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consulting

# Thoughts on Time Management

This guide to time management has been written by Dr Sara Shinton. You are welcome to use it to develop a better approach to your own time management, but please respect my copyright and do not reproduce any element of the guide without permission.

## About Sara:

I founded Shinton Consulting in 2000 to focus on my interest in researcher development, which came from my personal experience as a researcher (physical chemistry), careers adviser and working in academic development. I've worked with thousands of researchers to help them develop more effective approaches to their research careers, to consider alternative paths and in developing their leadership. You can find out more at [www.shintonconsulting.com](http://www.shintonconsulting.com)

# Five steps to better time management

- 1 Where does your time go?
- 2 What should you be doing?
- 3 What stops you doing the right things?
- 4 What is the right time management strategy for you?
- 5 Making the change

## Where does my time go?

Before we can start to change our time management habits we need to understand the context in which things are going wrong. We need to have an accurate insight into the choices we make on a daily basis which are sabotaging our good intentions. We need to look for patterns of ineffective behaviour and opportunities to change.

This starts with a diagnostic. It's a simple tool but will require a little discipline. For a week you need to map out the tasks you undertake to build a better picture of the context in which your time management is failing.

There are levels of sophistication to this diagnostic. At a basic level, you simply track what you are doing at a given time. You can decide how detailed to make your time map – it might be in chunks of 10 minutes, 30 minutes, hourly or daily (I'd probably steer you away from the latter – you aren't going to get an accurate enough picture).

You can add to the diagnostic with additional reflection points:

What did I want to be doing at this point?

Who or what has prevented me from doing more important things at this time?

Is this a time of the day at which I perform well or do have difficulty motivating myself?

What would help me to be more productive or prioritise better at this point of the day?

A sample time monitoring grid is included in this handout, but will need to be adapted to cover the routine of your working week and the level of detail you want to analyse. I've put in 20 minute chunks in a 9-5 day – this isn't meant to imply this is the right breakdown, it's just one that fits nicely into an A4 page.

## TIME LOG Date:

What do you want to achieve today?

Time	What did you do?	Importance Rating*
09.00		
10.00		
11.00		
12.00		
1.00		
2.00		
3.00		
4.00		
5.00		
How much time did you spend on high importance tasks? Are you happy with how you spent your time today?		
What would have saved/created time?		
What do you want to do differently tomorrow?		

*\*Importance rating is optional, but allows you to rate the tasks you have undertaken*

## What should I be doing?

I've been running time management courses for many years and include in my workshops a 2x2 grid that will probably be familiar to anyone who's tried to improve their own practices at some point.

### Urgent and Important

**Clearly, you need to do this first...**

### Not Urgent but Important

**This is the stuff that should be second in your priorities. Time should be scheduled and set aside for these tasks**

### Urgent but not Important

**Most of us respond to time pressure rather than value. This often comes second, pushing out the “not urgent, but important” stuff**

### Not urgent, not Important

**But often fun...  
Or displacement activity  
Or SEPs\***

**\*Somebody Else’s Problem**

I first came across this in a time management course where it was credited to Stephen Covey. His book, First Things First, elaborates on his own time management strategies.

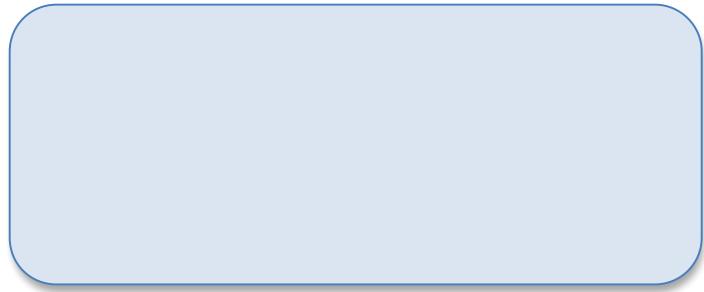
The key to working out what is important is to understand what your role is and on what terms you will be judged. If you aren't focussing on your career progression and ensuring that everything you do is what you should be doing, what is expected of you and what you will be rewarded for, there is a danger that your efforts are benefitting others. This isn't about being selfish as collegiate behaviour and supporting your colleagues is important, as long as it isn't to the detriment of your progression.

So, the next stage is to work out what your priorities should be. What are the things that you need to achieve over the next year to benefit your career? What are the key elements of your role? What do you need to start doing, or do more of, to progress? (This might be a good time to review what you need to stop doing.) There's some space overleaf.

These tasks are the important ones and you will hopefully find it straightforward to work out which are urgent and which need to be scheduled.

