule.
- ❑ **Preview.** How many messages do you really need to open? Sometimes you can glance at the subject line and know you can hit delete. Other times you need a little more info.
- ❑ **Prioritize.** Define your priorities and then use them as you manage your email. Prioritize not only what you read but also what you respond to and how you respond. Your time is valuable. Give it first to messages that require an immediate reply or action. If you don't get to other lower priority messages today, handle them first thing tomorrow before checking email.
- ❑ **Answer all questions.** An email reply must answer all questions and should pre-empt further questions. If you do not answer all the questions in the original email, you will receive further e-mails regarding the unanswered questions. This will not only waste time but also cause considerable frustration.
- ❑ **Touch each email once.** Do one of four things with email you receive:
 - a) Read only the subject line and delete it (spam/other junk mail).
 - b) Read it and delete it.
 - c) Read it and reply by phone/email or take some action.
 - d) Read it and file it for future reference.

Use Smart Telephone Tactics

Here are some tips you can implement immediately to save yourself time and increase productivity.

- ❑ **Batch your calls and return them all in a block.** Return calls during one or two scheduled periods each day. Make exceptions, if any, only for high-priority callers. If the person you want is out or if the meeting is uninterrupted, ask for the best time to try again.
- ❑ **Set a time limit for each call.** Keep an egg timer on your desk as a reminder to stay on purpose when you make or receive a phone call.
- ❑ **Be proactive in reducing “voicemail tag”.** Answer three questions when you reach the voice mail of the person you are calling—why you called, what you need, and when you are available for callbacks.
- ❑ **Know what you want to say.** Before you dial, make a list of key words or main points. Check them off as you cover each one.
- ❑ **Be specific.** Don't say, “Hi Frank. Got a minute?” Instead say, “Frank, I need about five minutes to discuss Project X with you. Is this a good time?” In other words, state what you want to talk about and how much time you need.
- ❑ **Locate items for ease of use.** If you are right-handed, make sure the phone is located on the left side of your desk keeping the right side of your desk and your right hand free to take notes. Just the opposite for lefties.
- ❑ **Candidly mention your time limit.** “I just have a minute before I need to leave for a meeting. Was there anything else you need?” or “Joe, I'm going to have to leave it here; the boss is expecting something from me in a few minutes.”

Summary

Get ahead of procrastination.

- ❑ **Just start.**
- ❑ **Prepare mentally.**
- ❑ **Prepare physically.**
- ❑ **Just stop.**

Create a successful to-do list.

- ❑ **Don't try to remember everything.**
- ❑ **Limit the items on your list.**
- ❑ **Check your list regularly.**
- ❑ **Order smartly.**
- ❑ **Assign a date and time for the items on your list.**

Minimize your paper clutter.

- ❑ **Clear your desk...now.**
- ❑ **Touch it once.**
- ❑ **Make it disappear.**
- ❑ **Respond real time.**
- ❑ **File Responsibly.**

Make email work for you.

- ❑ **Develop a routine.**
- ❑ **Preview all messages.**
- ❑ **Prioritize all messages.**
- ❑ **Answer all questions.**
- ❑ **Touch each email once.**

Use smart telephone tactics.

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- ❑ **Be proactive in reducing “voicemail tag”.**
- ❑ **Know what you want to say.**
- ❑ **Be specific.**
- ❑ **Locate items for ease of use.**
- ❑ **Candidly mention your time limit.**

RESOURCES

175 Ways to Get More Done in Less Time by David Cottrell and Mark Layton

Beyond Time Management: Business with Purpose by Robert Wright

First Things First by Stephen Covey, Roger Merrill, and Rebecca Merrill

Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity by David Allen

The 10 Natural Laws of Successful Time and Life Management by Hyrum Smith

The Organized Executive by Stephanie Winston

The Procrastinator's Handbook by Rita Emmett

The Time Trap by Alec Mackenzie

Time Management for Dummies by Jeffrey Mayer

Time Management from the Inside Out by Julie Morgenstern

Time Management: Get More Done with Less Stress by Efficiently Managing Your Time by Marshall Cook

Time Tactics of Very Successful People by Eugene Griessman

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Marta Wilson is chief executive officer of Transformation Systems Incorporated (www.transformationsystems.com). Marta promotes integration of self, people, and enterprise mastery around the world. In her work, she plays many roles including coach, facilitator, speaker, and trainer. Marta's books include *Work Miracles: Transform Yourself and Your Organization*; *Balanced Leadership: Stretch for Self, People, and Enterprise Mastery*; and *Live a Difference*. Her credentials include a Ph.D. in organizational psychology from Virginia Tech, a graduate internship in human resources research with BellSouth Corporation, and a post-doctoral apprenticeship in industrial engineering with Dr. D. Scott Sink, president, World Confederation of Productivity Science.

Contact Us:

Transformation Systems, Inc.
2011 Crystal Drive Ste 400
Arlington, VA 22202
www.transformationsystems.com

Questions for Marta?
703.682.6853
info@transformationsystems.com

