It's about time: Myths and realities of time management

Pareto's Principle or the 80/20 Rule is based on the principle that 20 per cent of anything is responsible for 80 per cent of the results. The value of the 80/20 Rule, as it relates to time management, is to help focus time and energy on the 20 per cent of the work that really matters.



Mastering and incorporating this rule, can keep you organized and efficient. Time management is really about self-management—learning how to leverage the time you do have by prioritizing, delegating and organizing your daily activities.

There are a number of tools and techniques that you can use to help incorporate the 80/20 Rule into your workday. But it’s important to first recognize and overcome the more commonly accepted myths about time management.

Myth number 1

I put things off until the last minute because I work best under pressure. Some people convince themselves that pressure stimulates creative thinking and productivity. In fact, nobody is at his or her best under pressure. The more you avoid a task, and reduce the amount of time available to properly complete it, the more unpleasant the task becomes.

Try breaking down large projects into small, more manageable tasks. Then work on each task in short bursts. Not only will the “bite-size” tasks make the project less daunting, but the short bursts of activity will help you overcome your resistance to starting the project.

Myth number 2

I get twice as much done when I multitask. Multitasking can be both necessary and a real lifesaver, but it can also quickly spin out of control and impair your ability to complete any one task effectively. Researchers have discovered that when you multitask, you do two things worse than you would if you did just one. Not only do you lose time when you switch back and forth from one task to another, but the speed at which you perform each task decreases.

The brain isn't set up to do two things at once effectively. For many, frequent multitasking leads to cluttered workspaces and unfinished projects. Try to block out the time required to accomplish each task, and concentrate on the one task at hand. If any task requires an extended period of time, “resetting” your brain with five to 10 minute breaks every hour or so can help.

Myth number 3

I'm too busy to get organized. The truth is that you're not too busy to get organized! One sure way to guarantee you don't use time effectively is to surround yourself with clutter and disorganization. The average worker loses at least an hour each day looking for misplaced information or materials. Not only is this a huge drain on time and energy, it can lead to distraction, frustration and unnecessary stress.

Divide your workspace into small, manageable areas to be “de-cluttered.” As you work on each area, choose one of the following actions:

- Refer it to someone else
- Act on it
- File it
- Toss it

When you “file it,” bear in mind that outdated material could be stored elsewhere. If you work in a computerized environment, get rid of paperwork and store information on your computer. This will make information more accessible and free up workspace. Once everything has a suitable home, things will be easier to retrieve. You can maintain organization with 10 to 15 minutes a day of straightening up.

Applying the 80/20rule

Now that you've reviewed a few of the myths about work, you can learn to apply techniques to help focus on the 20 per cent of work that is really important.

Learn to prioritize. Prioritizing is about learning to differentiate between essential and non-essential tasks. Activity lists are excellent tools to help you stay on top of priorities and remain flexible to changing priorities.

The key to making activity lists work is to review them at least once a week with your manager or supervisor. If you both see that the value of an activity is less than the value of the time required to complete it, bump the activity down the list or remove it. Not only will this help create clarity, but it will also keep you and your boss on the same page regarding expectations and priorities.

Understand what is expected of you. Defining and understanding goals requires clear communication. There are some key questions to ask each time you take on a new task. These questions will help provide an understanding of where a new task fits into your activity list. Try asking:

- What is the purpose of the activity and/or project?
- What is the measurement for success?
- What is the deadline?
- What resources are available?
- Who else is involved and how is their involvement related to the activity?

Learn to delegate. Delegation is a key skill for anyone leading a project. Trust and rely on other people’s abilities to perform, and understand what tasks others can accomplish. A good rule of thumb is, if someone can do a task 75 to 80 per cent as well as you can, then delegate it. This will allow you to focus on tasks that need your specific attention, and will also allow you time to review and support the other person's work.

Let go of perfection. While it's good to aim high, perfectionism can also set you up for failure. It's not uncommon to turn in work late, or never finish tasks waiting for perfection. The bottom line is that life is not perfect, so why should you expect everything you do to be? Try setting a realistic amount of time to complete each task. If the time allocated for the task passes and it is still unfinished, ask if the effort is in proportion to the value of the task, and whether other activities will be delayed by continuing. If the answer to either of these questions is "yes," then maybe it's time to move on.

As you begin to overcome the myths that affect your ability to perform, and apply new time management techniques, you will be able to focus on the 20 per cent of your work that really matters. And remember that this process is a transition, not an event. It's a matter of gradually accepting change in the way you work, and how you think about the work that you do.