Managing Time and Priorities: Audit Actions to Assess Time

In this lesson, you will:

- Examine the differences between procrastination and distraction, and explore how to overcome them
- Use a time log to evaluate your own use of time and how it aligns with your priorities

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Watch: Assessing Time

Knowing exactly how you spend your time is a critical step in improving how you manage it. In fact, when you document how you spend your time, minute-by-minute, the results will probably surprise you. In this video, Professor Burton will explain a concept known as "flow," which is a state of mind you might experience when you are motivated and engaged while still working toward accomplishing priorities. To use your time most effectively, you have to determine when and how you can find your flow, avoid procrastination, and minimize distractions.

Transcript

We're going to ask you to really take a look at how you're spending your time and really analyze where your time is going and how you're spending your days. Doing this is hugely eye opening for most people. We're surprised when we realized what are the things that are taking up a lot of time, what are the things that we set out to do but we weren't able to accomplish during a day, this feeling of being pressed and over-scheduled and having too many demands. The first step in dealing with that is to really step and analyze, well, How am I spending my time? But before we get there, I'm going take a minute and just introduce an idea. It's an important idea. It's an idea that comes out of the psychology of emotions and the psychology of happiness. it really was developed as part of studies of creativity. Now it's called flow. The person who really coined this term and has done the most extensive

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research on it, his name is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. But this concept of flow is a really interesting, and useful, and important concept. Because it's that experience of just being so deeply engaged in something and so immersed that time seems to pass without you even realizing it. Think about it have you ever had the experience when you were so into something, and so captivated, that you you don't even get up you don't look away you're deeply immersed and then, when you finally do look up you think oh wow, where did half a day go? Where did the hours go? Some people have this experience in a really great movie or in a really great novel. But ideally, some people get some of this from their work. Something that they're experiencing or doing, a task that they're doing. Now we know there's some characteristics of kinds of work or kinds of activities that give you this sense of flow. And it's about how challenging is it, how engaging, how stimulating is it. And then, how skilled do you feel, how accomplished do you feel when you're engaged in it? And there's this perfect balance of something that is challenging and engaging but it's really using all of you. It's really bringing out the best in you and using the best of you. And so this idea of flow and really recognizing when you're in this state of flow what are the things that you are doing that captivate you, that engage you that you can completely lose yourself in? Those are things you both tend to be good at and like doing. We want to recognize those as the positive things that you're spending time on and ideally, one of the things we know, is you can spend more time on those kinds of activities, you, actually will be more productive, better off, more engaged, happier, healthier, right? Trying to craft ways in which you would achieve this state of flow. Now, no job is always flow, no work is always flow, but recognizing what is flow, what gets you in a state of

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flow, is an important step in understanding your use of time, and your ability to use time productively.

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Tool: Assessing Your Time

This time log can help you evaluate your own use of time.

As mentioned, to manage your time and achieve your priorities, you need to understand how you currently use your time. Are you putting enough time toward achieving your priorities? Are you allowing yourself to be distracted? Are you overworked or unorganized? These are all questions you can begin to answer once you know what you are doing with your time.

This tool is available for you to download for future use on the job.

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Watch: Impacts of the Planning Fallacy

Have you ever underestimated how long something would take you to complete? As it turns out, human beings are categorically bad at judging how long something is going to take. This has serious implications for managers responsible for managing people, projects, and priorities. Professor Burton notes that it is possible to get better at estimating how long things will take so you can be more effective at creating, completing, and delegating tasks.

Transcript

One of the things that psychologists have recognized and validated is that human beings are terrible judges of how long things are going to take. It has a name. It's called the Planning Fallacy. And people in general tend to dramatically underestimate how long it takes for things to be done, and think about how optimistic we tend to be and how long it will take us to get from one place to another. My husband always estimates that the drive from Ithaca to Boston, oh it will only take us five hours. I don't think we've ever done it in less than six, and sometimes it takes us seven. But again, this optimism or this planning fallacy, this idea that we systematically underestimate how long things take, whether it's travel time, whether it's how long meetings will take, whether how long a phone call will take, or in the workplace, how long tasks actually take. Now, we know there's some variation across individuals in how how poorly they are as judges of how long things will take. Some people are off by a factor of two. It ends up taking them twice as long to do things that they think it will take. Others are you

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know a little more accurate, but in general there's a human tendency to underestimate how long things take. This has important implications for managers but because one of the things that you're trying to do is help people manage their time and priorities and also do your own time and priority management. If everyone's underestimating what will that mean? It will mean everything is delayed, everything is behind, we're never on time. So an important first step is knowing about this psychological bias and being in a place where you can start to develop more accurate measurements of how long things actually do take.

