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time to get serious about

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Time Management

By Ans Hoof



After a nice relaxing holiday, you return home full of good intentions on how to stay stress free. From now on, you are going to be more relaxed, have more time for family and fun things and you are going to do more sports or yoga – but these intentions last no more than 24 hours. The moment you see the pile of new email in your inbox the relaxed state of mind leaves you, making way for a frustrated feeling of being out of control. You hit the ground running, and you keep running to stay on top of things. All the good ideas you had during your holiday are gone, and will not return until your next break. The moment you realize this you feel even more frustrated. How can you manage your time and stay relaxed? Read on, because the summer holiday is near and this same pattern may repeat itself.

Managing time is one of the biggest challenges we face. This was always the case, but now with so many more sources of information, from new media to smart phones, it seems to be harder and harder to keep up with the pace. We are constantly running out of breath trying to keep up and avoid missing out on anything. Is there a better way to manage our time?

According to one of the many theories of time management, actions or tasks are divided up according to two criteria: urgency and importance. You may have seen the frame with four quadrants (sometimes called the Eisenhower box): urgent and important (quadrant I), not-urgent but important (II), urgent but not important (III), and neither urgent nor important (IV). Unless we are perfect organizers, we tend to spend most of our time in quadrant I: doing the tasks that are urgent and important. These are the things that need our attention

now: a deadline, an angry client, a crisis, a crying baby. We like to do the tasks in this quadrant, because when the task is done, it gives us an immediate feeling of satisfaction. Before doing these tasks, however, you should ask yourself: is this really my job; is it me who should be doing this here and now? It is possible you are doing this task to get away from 'real' work. This real work is in quadrant II: not urgent, but important: building relationships with clients, administration, planning, developing products, marketing, cost calculation. These tasks lack the sense of urgency and are therefore easily postponed – until it is too late. The best way is to plan the work in this quadrant: set a fixed time to do it, block in the hours in your weekly planning and don't let other things get in the way.

The tasks in quadrant III are urgent but not important: the phone that is ringing, a colleague who is standing at your desk, an inbox full of email, some meetings. Quadrant III takes up a lot of your time, but it should not. Ask yourself: is it really that urgent, or can I do it later, in a planned way? Is this really for me or can I delegate it? Do I have to be in this meeting or can I read the action list later on? You will be surprised how many things tend to solve themselves automatically without your involvement.

How much of your time is spent in quadrant IV: not urgent and not important? Be honest: are you reading the news online, chatting on Whatsapp, reading the updates Facebook and LinkedIn and checking your email every 10 minutes? Then you are either procrastinating or you have too much time on your hands. If you are on a tight time schedule, you should not do these things at all.

This all sounds rather easy, why don't we just do it then?

There are many reasons why we procrastinate, and we are not always aware of them. It may be due to fear of failure, when we're not sure how to do a task or are afraid to ask for clarification. We may be perfectionist and never happy with the end result. If you are aware of this, it helps to ask for a second opinion from a colleague or a friend. It can also be that we don't feel respected enough or we need greater incentives. In such cases, instead of procrastinating, ask yourself what would motivate you?

Another reason why we don't get things done: we cannot say "no." If we cannot say "no," we are always doing things for others that we don't have time for and that we feel bad about afterwards.

If this is the case for you, start practicing your assertiveness and say "no" to the next task that really is not for you.

A different type of procrastinator is the thrill-seeker:

he is convinced he will perform better under pressure so he prefers to wait for the last moment. If this is you, be honest with yourself – the best work is not done under pressure!

The answer to procrastination is simply: Do it now. If you know you should do it now, then just do it. You will feel better when the task is done and it will give you a sense of achievement. Do it and make sure you can concentrate on it, so close all the programs that could disturb you encourage further procrastination again. Which brings us to the next subject: your email.

How do you feel when you open your inbox and see piles of new email? Most people feel overwhelmed and start the

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really something very urgent or important, your phone would ring. You also know that a lot of emails are not really meant for you, but are only 'to inform you' as a CC. There is a way you can organize your inbox in such a way that you only have to read the messages that are meant to be read by you. You can sort your emails by the 'To' field. That way you only see the emails that were sent to you directly, instead of the emails where you were CC'd. Find out in View and Arrange by Item how you can rearrange your inbox in a way that helps you. You can sort by 'Subject' and you will find that a lot of spam that got through your spam filter is grouped together. You can sort by 'From' and by 'Date'. Now your inbox looks totally organized and you have control over your information.

Now your Inbox looks organized, how about your desk? Is it a mess, piled up with paper and things you don't really need anymore? Clean it up, because a messy desk has a disturbing effect on you. Organize your paperwork in the same way as you organize your computer files. Remove all those messy post-it stickers and make a to-do list and a weekly plan. Once a task is completed, clean up the associated paperwork. Make sure you only see things connected with the tasks that you should concentrate on now, and nothing else. After you have done all of this, you will regain your sense of control and you can concentrate on your work.

How does this feel? Now after your next holiday there is a good chance you can hang on to your relaxed frame of mind for a bit longer, and stay organized too. Enjoy your summer holiday! ●

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day with a feeling of stress and frustration. Ask yourself: are you focusing on your work, or on your email? Does your inbox prevent you from concentrating on your work? Is email really that important? Many subjects should really be discussed face-to-face. So why waste so much time reading through things that will only waste your time (or help you procrastinate)?

In his book *Getting Things Done* David Allen describes a great way to organize your email and stay stress free. If you follow his approach, you can have an empty inbox every day (imagine that!).

One of Allen's best practical tips is the following. It is possible to reset your email in such a way that the inbox does not open at

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start-up, but with another folder e.g. the Task folder. Check through Tools, Options, Other, Advanced Options, and browse in the field next to Start Up to the folder you want

to start with. If you start with the Task folder, the planning of the day is in your hands, you can set a fixed time for handling emails and you do not start the day with the feeling you are already out of control.

According to Allen, you should ask yourself: do I really have to read all these emails in my inbox? You know the answer is no. You know that if there was