Your key responsibilities

(suggest no more than 4-5)



Immediate objectives for these responsibilities

Theme	Next objective

Long term goals

Theme	Needs to be achieved in next 6 months

You then need to look at what you spend your time doing and if you feel there is a disproportionate amount of time spent doing things that aren't important, you need to work out why. Does your role need to be reconsidered so you are rewarded for the things you spend all your time on? Are you taking on responsibilities which should be done by others? Or are you lacking motivation to do the things you should and therefore distract yourself with things that you enjoy even though they aren't your responsibility?

Finally, if you look back at the 2 x 2 grid you'll note that the final box isn't labelled in the usual time management way with "drop this" because I happen to spend a lot of time in Box 4 myself and it's sometimes important to spent a bit of time doing stuff that isn't urgent or important. These tasks are often fun and allow a bit of breathing space (chewing gum for the mind). Some are not fun and do you no benefit. This is why you also need to understand WHY you spend time in, or not in, the boxes if you are going to change your time management habits. We'll come to that with the next key question.

What is stopping you doing the right things?

Onto my second-favourite quote on the theme of time management:

*Habit is habit and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs a step at a time.*

**Mark Twain**

Never underestimate the tenacity of your bad habits. Don't think that by attending a time management session you are going to walk out with a new approach that will instantly transform your life.

Instead hope that you'll walk out with a bit of understanding about WHY your time management isn't as strong as it could be. With this idea in mind I put together my own time management grid, based partly on the motivations I hear from people who attend my courses and partly on my extensive personal familiarity with poor time management.

Most people can complete the traditional 2x2 grid. With a bit of coaxing they can rank the demands on their time and energy in terms of importance and urgency. The key though, is to understand WHY THEY DON'T DO THE IMPORTANT STUFF FIRST. And that can be a lot messier to sort out.

So my time management grid takes on two different dimensions –

*Is this problem about me and my behaviours? Or the way others behave?*

*Can I change this?*

Traditional time management techniques work if you are the problem and you can change. That is usually only partly the case in academia. Other people and academic systems are often major factors in time management problems – and they need different approaches. I hope my grid helps you to work out a more effective approach to your own time management challenges and works well if you complete it after the traditional grid.

The first grid gives my thoughts on what steps you might take to address the issues. The second is left blank for you to complete.

And if you're wondering what my favourite time management quote is...

"I love deadlines. I love the whooshing noise they make as they go by."  
– Douglas Adams, *The Salmon of Doubt*

What is the right time management strategy for you?

## ABOUT ME

### can adapt

Traditional time management strategies

Self awareness - when do you do best work, best environment,

Analysis leads to understanding of how time spent

Ask yourself if you have created the problems with your behaviour

Schedule your own work as rigorously as you schedule "fixed" activities

Introduce thinking time to decision making

Manage interruptions

Balance variety or focus to suit your preferences

## ABOUT OTHERS

### can adapt

Not simply time management - about negotiation and communication

People understand - your role, your responsibilities

People are aware of and respect your career development

Don't sabotage your own diary - communicate existing commitments and negotiate deadlines in this context

Stop "sucking it up"

Wean people off instant gratification

Have positive alternatives to suggest if it's difficult to say "no"

Would a collective voice be more effective?

### fixed/unchanging

Manage yourself - know your weaknesses

Be realistic about level of commitment

Choose the things that fit your life

Could mentoring help?

How do others like you manage?

### fixed/unchanging

Are you alone?

What are the coping strategies that work for others?

Are there alternative paths you could take?

How do you schedule and control these things?

## ABOUT ME

can adapt

## ABOUT OTHERS

can adapt

Would a collective voice be more effective?

fixed/unchanging

fixed/unchanging

## Making the Change

The final stage is the most challenging – remember how tenacious our bad habits are.

This final activity is designed to help you unpick the problems with changing your behaviour and to identify what you really need to do to adapt to better habits.

The first step is to identify what you want to change - ideally something that will make a big difference to your time management.

Next think about what is stopping you from making this change – it might be other people, your own habits, the environment you work in or external deadlines. These are the resisting forces.

Now think about what the benefits will be of the change – this might be increased progress on important tasks, improved creativity or reduced stress. If the drivers which are STOPPING you make the change are largely external or other people, you need to think about the positive drivers that will convince them to accept the change.

Finally you need to address the resisting forces and make a plan. This might involve changing your availability (reducing open office hours for seeing students) or having a conversation with a colleague who consistently asks for things at short notice.

You might find this resource useful if you need to have a difficult conversation with someone.

<http://www.judyringer.com/resources/articles/we-have-to-talk-a-stepbystep-checklist-for-difficult-conversations.php>

The final pages include a schematic to help you to map out your thinking and an example of a completed schematic with extra notes.

Good luck and be positive – even little steps might make a huge difference.