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Watch: Examining Procrastination vs. Distraction

Creating tasks to help you achieve your priorities is only a starting point. Actually accomplishing those tasks is another story. In this video, Professor Burton explains the important difference between procrastination and distraction, and offers some strategies for how to overcome each of them in order to achieve your priorities.

Transcript

There's been lots in the media recently about how in modern society and in our technologically enabled society, people are subjected to many more distractions and interruptions over time, and it's harder and harder to get things done and to stay focused, and to accomplish things. I'm not sure that that's accurate, but it's worth talking about. And the way I'd like you to think about it is, there are actually two different categories of things that get in the way of, of our ability to get things done. These two categories are things that are sources of procrastination or ways of procrastinating. And then things that are distractors, or sources of distraction. I'm going to separate procrastination from distraction, because one of the things we know from psychological research is that they're actually quite different.

Procrastination is you yourself, avoiding something. There is some sort of emotional reason or emotional reaction that you're trying to avoid doing certain activities. So you find other things to do to fill the time. You know, sometimes it's watching television or it's reading the newspaper. Or it could be responding to unimportant emails or filling

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out paperwork that really isn't that important. Because, you're avoiding the thing that actually is important or urgent, as more worthy of your time and attention. But for some reason you're dreading it. Maybe you're worried you won't be good enough, or you're worried you won't be successful, or you're somehow anxious that the stakes are very high on this activity, and so you're sort of avoiding it. That's procrastination. You've got to recognize, are there categories of things, Why is that happening? What is the emotional state? Think about how can you overcome those tendencies.

Now this is quite different from things that are interruptions or distractions that are not really under your control, they're not really evoking any sort of emotional response but they're getting in the way of you focusing and being productive, and doing the things that you need to do. And these are things, simple things like when you have your email on and it alerts you every time a new email comes in. You can't help but kind of get distracted and turn your attention away from that. Or if you work in an open plan environment and you see people coming and going or you overhear conversations, these are things that are potentially distractions from the work that you actually need to be doing.

Now here, there are strategies that you can employ to minimize distraction. The first important strategy is to recognize when the work that you need to do is something that really needs focused concentration, and needs minimal disruptions. There's an example of this, some research that was done at a software development company. And what they found was the software developers were

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always interrupting each other with questions and with problems, and the managers were checking in and the way the workplace worked, meetings were called, phone calls happened. People weren't actually getting the work done because there were no uninterrupted blocks of time where people were able to concentrate. And so the company mandated a policy which they called quiet time, quiet hours, which gave people serious blocks of time when there were to be no meetings when you were really not to interrupt people unless it was a dire emergency that then built in to the working day some specific time for people to do heads down focused work, right? Minimize distraction. Here it was done by company policy. Lots of people are required or have to find ways to do it themselves. Whether it means opening your email first thing, answering emails and then turning it off and coming back to it at the end of the day to allow yourself not to be interrupted. Or having cues to others. Perhaps it's closing your door or putting headphones on. Lots of ways to signal to the outside world that you don't want to be interrupted but also to force yourself to recognize there is work that needs to be done in a quiet and focused and concentrated way.

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Activity: Investigate Procrastination

To effectively manage your own time and priorities, as well as the time and priorities of others, it is critical that you understand procrastination and the psychology behind it. In this activity, you will investigate the research that has been done around procrastination and then reflect on your own procrastination tendencies. You do not need to have a background or formal education in psychology for this exercise.

