

Excellent Time Management Is Vital For Success

It is interesting to me that professionals still struggle with personal productivity given the avalanche of time management gadgets, books and seminars available today. It all comes down to three main issues you must contend with if you want to control time instead of allowing time to control you:

- What it means to prioritize and focus.
- When to work on what.
- How to guard your time.

That is it – three simple steps.

What It Means To Prioritize and Focus

To prioritize means to place something ahead of something else. Seems simple, but it paralyzes many professionals. Think of all of the tasks, reports, analyses and other fun things that dominate your time each and every day.

Write down the top 20 things you have to do at work. Which things on your list are the *least important*? Mark them off the list. It starts to get brutally tough fast, doesn't it?

When I ask professionals about the issue of focus, they proudly whip out their list of projects and things to do. Then I ask them to explain which ones are the most important. They start to twitch.

I like to think of the things I do in terms of the old 80/20 rule. Eighty percent of the work is done by 20% percent of the people. Eighty percent of the profits come from 20% of the products. You get the logic. Who is most responsible for the important work that is accomplished in your group? Some small number of people. The rest may be important contributors, but there are only a few real workhorses.

I am *not* suggesting that the less important people or tasks be jettisoned. The point is to make sure we identify and focus on the things that matter *most*. What is your 20% – the most important tasks and people you are involved with on a regular basis? It is a group of special things and people that will determine how fast and how far you will climb the corporate ladder.

To identify the 20%, ask yourself this question. Which tasks and relationships will bring you the most experience, success and advancement? To answer the question, you must understand the power and potential of the people around you and what is valued by the system used to evaluate you. The really successful, well networked and/or smart people around – *they matter*. The tasks and projects most clearly valued by your superiors and/or the goofy evaluation process you are subjected to – *they matter*. Even worse, some tasks and relationships you do not like at all will be part of the answer to the

question – *so they matter too*. Which tasks will make your boss sit up and say, “Wow!” Which ones will prove you have what it takes to step up to the next level of leadership?

Go back and look at that inventory of the tasks that occupy your time. Which are the most important for your future in the firm and in your career? Find the 20% and treat it with the reverence it deserves.

From the 80/20 perspective, thinking through the tasks you work on is not too tough. The sticky part is usually the relationships. You all know that all relationships are not created equal. Sometimes there are people who are not worth your time. The honest question is how important is the person to your success and well-being in the firm and in your career?

There are two ugly implications that stem from this question. The first is that sometimes you do not need to be spending so much time with a person (e.g., helping them, socializing) if they are not in your 20%. The second implication is the bigger bummer. There are people out there you might not like very much who are in your 20%. You might object to their personal or professional values, the way they communicate or some other characteristic. Nonetheless, you must figure out how to deal with them more productively. If they are people with great skill, are privy to specialized knowledge you need or are connected to influential others, you must find the positive in them and build on it.

When to Work On What

Once you have the 20% clearly in sight, it is time for step two. When is the best time to work on these things? Think carefully and determine what time of day your brain processes most effectively. It is the time of day that you are you able to think through complex challenges and not get a headache.

Most of us have a window of a few hours each day when we can jump on these issues without having an aneurism. It is what I like to call your Einstein window. Ideas flow easily, words come naturally and problems feel like fun challenges.

Identify when you have your mental peak and dedicate it to only the 20%. I realize you face constraints – you have meetings to attend, calls that must be made at certain times, employees who need to be stroked, etc. Some deviations are fine, but the rule is to work vigorously to protect that window of time.

How to Guard Your Time

There are many simple ways to protect this vital window of time, but most people are unwilling to do them. First, close the door. Keep it open most of the day, but close it when you are working on the “good stuff” during those precious few hours when your

brain really rocks. Next, turn off all manner of gadgets that will chirp or beep and distract you. Then disconnect the phone. I'm serious. Try it for at least 30 minutes. Finally, we must deal with that most capable of foes, email. Turn it off. If you are like me and your best hours are the first few, try not launching the email program until your Einstein window has passed.

Here is one more tidbit on guarding your time. You need to learn to say "no." "No" is not a four letter word. Most professionals are horrible at it since they do not feel they have the power to say no. They feel obligated to their bosses, colleagues and employees.

How many times have you been deep in thought, maybe even crushed up against a deadline, when a person wanders in and says something like, "Jack, I'm working on the monthly report for the Director. Could you walk through that new contract with me for a minute?" Perfectly reasonable request, *but say no*. Tell them genuinely that you will get to it later – *but not now*. I can hear what you are thinking, "But there are exceptions, some things I must do!" That is true, and you should deal with those issues when they arise. Most tasks, however, do not fall into that category.

Sweat the 20% – *the rest is just work you have to do*. Yet another challenge – document how often you fail to say no and run off half-cocked to comply with whatever request came your way. Do it for at least three days, and then classify each interruption as either supporting or not supporting the 20%. You might be surprised.

Dr. Dewett is a business professor, author, consultant and speaker specializing in leadership and organizational life. As quoted in the New York Times, Business Week, the Chicago Tribune, MSNBC and elsewhere. His new book is Leadership Redefined. Find out more at drdewett.com.

Copyright 2008 TVA Inc. All rights reserved. While you may copy this publication, its content may not be modified. You may, and are encouraged to, share the publication with others who may benefit from receiving it.