

Spend Your Time Wisely

Elizabeth Anderson-Peacock, DC

There is a saying: If you want something done, give it to a busy person.

Why is it that within a day's time, someone you know seems to be able to accomplish so much more than you? After all, we are working with the same number of hours. But while you're grasping at the day's minutes, others seem to effortlessly float through their workload. Do they hold some special secret?

In short, no. However, there are a few key concepts and strategies that, if followed, can make your day *much* more productive.

Busyness vs. Productivity

First, let's take a look at the concept of "busyness." Busyness is the act of keeping ourselves full of activity, but without a plan that moves us forward through the day. I think of a time when I watched someone really look busy at her job yet, in observation, she was replying to texts and e-mails while having a lengthy telephone conversation. As a customer standing in front of her, I was asked to "wait" with her hand raised until she finished the conversation. When done, she apologized, but stated she was "so busy." I thought, *really*, is that so, or had she just lacked the skills to prioritize and handle her workload?

Productivity is the act of being efficient while accomplishing things that move you forward in the day. And it all happens because you have a plan of action.

Can you find examples in your day that can be defined as "busyness" instead of productiveness? Here are a few time-wasting habits to consider:

Time-Wasting Habits

We need to be aware of our time-wasting habits. While we all have our own schedules and individual personalities, there are two major time wasters that many seem to fall victim to: multitasking and interruptions.

Multitasking. There is really no such thing as multitasking. Masquerading as multitasking is the ability to rapidly switch from one task to another. However, the brain is designed to work on one thing at a time. Some people can sequentially change what they are doing, but they are in effect still focusing on one thing at a time.

Evidence is emerging that "multitaskers" are not actually as efficient as we think since their thought processes are distracted by jogging back and forth between tasks. The effect is often reduced focus and mental fatigue as one has to keep in the forefront of the mind the numerous thoughts to "remember."

Interruptions. Have you ever begun your day with a well-thought-out plan of what you wanted to accomplish, but at the end of the day, somehow managed to do absolutely nothing on that list? Of

course you have. Time-consuming interruptions can sneak in by a simple phone call, an e-mail, even a radio broadcast and lead you down a very different path than the one intended.

These time wasters distract us and take us off our game, shifting our focus and derailing our plans. We falsely prioritize these distractions as having to do them right away, instead of redirecting them where they belong.

Prioritization

While prioritization is a simple concept that we've all heard of, many of us fail to realize the importance of implementing it in our lives *each and every* day. Your time is valuable; make the effort to spend it wisely. It is the prioritization of duties and tasks from high priority to low that will allow you to maintain maximum focus and accomplish tasks efficiently. If we do not prioritize our time and energy with high-priority items, we then proceed to fill our day with low-priority items, interruptions and other time-consuming distractions.

Make a list. Start each day with a list of what you wish to accomplish. Then prioritize the items from high to low - either move the list around or number accordingly.

Note what time of day you are the most productive. Is it in the morning, afternoon or evening? We each have our own *circadian rhythm*: high and low energy times with which we pace ourselves through our day. Once identified, try tackling those important items during your high-energy time of day and leave your low-priority tasks to your low-energy time of day.

For example, my creativity comes best either early in the morning or late at night. My low time is mid-afternoon. I schedule academic reading, complex thinking and creativity during my best times, and leave my low-priority items (i.e., reading e-mail, opening mail, handling messages and chores) to my low time.

[pb]The Five-D Rule

Once you have developed your list, apply the "Five D" rule (do, delay, delegate, dump or donate) to ensure the list is completed. The five Ds will help you categorize those items on your list and take action on what must be accomplished.

Do It Today. Early in practice, I would put off certain things I did not enjoy doing (e.g., workers' compensation forms and medico-legal reports). They would begin to accumulate and become seemingly overwhelming as a "huge pile of work." I would spend time thinking about the pile both in and outside the office, which was distracting and completely unproductive.

I learned to finish all of the reports each day by allotting time at the end of the day to complete them. The next day would begin fresh and I would not be focused on the leftovers from the day before. There was no catching up to do and I was prepared for the new day; my mind was in present time. Should something happen to me, all files were completed and up-to-date.

Delay. On the other hand, if an item is something that is not pressing at the time or needs more time to gestate, you may delay it. However, make sure that you set up a time to revisit and put it in either the do, delegate, dump or donate category.

Delegate. The key to proper delegation is ensuring the person knows what is anticipated and agrees on the performance standard expected. When delegation is not followed correctly, the majority of the time it is due to how the instructions are communicated and whether the person is trained in what needs to be done to complete the task properly. In other words, the majority of the

time, the problem is with the *one who delegates*.

Early in my career, I would constantly interrupt my staff with a task when something popped into my head, so it would be "off my mind." So, while I could focus on other things, I had the expectation that they would handle the new task along with "everything else."

During a staff meeting, it came up that some things were being forgotten or left incomplete by staff. I discovered that whenever I would interrupt them, whatever they were working on had to be mentally filed and paused while I gave them instructions. At times, the pause was enough for them to forget whatever I had previously delegated. Yes, somewhat unfair. Instead, I began to write down the tasks that needed to be delegated and instruct staff at an appropriate time. They would then follow-up with me at the end of the day, and I would note if it was high, medium or low priority, along with any other explanations.

Once I properly trained my staff and delegated what I did not have to perform myself, this freed my time to do the things only I could do and loved to do. This provided me with more energy and made better use of my time. It allowed staff to shine with their strengths and grow as individuals, and we worked as a team. I systematized their jobs and created performance reviews to ensure they had tools to deliver what was expected. It took me a great deal of up-front energy to train staff, but for many years, the practice ran smoothly.

Dump or Donate. How often do you look at a pile of papers, a junk drawer or a closet in disarray and feel like it will be a huge chore to sort? Clutter is distracting. It creates chaos of the mind. How much time and energy is spent thinking, "I should clean that up or sort through that pile, shouldn't I?"

If you have not used an item in five years, ask yourself if it will ever be used. If not, can it be used by others? If in decent shape, can it be donated to someone? If in poor shape, should it be dumped? I would propose you block out some time to handle this, even if just a half hour. Have a garbage can and a box with you. You either garbage it or box it to donate. Items you no longer use may be recycled or used by others through various organizations and programs.