Here are a few sources that may help to get you started:

> Hall, Alena. "The Science Behind Our Urge to Procrastinate." *The Huffington Post*. July 15, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/15/science-of-procrastination_n_5585440.html.
>
> Lebowitz, Shana. "You Aren't Just Lazy – These 7 Psychological Theories Explain Why You Procrastinate." *Business Insider*. July 22, 2015. http://www.businessinsider.com/psychological-reasons-you-procrastinate-2015-7.
>
> Wang, Shirley S. "To Stop Procrastinating, Start by Understanding the Emotions Involved." *Wall Street Journal*. August 31, 2015. http://www.wsj.com/articles/to-stop-procrastinating-start-by-understanding-whats-really-going-on-1441043167.

Go online to investigate procrastination. Pay particular attention to information about why people procrastinate and what can be done

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about it. Then record your findings and responses to the questions below. Once you have finished entering your responses, you will be able to save or print them for future use.

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Watch: Assessing What Matters

Beyond assessing whether you enjoy doing a particular task, it's important to know if what you're doing fits with the priorities of the organization. In this video, Professor Elias will share a simple framework for how to determine which tasks you should focus on.

Source: Covey, Stephen R., A. Roger. Merrill, and Rebecca R. Merrill. *First Things First*. New York: Simon Schuster, 1994.

Transcript

So when thinking about where your time goes, you want to assess if you're spending time on what really matters. And there's a lot of questions surrounding what matters. When are certain tasks that matter due? Where you should you be doing them? Why are they really important tasks, and who might need to be involved in these tasks that really matter to you? A lot of times we don't allocate enough time to complete these tasks that matter, and so we end up not having enough time to complete them. Either because we're doing other tasks, that aren't as important, or because we just haven't estimated the right amount of time that these tasks will take. So when thinking about achieving our priorities, we want to focus on tasks that are urgent and important. What do I mean by urgent and important?

Well urgent tasks are pressing tasks that require immediate attention. They seem like they're something we need to get to right now. But they don't always contribute to our long term goals. Tasks that

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contribute to our long term goals, or overall organizational strategy, are usually called important tasks. So ideally, we would spend out time on tasks that are both urgent and important. And then secondly, on tasks that are important, but no necessarily urgent.

Let me give you some examples of these types of tasks. A task that would be urgent and important would be a time sensitive work project that needs to be turned into senior leadership by the end of the week. That's both urgent, because it has a very hard deadline, and it's important, because it's important to our success as a career professional, as well as the success of the organization. A task that's not urgent but actually very important, might be something like exercise. There's no particular deadline or time period that we have to exercise during the day, but it's something that will benefit our overall health in the long run, so it does serve a long term goal. Another not urgent but important task might be career planning. So if we have a job and are currently employed we might not spend a lot of time on career planning, but if in the long run we do want to move to a certain level in our career, we need to allocate a little bit of time to that. There are some tasks that are urgent but not important. And overwhelmingly, studies show we spend a lot of our day doing these urgent but not very important tasks. This might be returning kind of unimportant phone calls, or having people actually approach you, and need something and request something, such as a sports team wanting to do a fundraiser with your company. It seems very urgent because it has an immediacy to it and people are actually present and there. But it might not be that important to your long term strategy even if it's important to someone else's long term strategy. An example of a task that isn't urgent or

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important and should be avoided for time management would be unfocused web surfing or spending too much time on social media. So again, when assessing what matters and where our time goes, we want to think about what kinds of tasks we're spending our time doing. Are they urgent? Are they important? Are they both or neither?

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Final Assessment

As you have seen in this lesson, it's common to underestimate the amount of time it will take to complete a given task. By evaluating your current and past use of time, you can better prepare for managing your future use of time. Complete the following assessment to confirm your mastery of the key concepts presented.

Answer the following questions.
You must answer at least three questions correctly to achieve completion.
You may take this assessment up to three times to achieve a passing score.

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Lesson Wrap-up

It may often feel like time slips away. This could be because a task takes twice as long as you planned, because something else pulled your attention away, or because you are avoiding doing a task.

In this lesson, you completed a time log that allowed you to evaluate your own use of time so you can reflect and set goals for your future use of time. Professors Burton and Elias also covered the important differences between procrastination and distraction, and they offered ways to avoid both pitfalls.

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