

TIME MANAGEMENT: HOW EXECUTIVES CAN ACCOMPLISH MORE AT LESS TIME

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Abstract

The executive who can accomplish most of his/her assigned activities on a given time is a productive executive. Such executives are however not commonly found for 'time management' or more appropriately, the management of one's activities within the available time is both a science and art that the productive executive cultivates over a long period. Time is inelastic, perishable and ticking away. The productive executive maximizes tasks accomplishment during time. The article argues that time management is a mis-application of terminology for time cannot be managed but one can manage what he/she does within the time available. The time-tested principles of time management were discussed including useful tips on how executives could accomplish more with their time. The article contains a specimen Time-Log which executives may find very useful in scheduling their everyday activities to enable them monitor actual time use. Other techniques for task prioritization were also discussed.

Introduction

Among all the resources required by the executive for the realization of organizational objectives, time is the most scarce. Time is totally inelastic, extremely perishable, as it can neither be stored nor recovered. Yesterday is gone and can never come back. Therefore, time is always never enough and is irreplaceable when lost. With this in mind, executives must always make the most use of any available time for maximum productivity (Ducker, 1967). Within the 20th century, great advances in science and technology have touched on and improved almost everything that is vital for human productivity and well-being on earth except time. No amount of scientific innovation will be able to extend the length of a day beyond twenty-four hours except perhaps, to accomplish much more within one day (Wenig and Matthew: 1983).

It is therefore, a surprise that many executives spend their precious time in many ways that do not contribute directly to the realization of desired organizational objectives. The problem however, is that such executives do not even realize that they are wasting this scarce resource in innumerable unprofitable activities that do not add value to the organization. Weber (1958) considered the wasting of time as the deadliest sin since the span of human life is finite and short within which one should make meaningful contribution to society. The irony of the situation is that most executives constantly complain about lack of time to accomplish their duties while they, at the same time, inadvertently waste their little available time in activities that make little or no contributions to the objectives of their organizations. In fact Hicks and Gullet (1981) believe that:-

...most managers do not know how they spend their time. When asked to estimate the percentage of time they devote to various activities, they generally provide (vague) answers that fail to match up with objective surveys of their actual time use.

An example of the "Time-waste syndrome" (Odo:2003) in Nigerian organizations occurs in several ways:

- i. African/Nigerian time malady where, meetings/events/ appointments usually start between one to two hours behind schedule.
- ii. Unacceptable situation where one works in one location while he lives in another location, 100kms away. He/she arrives for work on Monday at 1.00pm and leaves for home on Wednesday.
- iii. A thirty minute break stretches to two hours or may even mean dismissal for the day.
- iv. Going to the bank, market, motor car/motorcycle repairs at 10.00am and never to return for the day.
- v. Conversation/idle talk with friends under trees/sheds during working hours.
- vi. With the arrival of the GSM, we now have endless telephone conversations interrupting the flow of work.
- vii Private drop-in visits/meetings not related to work that take unreasonable amount of time, viii. "Not on seat" which may mean that one may be out running his own private business or even on a full-time academic study etc.

Can We Really Manage Time?

Time Management has generally been defined as the management of time so that one can make the most out of it. This presupposes that one can actually manage the time available to him. In other words, time is assumed to be concrete, tangible and finite commodity that can be divided, used now or stored for a future use. However, this is not true. For according to Allen (2001):

You can't manage time, it just is. So "time management" is a mislabeled problem, which has little chance of being an effective approach. What you really manage is your activity during time and defining outcomes and physical actions required is the core processes required to manage what you do.

This means that like the everyday sun, time is on its own, aloof, independent, untouchable and running. It cannot be influenced by any means. What remains is for one to make the most out of it as it runs. Time management is therefore a mis-application of terminology for time cannot be managed but one can manage what he/she does during time.

Actually, time management should be seen as all the processes, practices/activities people follow to achieve a better utilization of their time.

Types of Time

Broadly, there are two categories of time available to the executive in the discharge of his duties. These are:

Response (Reactionary) Time: This is time spent in reacting to requests or actions initiated by others or situations calling for directives, instructions, opinions or decisions from the executive. This accounts for the longest part of the time spent by the executive (Drucker, 1967).

