

## Take Control of Time

# Workshop 4

From her office across the hall, Valerie watches Tasha, her department's new assistant, frantically sort through the clutter of reports, correspondence, and files covering her desk. Tasha calls out, "Val, have you seen the Tobin file? Mr. Richardson wanted me to enter the accident claim information into the database two days ago, but I can't find the file anywhere."

Before Valerie can respond, Tasha's phone rings, "Oh my gosh," Tasha exclaims, "I forgot all about the meeting. I'll be right over." Then she rushes down the hall.

When Tasha returns a half hour later, her phone is ringing again. It's the payroll administrator, telling her that she's late turning in the department's time sheets. If she wants her group to get paid, she'd better get the time sheets to the payroll department right away.

By now, Tasha feels so overwhelmed by everything she must do that she feels like crying or quitting! But, with some effort, she pulls herself together enough to begin collecting the time sheets.

On her way out her office door, she nearly bumps into Mr. Richardson. He asks sternly, "Tasha, I told you I needed the Tobin figures two days ago. What's the holdup?"

Tasha can only mutter that she'll get to inputting the data right away. To herself, she adds, "If I can ever find that file."



Later that afternoon, Mr. Richardson hands Tasha a flyer announcing a time management workshop and asks her to

attend. Bewildered and a bit annoyed, Tasha thinks, "That will take more time away from my work! How am I supposed to get anything done?"

### What's Inside

*Here, you will learn to*

- ◆ strengthen your organizational skills
- ◆ gain control of your time
- ◆ triumph over procrastination

## Get Organized!

Tasha clearly needs to be more organized. Her disorganization causes her to miss meetings and deadlines, lose items, and waste valuable time looking for them.

Tasha is not alone. When Accountemps asked 150 executives what percentage of work time they and their assistants spend looking for lost or misplaced items, the average response was 9 percent. That's 3.6 hours in a 40-hour work week, or almost 2 full days a month. Over the course of a year, that's between 4 and 5 weeks of wasted time!

So many people need help getting organized that some specialty stores sell only organizational tools, and a new occupation called professional organizers has evolved. Consultants frequently offer workshops on organizational skills, and organizational tips are often discussed on radio and TV.

The good news is that disorganization is nothing more than a bad habit. Like all other habits, disorganization is learned, and it can be unlearned. With effort, you can replace disorganization with habits that increase productivity and save time. Here are some suggestions for becoming better organized.

# ? Did you know?

Ninety-five percent of the papers that are filed for longer than one year are never looked at after they are filed.

**Source:** NIEHS Office of Management

## Create an Efficient Filing System

If Tasha's clutter seems familiar to you, you would probably benefit from setting up a workable, effective filing system and promising yourself to use it. Whether you store most of your documents in properly labeled computer files, or use a combination of computerized and paper files, experts recommend creating main folders and subfiles. Tasha might label a main folder "Tobin, Maureen" and label subfolders "Contact Information," "Claims Information," and so forth.



Main folders also can be labeled by project number or subject. The main folders should then be arranged in alphabetical or numerical order, depending on the system that is most effective for the type of information. For example, larger medical offices often file patient records by patient number, such as 9803-Marian Solomon, and a landscape center might store files by type of plant, such as *Begonias*.

Whatever system you use, be sure to file information immediately. You'll keep your files manageable if, once a year, you purge your computer and paper files of documents you no longer need.

## Organize Your Work Area

You can't work efficiently if your desktop is a jumble of papers, magazines, gadgets, personal items, and coffee cups. Clear your desktop of everything except what you need to use everyday. Then, put those essentials near where you use them. Each night, clear your desk of everything except what you plan to start working on the next morning. You will find that your days will start more efficiently.

Organize your desk drawers, too, by putting items where you can easily find them. If you don't use an item often, place it in a closet or storage area—it does not have to take up valuable space in your desk. Desk drawer organizers help keep small items, such as pens and paper clips, in place.

All of us can benefit from organizing our workspace. Mechanics need to be able to quickly find their tools. Farmers need to organize feed, chemicals, seeds, and equipment. Nurses and other medical personnel must be able to find equipment and other supplies immediately.

One final suggestion: Put things away as soon as you finish using them. You'll be amazed at the amount of time you will save when you know where files and supplies are and don't have to hunt for them.



## Avoid Information Overload

Nearly every worker receives mail and email, reports, articles, and other documents in abundant amounts. Information overload is a common complaint.

