

Time Management

How to accomplish important tasks and still have time for fun

BY MEL BRAVERMAN

“Time management is the act or process of planning and exercising conscious control over the amount of time spent on specific activities, especially to increase efficiency or productivity. Time management may be aided by a range of skills, tools, and techniques used to manage time when accomplishing specific tasks, projects, and goals complying with a due date.”

—Wikipedia

“The great dividing line between success and failure can be expressed in five words: ‘I did not have time.’”

—Franklin Field

In my work with managers, one theme that continually arises is their feeling of needing more time to accomplish what they believe is necessary to grow or maintain their cooperatives. When I ask if they have followed through on what we previously worked on, too often the response is, “I just couldn’t find the time.”

The concept that time is something to be “found” removes the responsibility for what needs to be accomplished (according to the individual) from that person and places their failure to act on an abstract concept. There is a sense that the inability to do what they said they would do is due to an outside force impacting them, and they are not responsible for this result. I challenge this concept regularly by pointing out that there was plenty of time to do what they said they wanted to do, but obviously it had not been a priority. The responsibility for not doing what we want to do is ours and ours alone.

“Don’t say you don’t have enough time. You have exactly the same number of hours per day that were given to Helen Keller, Pasteur, Michelangelo, Mother Teresa, Leonardo daVinci, Thomas Jefferson, and Albert Einstein.”—H. Jackson Brown

A few years ago I realized I could be a more effective resource for my clients if, in discussing ways to improve their co-op’s performance, they understood the need to manage their time to implement improvements. I felt I needed to be able to assist them with time management. To this end, I decided to learn more about the process of time management and to have suggestions for those who are time-challenged. During my research, I realized the issue is not so much time management—not that this isn’t important, yet it is not what gets the job done—but rather the manager’s ability to prioritize what is most important to accomplish and to focus energy on these tasks. The retail environment is a never-ending job, with success being a continual process and not necessarily a point you will reach.

“The bad news is time flies. The good news is you’re the pilot.”

—Michael Altshuler

I worked with one client on his desire to improve his ability to accomplish more of the important tasks. The first step was gaining an understanding of where his time was currently being spent. Was it being spent in the appropriate areas? I asked my client to carry around a small sheet of paper that had the day broken down by one-hour segments. Each hour he would record what he spent the majority of that hour doing: phone calls, employee issues, budgeting, writing reports, and the like. Each day, he began with a new sheet of paper.

After two weeks, we added up his figures and determined by percentages where he was spending his time. He discovered he spent the majority of his time on smaller, less important tasks that

were easy and too little time on what really

needed to be accomplished. This gave him a greater understanding of why, although he was working hard and long hours, he always felt a lack of accomplishment and a sense of franticness about meeting the co-op’s priorities.

Focus on your priorities

“It’s not enough to be busy, so are the ants. The question is, what are we busy about?”