Discretionary Time: This is the block-time which the executive controls and uses for planning, initiation or accomplishment of objectives. Higher level executives are advised to reduce as much as possible their response time and increase their discretionary time. This may entail that routine or less important duties would be delegated to lower level staff.

Principles of Time Management

Consultants and researchers on time management have devised several ways which administrators can adopt to make better use of time. However, research evidence clearly indicate that good time management is in line with the widely accepted principles of administration. A good administrator is therefore, most likely to be an effective manager of time. Following Hicks & Gullet (1981), we may discuss the generally accepted Time - Management Principles.

Effectiveness before Efficiency: The effective administrator is the one who recognizes the essential activities that lead to the accomplishment of job objectives and pursues them. Hicks and Gullet, (1981) also point out that:

Effectiveness involves doing the right thing, the ultimate futility is to do with great efficiency that which should not be done at all

It is not an effective use of time to engage in unnecessary activities or what should be done by someone else. This entails that the executive should develop and keep in focus clear objectives of his job and the activities that lead to accomplishing them. These activities should then be done accurately which leads to efficiency, in view of the fact that accuracy achieves the minimum use of time and resources. Therefore, consider effectiveness before efficiency as no matter how diligent an activity is performed, it would be of no value if it fails to contribute directly or indirectly to job objectives.

Don't do, Delegate! Many executives find it rather difficult delegating to subordinates work, which they believe could better be done by themselves. In effect, they practice little or no delegation of duties. Such executives are sometimes doubtful of the abilities and trustworthiness of their subordinates. In our environment, such executives usually avoid delegating because they want to appropriate the trappings that go with such duties to themselves. Sometimes however, lack of delegation of duties occur where the executive does not feel comfortable if he is not actively involved in performing such a given assignment. This arises from a low tolerance to imperfection or ambiguity and a desire to be abreast of what is happening on a moment by moment basis.

Unfortunately, performing duties which subordinates should be handling, ultimately leads to a waste of precious time and a sure route to work-overload. Most importantly, those un-delegated duties will tend to obstruct the core duties the executive should better have concentrated on. Therefore a proper analysis of the job must be done to ascertain what duties and tasks should be delegated to subordinates and what must be retained.

Additionally, the executive must be careful to avoid reverse delegation. This manifests in a situation where a subordinate brings back issues/problems for a decision to the executive which the subordinate should have made. Accepting reverse delegation cancels out the gains of delegation and increases the work load of the executive. We recommend that the executive should resist accepting delegation from the subordinate and insist that decisions be taken by the officers covering appropriate positions in the organization. This does not mean

however, that the executive should turn a blind eye to genuine cases or refuse to offer advice when and where necessary.

Identify and Prioritize. Executives should at the end of each day, identify what they hope to achieve the next day and their order of importance. This enables them to have a clear idea of the work target of the next day and the sequence of the targets. It is useful to classify them into “A” - high priorities,

i. e. the most important things that must be done; “B” - medium priorities i.e things that should **be** done after accomplishing the objectives in ‘A’; “C” low priorities, i.e. things that may be done if time permits. This practice helps the executive to distinguish high priority (very important) and low priority (less important) activities and also to plan how much time to allocate to each activity.

Screening and Grouping. This is used to control interruption in the flow of work. The process involves making a determination of which enquiries, visits or calls should have access to the executive immediately and which should be rescheduled or cancelled out-rightly. The payroll officer may hear complaints about tax over-deductions at 2.00pm on Tuesdays, and underpayments at 3.00pm on Thursdays. This enables the officer to handle all cases on the same subject simultaneously and thereby, avoid unnecessary interruptions that would have resulted had they been treated at various times.

Other Useful Tips

Some executives are in the habit of beginning their work day with petty assignments hoping to tackle bigger and most important tasks later. To their chagrin, they usually end the day without getting to the important tasks. It is therefore recommended that one begins with the most important activity of the day and work his way down to the less important ones.

Very difficult or tough problems demand extra efforts for their resolution. Map out a special block of time to handle difficult problems and keep interruptions to the minimum. It should be used with care as the time people spend while waiting outside the closed doors are likely to be wasted time and it also irritates colleagues and subordinates.

If possible, write more and visit less. Just make a phone call or send a subordinate if they could suffice. Note however that many bureaucratic transactions need documentary evidence for necessary record purposes.