To get a handle on information flow, try these suggestions:

- ◆ Look at every piece of paper or email one time only, and then act on it. Don't read an email and return it to your inbox to review again later.
- ◆ If you can quickly perform the task required by a communication, do it immediately. Then file, discard, or route the item to the next person who needs to see it.
- ◆ If an item requires someone else's attention, route it to that person.
- ◆ If you don't need to remember the information, or if it is not relevant to your job, trash the document.

“Until we can manage time,  
we can manage nothing else.”

— **PETER F. DRUCKER**

*Management consultant*

## Write Things Down

It is impossible to remember every commitment you make—unless you write reminders to yourself and organize them with an effective system. Here are several systems that will help you remember what you need to do. All of these work well, if they are used consistently.

- ◆ **A To-Do List:** Each morning (or the night before), list what you need to accomplish. Avoid long-term goals, such as “Come up with new fall clothing line.” Instead, write tasks that you can accomplish, such as “Call five customers who frequently purchase and learn what they want to see in the fall line” and “Review three competitors’ Websites to see what they plan to offer.” Include on your list all of the phone calls you need to make during the day, tasks you plan to tackle, meetings you must attend, and so forth. Then, cross off items as you complete them.



- ◆ **A day-planner, desk-top calendar, or project/time management software:**

All of these will help you organize your time and jog your memory about tasks you need to complete. Remember though, no system works unless you use it!

- ◆ **Software organizers:** Use the Notes, Reminders, Calendars, and other features of your computer software to help you stay organized and efficient.

I have never known a successful person in business who didn't operate from some personal organizational system.

— **MARK MCCORMACK**

*Entrepreneur, author of  
What They Don't Teach You  
at Harvard Business School*

## ACTIVITY 4.1

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

### Figuring Out Filing

What would be the best way for each of these workers to organize their files? Explain your suggestion in the spaces provided.

1. Manuel, a travel agent, receives many brochures from hotels, touring companies, and chambers of commerce advertising vacations at scenic locations. What would be an effective way for Manuel to organize the brochures?

Main files: \_\_\_\_\_

Subfiles: \_\_\_\_\_

2. As part of their duties as firefighters, John and Sonya visit local businesses to teach employees about fire safety. In these sessions, they hand out literature about types of fire extinguishers, procedures for alerting coworkers and the fire department about a fire, what to do if your clothes catch on fire, and so on. How should they file this information?

Main files: \_\_\_\_\_

Subfiles: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Mr. Martinez teaches tenth-grade English to four sections of students and keeps files of each student's work. How should he organize his files?

Main files: \_\_\_\_\_

Subfiles: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Dr. Mintz, a veterinarian who specializes in exotic animals, keeps computer files on the latest research for tortoises, snakes, rabbits, birds, and other exotics. For example, he saves Internet articles on nutrition, illnesses and injuries, use of drugs, surgical techniques, ideal habitats, and animal behavior. How should he organize this electronic information?

Main files: \_\_\_\_\_

Subfiles: \_\_\_\_\_



## Use Time Productively

Do you know anyone like Ling? Ling arrives at the hospital where she works as a medical transcriptionist at 8 a.m. sharp. She prides herself on being punctual. On her way to her office, she chats briefly with one of the janitors. Then she makes coffee, puts a new toner cartridge in the office printer, and calls her daughter to make sure she's getting ready for school. As she begins to type her first medical record of the day, she glances at her watch. "Nine o'clock, already!" she says to herself. "Where does time go?"

Ling is not disorganized—in fact, she's extremely well organized. But she wastes valuable minutes in other ways. Managing time means making the most productive use of the time available. You can do that if you follow these four steps:

1. Arrive at work punctually.
2. Plan your day, and stick to your plan.
3. Arrange your schedule to accommodate your work habits.
4. Limit distractions, interruptions, and other time wasters.

I must govern the clock,  
not be governed by it.

— **GOLDA MEIR**  
*Israeli politician*

## Be Punctual

Your employer will expect you to arrive at work on time every day and begin working with minimal delay. "Time is money," as the saying goes. Time also translates into productivity, which influences company profit. An employee who starts work 15 minutes late each day loses about 5 hours of work time a month, or approximately one and a half weeks of productive time a year. Fifteen minutes in one day may not seem like a big deal, but the time adds up.



Being punctual gives you more time to work, which increases your output and value to the company. It also shows that you are dependable, want to contribute to your company's success, and can be trusted.

You probably know people who are always on time and others who never seem to be on time, no matter how hard they try. People who are regularly punctual know that traffic jams are common during the morning rush hour, so they leave home a half hour earlier than they would later in the day. If they ride in a car pool, they allow time for the inevitable delays that occur when several people must be picked up in different locations. A person who is habitually late may rush into work saying, "Sorry, I had to stop for gas." Those who are punctual fill up with gas the night before.

