

Eight ways to manage yourself by Kerry Gleeson

Like all professional Human Resource departments are struggling to cope with today's massive workload. You are being asked to provide more with less (staff, budget, potential market, etc.)

How can you and your team accomplish the seemingly impossible?

The answer: by learning Information Age survival skills to manage your workload. By processing your workload more efficiently, you create more time to service your company staff.

Cultivate Effectiveness

The following are several skills you and your team must have to achieve effectiveness and sustained service with less.

1. Screen non-essential information.

Learn to identify information that you don't need and eliminate it at the source. Remove yourself from all distribution lists that stuff your paper & electronic mailbox with useless catalogs, newsletters, and data that have no value to you. Allow only those items which you need to do your job or address issues of high importance to you to get through your filters. Many of today's email programs (e.g. Microsoft Outlook, IBM's Lotus Notes, etc.) provide filtering options to send email directly to folders or Deleted items bypassing the inbox. What you do not see you do not need to process. Make it a point to open your mail, both "e" and "snail," only when you are ready to deal with it and make your "delete" key and trash bin your best friends. If you learn to ruthlessly screen/filter low-value information, you will find that the volume of data you work with will decrease dramatically.

2. Do not procrastinate.

When you put off tasks, you only build stress and make your workload seem heavier than it really is. If you tackle your worst jobs first and work on them a little at a time, you'll find that they're not as unmanageable as you imagined. Deal with incoming paper and electronic information as soon as you come across them. Don't set them down or close them without adding value to them, or the result will be a waste of precious time. If you are not going to process your email, don't look at it! If you look at it, do it then and there! Apply the 4D's – Do it immediately; Delegate it to the right person, now; Designate the email to a Task, now; or Dump it (file or discard). Finally, you'll find that doing it now will keep both of your "in" boxes emptier and keep you from losing important documents.

3. Reduce interruptions.

One work study determined we get interrupted on average every three minutes. Another study found it takes an average of 8 minutes to get focused back on what we were in the middle of doing before being interrupted! In other words wasted time! Try batching communications with those people you work with most frequently to remove annoying and distracting interruptions. Keep a file, paper and/or electronic, for each person containing documents and email you need to discuss, or your notes on subjects you need to ask about. Meet with these people frequently, on a scheduled basis, if necessary, and answer all your questions at once instead of dealing with five or ten interruptions. If you establish this practice with all your co-workers, you could perhaps eliminate 50 interruptions a day. You'll find that practicing this batching technique that you will improve your concentration and increase your knowledge and work output—to say nothing about improving relations with your colleagues.

4. Get your papers organized.

It is important to be able to find everything you need to do your work all the time. Stop wasting time looking for lost documents on your desk or office floor. Most of us keep far too much “stuff” that has lost its value. Get rid of what you do not use, do not need or can get elsewhere. Have a defined place for everything that comes into your office by grouping related papers, labelling them, and containing them. Organize materials on an as-used basis.

- Place frequently used files and materials where they can be reached without getting up from your chair
- Place files that are used occasionally (that is, once or twice a month) in a nearby filing cabinet.
- Archive files that are used no more than once a year.
- Keep your papers organized; work with only one file or project at a time. This will make it easier for you to concentrate and also keep papers from becoming misplaced or misfiled.

5. Establish good email and electronic document storage habits and organizational systems.

Handle your electronic information as ruthlessly and efficiently as you handle your paper documents. Act on and delete as many messages as possible as soon as you read them. When email messages must be saved, use the hierarchal subject file procedure which migrates from macro to micro subject naming conventions. Organize your My Documents, and electronic documents (any word, excel or other documents) using the same category names you created for your paper files and email folder tree. Under no circumstances should you file documents by “type” such as Word, Power Point, and Excel. Once purged and the system set up, it is easy to maintain.

6. Use your calendar proactively.

There is an old time management rule that has stood the test of time! If you want to get something done, schedule it! This may be perhaps one of the most important steps toward gaining control of your workload. You schedule meetings with others all the time, but you probably don’t do the same for your own work. Schedule appointments with yourself, on your electronic calendar, with reminders set, to most effectively concentrate on your priority projects. Peter Drucker, in his landmark book *The Effective Executive*, says it is best to work in blocks of time, no longer than ninety minutes. Routinely schedule ‘work’ time in your calendar and keep to the routine. Doing so will allow you to focus on your goals and improve your concentration.

7. Develop an effective Task/To Do follow-up system for yourself.

Too often managers tell us they take a great deal of pride in their memory. We tell them a good memory is not necessarily the skill they need. They need to be able to forget everything they need to do and track. You do not need to “remember” that at 3:00 pm “I have to call Stan.” Instead, set up a system to remind you of a task only when you are to act on it. Keeping a follow-up system for yourself electronically is the best way to remind yourself of important deadlines, actions and tasks to help you keep your goals in sight and make big projects more manageable. Make sure that you use the power of electronics and that your reminders come to you automatically when you want them.

8. Do not allow meetings to take over your life

One client, trying to gain control over his work, analyzed his time and realized he had 50 hours of scheduled meetings per week. As bad as that may be, what made matters worse is seldom did these meetings produce more than discussions. The meetings consumed all the time to actually do anything! Of course, one can tighten up the meeting processes, have an agenda, start and end on time and make meetings more efficient. But many meetings should not be held in the first place. Meetings are not a substitute for management. Avoid 'problem solving meetings' – instead go to the place where the problem exists, observe, look, listen and gather the facts to solve the problem. Block out time in your calendar for work. Protect your time. No one else will.

What happens when you implement all these ideas? If you have strong work methods, you will provide an excellent role model for your team. Work is "easier." There is less effort involved and you will get more of the right things done in less time.

Your team will have more time to carry out its role and make a difference.

About the Author

Kerry Gleeson, Developer and Author of "The Personal Efficiency Program; 4th Edition - How to Stop Feeling Overwhelmed and Win Back Control of Your Work".

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