The Time Log. This is a device used for measuring how one uses time. It’s construction is relatively easy. It consists of a piece of paper divided into fifteen minute intervals. The job of the executive is analyzed and the different duties and specific tasks that lead to the realization of the job objectives are identified and given code numbers. The executive then writes the relevant code for the work he is performing at each fifteen minute interval, throughout the day. It is estimated that after a two-week painstaking keeping of the time-log, it will give the executive a fair idea of how he/she is actually spending his/her lime at work. If the log is complete, the executive can compare between the way he/she thinks his/her work-time should ideally be spent and the way it was spent as recorded in the log. In most cases, one finds that the time-log is an eye opener to his/her ineffective use of time at work. Appropriate changes and adjustments can then be made to reduce inappropriate use of time. An example of a time-log is provided below.

TIME LOG

Name of Staff:

Dept:

Day of the week:

Date:

Time	Activity	Completed/Not completed
8.00 am		
8.15 am		
8.30 am		
8.45 am		
9.00 am		
9.15 am		
9.30 am		
9.45 am		
10.00 am		
10.15 am		
10.30 am		
10.45 am		
11.00 am		
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12.15 am		
12.30 pm		
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1.15pm		
1.30 pm		
1.45 pm		
2.00 pm		
2.15 pm		
2.30 pm		
2.45 pm		
3.00 pm		
3.15 pm		
3.30 pm		
3.45 pm		
40.00 pm		

Source: Hicks, and Gullet (1981) [modified].

Figure 1.1 Activity Time Log. (The executive records what he/she is doing at 15-minute intervals showing a realistic picture of how his/her time is spent).

ABC Analysis

This is one of the most widely used techniques in management. As mentioned before, it involves the categorization of large number of activities into groups which are marked A, B,C, or any nomenclature adopted. Therefore, activities that are considered to be of the highest priority are grouped together and assigned A, and those with the lowest priority are labeled C etc. Even with the activities grouped in category A, the one that demands the most urgent attention is labeled A₁ etc. This way, the individual first tackles the activities in A, then B and C etc which ensures that the most important activities are always completed within time.

Pareto Analysis

The pareto analysis assumes that 80% of tasks can be completed in 20% of the time available. The remaining 20% of tasks will end up taking 80% of the time. The executive should therefore sort the tasks into two parts with the ones appearing in the first category commanding higher priority. The 80-20 rule can also be used to increase productivity as it is assumed that 80% of the productivity can be achieved by performing 20% of the tasks that have earlier been accorded higher priority.

POSEC Method

This is an acronym for prioritize by organizing, streamlining, economizing and contributing. The method prescribes a model which identifies an individual's immediate sense of emotional and monetary security. It assumes that if an individual attends to his personal responsibilities first, he/she will be a better position to undertake collective responsibilities.

Similar to the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the acronym is a hierarchy of self realization.

- a. The individual should prioritize his time and define his life by goals.
- b. Those things one must accomplish regularly to be deemed successful especially family and financial issues.
- c. STREAMLINING: Activities that are unpleasant but must be done (work and chores)
- d. Activities that one finds desirable and pleasant but they are not pressingly urgent. (Past-times - social events)
- e. Pay attention to other matters that may make the difference e.g social obligation.

The Eisenhower Method

This is the method developed by US President Dwight D. Eisenhower. In this method, all tasks are evaluated using the criteria of important/unimportant and also urgent/not urgent and assigned in specified grandaunts. Tasks that are considered important/urgent are done immediately and personally while tasks that are unimportant/not urgent are delegated to subordinates.

Fit

Usually, the concept of fit as used here advocates for the congruence of the requirements for the accomplishment of tasks (such as human, location, finance, time etc). Fit recognizes that sometimes one is constrained by factors externally controlled and fit enables us to maximize our productivity in the light of such constraints. For instance, if an individual is faced with 20 minutes gap in his schedule, it would be more efficient to take up a task that would take 20 minutes to complete than to embark on a task that would require just 8 minutes, or to commence a task that should normally take up to one week to complete. Similarly, a free time that occurs at 8.30am in the managers schedule would probably be applied less productively on a round of golf or lawn tennis.

Conclusion

Time management is a concept not readily understood or cultivated by most executives especially in the public sector organization in Nigeria. Individuals don't manage time rather, they manage the activities they perform during time. Applying the basic principles and techniques presented in this paper will assist the executive to be more productive on his/her available time.

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