## Plan Your Day

Planning is essential to time management. Imagine these two coworkers: Leah takes 10 minutes at the end of each day to think about the most important things she must accomplish at work the next day. Then, she lists them in order of importance and estimates the amount of time each task will take. Shauna gets to work in the morning with a vague idea of what she will focus on first. The rest of her day, she figures, will fall into place. Which employee do you think will be more productive?

Shauna's problem is that she doesn't focus on the end result. When you don't have a clear idea of what you want to accomplish and the steps that will get you there, you increase the likelihood that you will get distracted and spend time on unimportant tasks. You will be more likely to allow interruptions to dictate how you spend your time. Basically, time will control you; you won't control time.

Here are the steps that many good time managers follow:



- Step 1:** In the evening or at the end of your workday, decide the most important things you need to do at work tomorrow. Base your decision on what your supervisor or company would consider most important. These can be called your “key tasks.”
- Step 2:** Prioritize these tasks. Number them in order of importance, using 1 for the most important task, 2 for the next most important, and so on.
- Step 3:** Write the top-priority item as the first thing on your To-Do List. When you accomplish it, you will feel good for the rest of the day, even if you don't get everything else done.

## Productivity Traps

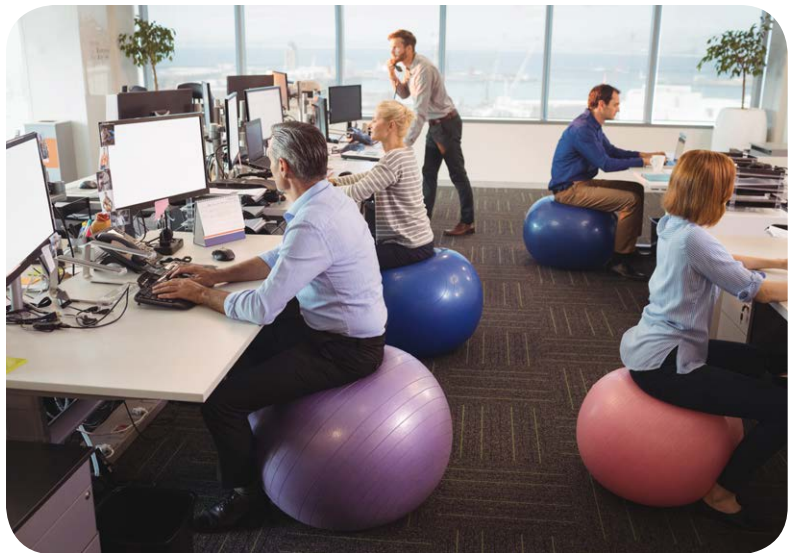
Several productivity traps decrease your ability to be efficient. Try to overcome your tendency to fall prey to these traps.

- ✓ You have a hard time saying no and often agree to do more than is possible.
- ✓ You tend to be disorganized and waste time when you could be working.
- ✓ You procrastinate, finding reasons to delay getting down to work.
- ✓ You're a perfectionist. You spend so much time attempting to make your work perfect that your productivity decreases.
- ✓ You let interruptions and distractions get you off-course.

- Step 4:** Add to your list everything else you must accomplish during the day—including phone calls, meetings, lunch, and appointments—in the order you plan to do the tasks. Estimate how much time each task will take. It's a good idea to add 10-20% to your time estimates to allow for the interruptions, problems, and delays that are bound to occur.
- Step 5:** If time remains, add tasks that you'd like to accomplish but aren't essential.
- Step 6:** When you get to work in the morning, start with the first item on your list. Check off items as you accomplish them.

### Organize Your Day to Fit Your Work Habits

Do you have more energy in early morning, or do you come alive at 10 a.m. or even at 3 p.m.? For the next three days, jot down how you feel at various times of the day. Note the time and whether you feel alert, tired, focused, distracted, or some other way. Once you identify your typical energy level at different times of the day, try to schedule your most important and creative work for your high-energy times and more routine tasks for low-energy times.



Many people find that they have the most energy in the morning and tend to drag after lunch. Early afternoon, for them, is a good time to make phone calls and file correspondence. If you have low energy for most of the day, look at your eating and sleeping habits. Eating a high-carbohydrate breakfast and a mid-morning snack may increase your energy in the morning. A lighter lunch may help reduce sleepiness in the early afternoon. Or, you may simply need to go to bed earlier.

“  
It is not enough to be busy.  
The question is:  
What are we busy about?

