

7 Tips To Recapture Time

By Karin S. Syren

Time management is a universal concern and taking the necessary steps to conquer the issue is often avoided. But since the only way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time, begin today to win time back into your service - it's been your enemy long enough!

1. Keep a running To Do list.

This yields immediate results. Use your list to continually reassess your changing priorities, to enable you to remain fluid in the face of a day that seems to morph before your very eyes! The idea is to empty your mind of the daily details and free it for the more valuable creative opportunities.

If you use your computer, create a template with all the elements valuable to you and a format easy to read and update. Load it daily or build continually on the same list, refreshing as you go.

On the go? Print your list and take it along, making notations for transfer later. Keep supporting materials attached, copies letters, estimates, invoices, and phone numbers, everything necessary to dispatch the items on your list. Since you won't need 15 minutes to locate supporting paperwork, you can cross an item from your list, even if you only have a few minutes between appointments.

2. Use an organizer or palm pilot - make it really work for you.

If you use a daily planner, make your entries in pencil and be sure that each date has plenty of room for those unscheduled "squeeze-in" activities you wish to complete. Update names and addresses each time you update your address book in your email program. Consider working with a zippered planner and include copies of supporting paperwork for each upcoming appointment, phone call, etc.

You may find the best of both worlds works for you, and a hand held organizer which syncs with your computer is the perfect tool for you. Whatever you use, make sure it's comfortable for you - after all, it will only work if you'll work it.

3. Handle incoming mail immediately.

Keep a wastebasket near your front door or inbox and sort mail as it arrives - never let it pile up. Be ruthless! If you put it aside to read later, make sure "later" is an actual item on your schedule, "time to review today's mail," and then stick to it. If it's not, remember manana never comes. You may be rushed at the moment, but check your LATER stack and if it's an inch high or more, there is a pattern in the making and chances are you won't get to it until you are doing a major muck-out.

4. Use voicemail and email freely as appropriate.

These two valuable technologies have developed somewhat of a reputation as inferior communication tools. No technology is all bad or all good - all things in moderation. Learn how to use electronic communication wisely and appropriately and value it for the opportunity it affords you to clearly state your issue uninterrupted and with no time wasted. These tools are most effective when used to enhance, not to replace, personal contact.

The same temptation we fight with incoming mail presents itself with both voicemail and email. Deal with incoming messages immediately, only filing emails when you have read them and know you will need to refer to them in future. Transcribe voicemail messages for future use and then delete them. If you haven't time to listen right away, make sure you schedule a time.

5. Use travel time as personal development and study time.

Employing motivational tapes and audio books, make this time a personal enrichment time that you can look forward to each day. If you don't already have a backlog of tapes and CD's you never seem to get to, try your local library for starters. Large bookstore chains devote entire sections to audio books - the hardest part is choosing among them!

If personal development is not a key issue, you might consider a small tape recorder to document squibbets, brilliant thoughts, notes, or additions to your To Do list. Don't try to juggle too much if you're the driver though - save your serious dictation for stop lights, freight trains and gridlock. Business letters and reports are best kept for a time when you can concentrate fully on the project.

6. Schedule appointments early in the day.

This is a great time manager and, allowing for a bit of initial resistance, people will become accustomed to your scheduling idiosyncrasies. Leave your afternoon for follow-up conversations, correspondence, etc. Evenings are free and carryover is minimized. It's worth hitting the ground running each day if you know the rewards are real and there will actually be an end to your day!

7. Make a working file for every project & file everything in it - immediately.

If it's a new project, make a new file the first time it generates paper - it takes seconds to place an item where it belongs and most people work smarter in an uncluttered atmosphere. Keep your current projects handy in a desktop file; you'll be more likely to keep up with the filing when it's close at hand.

Consider an old fashioned tickler file, 31 files labeled with the days of the month. File a copy of a dated action item along with copies of supporting documents in a desktop file or a tub drawer and check it first thing each morning.

Start today! Each tip can be implemented with minimal preparation, but the reward of gaining a sense of control over the day puts you back in the driver's seat, actually spending time (i.e., making conscious decisions regarding its allocation), rather than watching it trickle through your fingers. With the time you'll save - - start planning your vacation. See you on the beach!

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