

Time on Your Side

These musings for nonprofits and foundations investing in them are the personal views of Institute President Hal Williams. Feel free to comment at hwilliams@rinstitute.org.

All of us, regardless of our role or organization, are leaders and managers when it comes to the allocation of one indispensable resource: our time.

On the one hand, we can use our time efficiently—getting as much done in an hour as possible. On the other, we can use it effectively, insuring that we not only do things right, but do the right things.

My observation after working with many groups is a simple one: some people get a lot more done in a day than do others. The variation in productivity is enormous. Here are eight thoughts on using time effectively, as well as two articles on time management. We also add a third article on meetings—and how to make that time more productive and energizing.

1. Know where your time actually goes. We urge you to keep a time log looking at increments of 30 minutes for a week. I am always surprised at where my time goes, and I'll bet you will be as well. Once you do it, look squarely at how you might wish to change the way you spend time. Record not only what you are working on, but the way you are working—e.g., in a meeting, on the phone, quietly at desk, in field, etc. This baseline is essential.
2. Don't be a time victim. A surprising number of people go to meetings, respond to questions and issues and let their time go to people who call for it. To use time, you have to control it in some measure. Most of the suggestions below assume your willingness to be proactive to some degree, which is always possible if we are willing to leave the comforting flow of others deciding where our time goes.
3. Reduce duration of telephone and personal conversations. Most conversations I observe and hear could be done in half the time, including my own. This savings is largely enabled by a quick, initial summary of what the call or interaction is to achieve. An outcome framework for a short call or chat can cut it from 10 minutes to 5 almost every time.
4. Shorten time in meetings. In addition to draining energy, most meetings are not a good use of participant time. Make sure the convenor or chair clearly states the target—not what is to be discussed but what is to be concluded. Meetings need targets far more than they need agendas. Cutting the time you spend in meetings is likely to add hours to your time bank for each week.

5. Remember—there is never enough time to do everything, but there is always enough time to do the most important things. You just have to move them to the top of your list. Studies of “inbox behavior” suggest that most of us postpone work that is complicated or presumed to be unpleasant, regardless of how important it might be. Getting to your most critical stuff first is almost always a help to effectiveness.
6. Handle it once and in real time. Going back and forth on tasks is never efficient; a task set aside is displaced to the lower reaches of your memory. Try hard to reserve the time to finish what you start rather than constantly going back and forth. This can not only buy you 10% more time but also make your products of higher value. For example, minutes that you distribute or read a day after a meeting let you keep going, while those out in three days or often three weeks mean you have to regain momentum, or even start almost from scratch.
7. Don't be a slave to email. Some people think it's great when a person is always very prompt in responses. I do not, in that it means they are slave to their screen. Few of us can say that the greatest accomplishment we can achieve is answering our email. In fact, a lot of email advances work far less than we think it does. I strongly urge you to reserve a block of time 2-3 times per day for email responses and resist going to your screen every time something arrives (unless awaiting something urgent).
8. Watch out for too much multi-tasking. People always on their phone, always looking at blackberries, or always instant messaging may think this is the way to keep up in a technological world. The sacrifice in real listening, reflection, and creating with others, however, can exact a high price for this business.