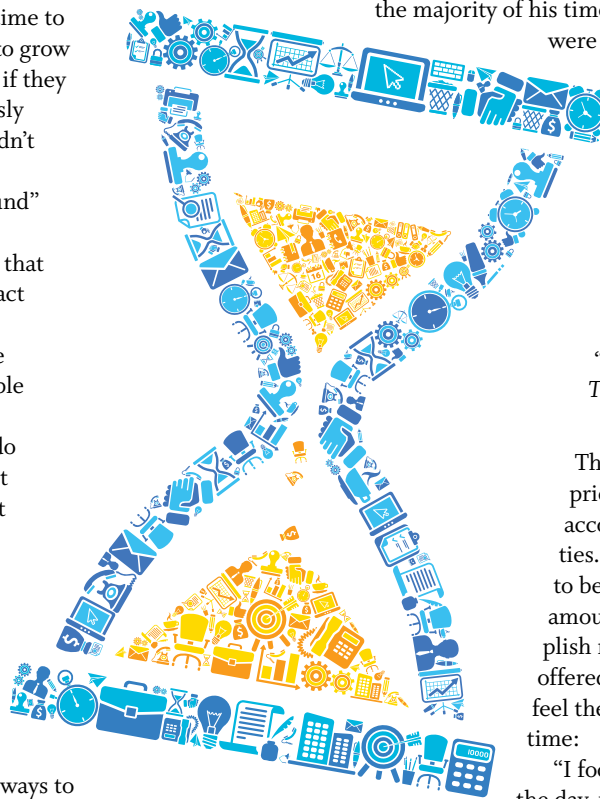
—Henry David Thoreau

The concept of understanding what your real priorities are is key to having the ability to accomplish the tasks related to these priorities. I surveyed some industry folks who seem to be able to accomplish a lot during the same amount of time in which many of us accomplish much less. Some responses that were offered are food for thought for those of you who feel the need to accomplish more with your work time:

“I focus on the more difficult things early in the day, when I have the best energy and focus,” said Alysen Land, general manager at Ozark Natural Foods in Fayetteville, Ark. Her approach mirrors one suggested in the book *Eat That Frog*, by Brian Tracy and Berrett-Koehler: “The key to reaching high levels of performance and productivity is for you to develop the lifelong habit of tackling your major task first thing each morning.” Land added, “I need to get up and away from my desk every so often to keep me refreshed and productive.”

Mark Goehring, who wears a number of hats (CDS Consulting Co-op board president, Co-op Board Leadership Team leader, and board trainer), is able to manage all these responsibilities and still have time to ride his bike around the countryside. Goehring says, “Map out what you are trying to accomplish, and break it down into interim steps. I stay connected to how today’s work will allow me to

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◀ accomplish something much bigger than the specific task at hand.” Staying focused on the larger goal keeps him motivated to accomplish the smaller tasks that will enable him to attain his goals.

Goehring is also a fan of keeping mentally alert by using physical activity during his day—“It helps me keep productive with my time.” To this end, he actually has his desk set up with a treadmill so he can get his walking in while he works.

“One thing you can’t recycle is wasted time.”—Author unknown

For Michelle Schry, general manager at People’s Food Co-op in La Crosse, Wis., achieving her priorities is a process that begins with breaking down what she wants to accomplish and focusing on those areas that are intricately tied to the co-op’s success. “Every project, every day, every situation has its priorities. Learning how to think critically and determine priorities and logical orders for activities is a crucial part of being a good manager. Do I fail on occasion? Yep—but luckily for everyone around me, I try to limit my ‘fails’ to activities that have the lowest impact on the organization.”

“One cannot manage too many affairs: like pumpkins in the water, one pops up while you try to hold down the other.”

—Chinese proverb

Dan Gillotte, general manager at Wheatville Cooperative in Austin, Tex., offers this: “Many people tend to push the big things back and take care of all the little things. Yet people feel more satisfied with their work when they accomplish the big things.” Dan recommends the *Big Rocks Approach*, by Steven Covey, as an excellent read for time-management concepts and tools.

“Resist the temptation to clear up small things first!”

—Eat That Frog

As I spoke with these and other managers, it became evident most believed that to accomplish their most important goals they need to understand that the smaller tasks feed into the larger goals, and they need to keep mentally and physically energized while doing these tasks. A sense of accomplishment, no matter how hard the work, can improve your energy for other work.



Lists and calendars

Once we understand our priorities, we still may need approaches that help us understand when we can do the work to achieve these priorities. In asking about what tools were used, one came out very strongly: lists.

Lynn Christensen, general manager at the Ft. Collins Co-op in Colorado, says, “If I don’t take that three minutes to make my list when I first arrive at work, I am lost. I place a star next to the most important items to keep my focus in the appropriate place.” Land from Ozark Natural Foods says, “First thing in the a.m., I write down everything I want to accomplish that day.” In speaking with Walden Swanson of Co-op Metrics, I learned he has five task lists going at any one time. Swanson’s lists are for different areas, and he prioritizes them daily.

