

Time management - exercise

If you're aiming to improve time management, you might want to try the following '168 hours' exercise (or a version of it).

Here, FEU project manager Frances Dredge outlines her approach accompanied by some helpful tips.

WHAT IS THE OBJECTIVE OF THE EXERCISE?

Basically, you are aiming to assess your average week (168 hours) to find out

- where you are wasting time
- where you can save time
- what areas you should dedicate more or less time to
- how you can get the most out of your time depending on what you need and want to do.

Bear in mind that this is not a 'quick fix'. You should see a few immediate results but like any improvement process or change, it's best to take a step-by-step approach through trial, error, adjustment and review. Persistence counts here too as it's all too easy to slip back into old habits.

While you'll need to invest time to analyse how you're managing your time, the results you're achieving and how you feel about those results, it's worth the effort. I've discovered, unless I take control of my time, somebody else will!

THE EXERCISE

Complete the following exercise over 168 hours (one week) or, if you want an even better overview, over a month:

1. Record your activities per day for seven days/one month (see below for example of a first day).
2. Enter the time that you spent on each activity or each group of activities.
3. Note down the results of these activities (results could be practical or emotional, e.g. 'one new commission' or 'this was great fun and I felt re-energised').
4. Note down what type of activity this was, e.g., I split my activities into several areas including core (i.e. work that I'm doing now), core/business (work that I'm doing to ensure work continuity, e.g. talking to prospective

The benefits of improved time management include a better life balance; greater effectiveness; more time to do what you enjoy and less stress.

clients), support/business (administrative work, e.g., accounts), support/home (chores) and leisure. Use whatever categories work best for you.

5. The resulting weekly/monthly overview will give you a much clearer idea of how you are using your time and what areas you can change to get more out of the time you put in. (See tips on p4)

**For example
MONDAY**

Activity	Time & time spent	Result	Comment	Type of activity
General emails and telephone	8am – 10am	Received two potential work leads, which I replied to. Replied to a range of other emails. Caught up with an old friend. We agreed to go to the theatre so I did some online research and booked tickets online	I deal with correspondence first thing because I like to get it out of the way and don't want to miss out on anything that comes in via the email. However, I am at my most creative in the mornings and dislike the fact that this sort of work often takes a big chunk of time	Support/business
Emails	Throughout the day - as they come in – about 1 hour	I answered all emails	I find that stopping to answer emails ruins my concentration. However, I can't help myself	Support/business
Coffee break	10-10.45am	Had a chat with my neighbour	I usually have a shorter morning break but, when my neighbour knows I'm working from home, he tends	Leisure

			to visit and I don't like to be rude. I was a bit stressed as I had a deadline to meet	
Feature writing	10.45 – 4pm	Completed the feature and emailed to editor	This took longer than I thought. Consequently, I was really stressed and nearly missed the deadline. I'm not sure if I made any money out of it considering the hours I put in.	Core
Research for a client meeting – two weeks time	4-5.30pm	I've scheduled in more work on this later in the week		Core
Telephone call to potential new client	5.30-6.00pm	Arranged a meeting for next week	This was a good time to call as this client is usually more likely to be available before or after 'standard' working hours	Core/support
Food shopping	6.00 to 7.00	Got food for next couple of days	Necessity	Support/home
Cooked dinner	7.00 to 7.45	Everyone got feed	I didn't eat much as I felt rushed and wanted to get on with other things. I usually enjoy cooking but currently have too many things on my	Support/home

			mind	
Household chores	7.45-9.30	Clean house!	I wish everyone would pull their weight a bit more	Support/home
Book writing	9.30-11.00	Wrote a couple of paras and gave up	I have a great idea but never seem to have the time to get it down on paper	Core/support
Read a book	11.00-11.45			Leisure
Sleep	11.45-6.30			Leisure

(*This is the first day in a time review that I helped a colleague with. Once she had written it down, she could immediately see ways (which weren't apparent to her previously) in which she could make better use of her time. You'll probably be able to see a few straight off too).

TIPS TO IMPROVE TIME MANAGEMENT

Plan and prioritise

Prioritising daily tasks by making a list is a good start. In the above example, if core work (feature writing) had been listed first, timing issues and stress could have been avoided.

Also, differentiate between and prioritise 'must dos', 'need to dos' and 'like to dos', e.g., writing the feature was a 'must do' for Monday but 'research for a client meeting' could probably have been placed further down the list.

Note: leisure activities that we like to do often fall by the wayside when we're busy. However, if a swim and gym session once a week keeps you happy and healthy, this could be seen as helping to maintain your career and therefore defined as 'support/business' and scheduled in with other business tasks.

Focus your effort

Are you putting too much time and effort into certain tasks? For example, if you're not in profit – whether this is on a monetary, creative or a satisfaction level, perhaps you need to dump a certain activity or dedicate time into replacing it with another, more lucrative one.

Sometimes we want or feel that we should be attempting a wide variety of activities. However, it's unproductive to spread yourself too thin – go back to prioritising and planning and break projects down into manageable steps.

Be honest with yourself here. Sometimes we use certain activities to avoid doing other things or to avoid putting in the effort to find more profitable/satisfying endeavours.

Evaluate timing

For example, if you are at your most creative in the morning, use this time to undertake creative activities where possible. I usually schedule routine activities (support/business) such as accounting and filing for late afternoon because I can switch on to autopilot to complete, what are for me, rather boring if essential tasks.

Also, look for areas in which you could save time, e.g., from above, shopping online may allow more time to enjoy cooking.

Recognise and schedule the creative process

If a particular project is a 'must' for you (even if you haven't been commissioned for it yet), schedule it into your day. In the above example, for instance, 'writing a book' isn't seen as a priority so has been put off until evening.

However, also recognise that, just like any other work task, you need deadlines (which you'll probably need to impose yourself), or the creative process might become an endless activity with little result.

Get down to business

Even if you work from home sometimes, you need to differentiate between work and play time – and so do other people. This might mean being more assertive.

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES

If you have any tips to share or any questions, please join our discussion on the FEU Training Facebook page (Time management exercise).

Alternatively, please email: frances.d@feustraining.org