— HENRY DAVID THOREAU  
*American Essayist*



## Limit Time Wasters

Some things we do during the day contribute to our productivity, such as working on important tasks, reading assignments, and answering correspondence. Other things we do limit our productivity, such as spending time socializing or making trips to the water fountain. While no one can be productive 100 percent of the time, we can increase our productivity by limiting the time we spend doing “low-value” activities.

To see how you spend your time each day, start an Activity Log. For a full day, write down the time you start and finish everything you do, whether it is brushing your teeth, writing an email, or chatting in the hallway. When you know where your time goes, you can redirect your efforts to become more productive.

What about distractions imposed by others? Some interruptions cannot and should not be avoided, such as questions from customers and requests from supervisors. However, you can limit other distractions and interruptions so you stay on-task and get your work done. When you really have to concentrate, try these interruption-busters:

- ◆ Close your door and forward your calls.
- ◆ Move chairs away from your desk so coworkers can’t sit down and chat excessively.
- ◆ Don’t feel you must deal with interruptions right away. If you’re busy, schedule time on your calendar to deal with them, just as you would schedule time for other tasks that require your attention.
- ◆ Learn to say no.

## ACTIVITY 4.2

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

### What’s Your Priority?

Boshra works at Wayne’s Nursery, a plant and garden center in rural Tennessee. Here’s what he’s written on his To-Do List for Wednesday, May 2. Indicate the order in which you think he should do his work by recording a 1 by the most important task, a 2 by the next most important task, and so on.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Water plants in greenhouses.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Begin to develop plans for display at next year’s Spring Garden Show.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Put together Mrs. Goodwin’s order for 10 a.m. pickup.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sweep workroom.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Weed flowerbeds. Wayne has been complaining about how they look.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Count number of tomato plants in greenhouse. Wayne needs figure before placing this afternoon’s order.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Develop customer satisfaction questionnaire. Must be completed by mid-summer.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Place Nursery ad in paper; deadline is 3 p.m. Friday.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Add supports to strengthen hanging-plant display.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Fix Nursery sign—fell down in last night’s windstorm.

## Overcome Procrastination

“Procrastination is the thief of time,” wrote the English poet Edward Young. You probably know people prone to procrastination. Perhaps you suffer from this time waster.

Procrastination is the act of putting off a task that needs to be done. We procrastinate for many different reasons, but we do it most often when we feel anxious about a task or overwhelmed by it. We may not know where to start, we may doubt our ability to complete the task, or we may be immobilized by perfectionism, the irrational belief that we must do everything perfectly.

When you procrastinate at work, you waste time, lower your productivity, and often miss deadlines. On a personal level, you may feel bad about yourself, anxious about the work you aren’t doing, and guilty for not doing what you know you must.



To overcome procrastination, try this approach:

- ◆ Question yourself about why you aren’t getting started, and challenge the excuses you make. Change negative self-talk, such as “I don’t know where to start,” to positive self-talk, such as “I just have to take this one step at a time.”
- ◆ Define your goal and the steps you need to take to reach the goal. By breaking the goal into manageable tasks, you will feel less overwhelmed.
- ◆ Set priorities for the tasks and determine deadlines for them.
- ◆ Get started on the first task.
- ◆ Reward yourself for your accomplishments.

“  
Mañana (tomorrow)  
is often the busiest day  
of the week.

— SPANISH PROVERB

## ACTIVITY 4.3

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

### Think Action, Not Procrastination!

Here are some comments that might be made by people who are prone to procrastination. On the blank lines following each comment, explain what the person might have said if procrastination were not a problem.

1. This isn't due for two weeks. I don't have to start yet.

---

---

2. I'm going to play a computer game for a while. It will give me more energy to work.

---

---

3. I'm not in the mood to do my math homework. I'll probably be ready after I watch this show.

---

---

4. I don't have time to start such a big project now. I'll wait until I have a big block of time.

---

---

5. I don't have the experience to do this task. I'll ask around to see if someone else can do it for me.

---

---

6. This is a really tough assignment. I'd better take a short nap to be sure I'm rested enough to tackle it.

---

---



## GETTING CONNECTED

For an excellent series of articles on time management,  
locate the Website for Mind Tools Ltd. at:

**<https://myqss.link/Time-Management>**

Scroll down the page and click on “Time Management Skills.”

## WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- Being disorganized causes you to miss meetings and deadlines, lose items, and waste valuable time looking for them.
- You can combat disorganization by developing an efficient filing system, organizing your work area, and using an effective method to remind yourself of obligations.
- Take control of time by being punctual, planning your day, and limiting distractions.
- Procrastination can be overcome by defining the steps needed to accomplish a task and then taking the first step.