I also use lists, but there are times when I feel the list is growing so fast it is difficult to see how I will accomplish what is on it. I felt that Gillotte was on to something when he explained that he had moved from lists to a calendar. “Wheatville managers all have their own calendars,” Gillotte said. “Block out time for each task: reviews, product investigation, other. Treat tasks as you would a meeting, even if it is only a 15-minute task. Build in open office time—you can read emails, make calls, deal with short-time, drop-in issues.” Gillotte believes that all tasks, small and large, should be placed on the calendar.

Using a calendar creates visible boundaries in understanding what you can accomplish in any given day. This removes some of the grandiose thoughts we may have on what we intend to accomplish and hunker us down in a reality with a beginning and an end. A list can be infinite, but a calendar is finite.

Other people I spoke with also mentioned using calendars. Google calendar was most mentioned, but while I expected most to hear about technical tools, I was offered a lot of very down-to-earth (not technical) approaches. Kari Mitchell, Outpost Natural Food’s director of human resources (Milwaukee, Wis.), said some of her time management tools were “delegation and cross-training.” This makes perfect sense to me because if you can delegate some chores to others, it frees you up to focus on your important tasks.

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Also, if you work in an environment where cross-training is a priority, you are able to weather personnel changes with less negative impact on your time.

Regular meetings and administration

Mitchell also said, “Regular meetings with those you supervise reduces unanticipated use of your time.” Regularly scheduled meetings with a specific agenda can save a lot of time, especially if those who will meet can postpone talking about their issues (assuming they are not time-sensitive) until the meeting. The challenge here is for all to learn that just because I want something now does not mean it needs to be addressed right now. The more time we spend on “I need it now” issues, the less time there is for everything else—which typically means less time for the most important things.

A number of managers spoke to the need for establishing blocks of time for administrative tasks. This means scheduling the time and ensuring your coworkers understand that this is not down time but focused work time, and you are not free to be disturbed. Thinking you will accomplish your administrative tasks “when you have time” is a recipe for frustration. For many, to ensure they have this time, establishing boundaries with co-workers is essential. If you set up your schedule for administrative time and continually respond to others’ immediate needs (real or perceived), you will either not complete those tasks you intended to complete or you will work longer hours than you anticipated.

Christensen said, “SMART goals for all my managers helps keep them on track and reduce my need to work on their issues.” I have been training managers on SMART goals—Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound—for 15 years, and most of those I’ve worked with who have instituted the SMART goals and monitoring system find it frees them up while allowing them to monitor what is going on.

And then there is the power of “no.” Schry says, “Know

when to say no. This is hard for co-op managers in particular, because we’re often selected to be responsive to members and staff. But I find that just because someone asks me to do something doesn’t mean I have to do it. Being a good manager is just as much about knowing what *not* to do, as it is about know what *to* do.”

“You can say ‘NO’ to anything that is not a high-value use of your time and your life!”
—Eat That Frog

If you determine you are going to work on your time-management skills, I suggest you explore each of the following:

- **Awareness:** Learn where you are spending your time; don’t assume you know.
- **Prioritizing:** Determine what will serve your co-op best, and focus on these areas.
- **Setting goals:** If you are managing people, ensure that each has a set of goals to focus them where you want them to spend their time.
- **Delegating:** You cannot do it all by yourself—even if you have stronger skills than others. Is doing the less important tasks serving the co-op best?
- **Setting boundaries:** Using “no” as a tool when appropriate may allow you to “gain” time as others learn what not to bring to your attention.

As you see, there are lots of possibilities to consider: from basic lists to calendars, from delegation to a system of goals, from blocking out specific administrative time to “just saying no.” No one system meets everyone’s needs, but if you are not managing your time to allow you to accomplish your co-op’s priorities, or you are working from dawn to dusk every day, you are probably not giving your co-op or yourself your best. Most of us do not have the luxury of adding staff to free up our time. As Schry said in parting, “I think a personal assistant would be great, but I don’t work at Bain Capital”—and neither do you. ■



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