reLean

Guide: Basic principles of time management

2015

London February 2015

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About this guide

Managing time has never been more important than right now. In the middle of major technology shift and financial crisis, getting the basics right is crucial to ensure we make the most of the technology aid. Understanding and mastering the basics principles of time management will therefore be even more crucial to ensure an individual efficiency and effectiveness both now and in the future.

The basics of time management

At its core, time management is about the scheduling and prioritization of tasks. To do this we should ensure that we only do those tasks that are actually needed and that we ensure to do them in the most efficient manner. Basically we need to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of our tasks. The two most basic of time management principles that we should adhere to are therefore to *Avoid Multi-tasking* (efficiency) and aim to get our tasks *Right First Time* (effectiveness).

Avoid multi-tasking

All tasks has similar anatomy and are elementary subject to the same basic processing. Our brain can only process one of these tasks at once and when we try to multi-task the work scheduling of our brain causes the tasks to start and stop. For every one of these start and stops, we loose some start-up time trying to understand the context of the task and where we were with it. We even loose some time trying to figure out what we were doing before the change of tasks. A study[1] showed that when we multitask, the tasks takes up to 25% for simpler tasks 100% for more complex tasks longer to complete.

[1] "Executive Control of Cognitive Processes in Task Switching," Joshua S. Rubinstein, U.S. Federal Aviation Administration, Atlantic City, N.J.; David E. Meyer and Jeffrey E. Evans, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich., *Journal of Experimental Psychology - Human Perception and Performance*, Vol 27. No.4

In the figure below the effect of multi-tasking I illustrated showing the most obvious sources of waste associated with its dealings. As a distracting task occurs (often in the shape of email, phone or a question from a colleague) we are abruptly stopped in our processing and slowly try to figure out what happened. As we see the alert of the disturbance, we begin a painful journey of switching context to understand what this disturbance is all about. The disturbance, often relating a task, either requires our immediate attention and action or allows us to promptly go back to the task at hand which yet again provides us with a context switching. The brain, now switched back to the original task again, does not immediately work at full speed due to some start-up loss trying to figure out exactly where we were when being disrupted and will be inclined to do minor rework to get back on track.

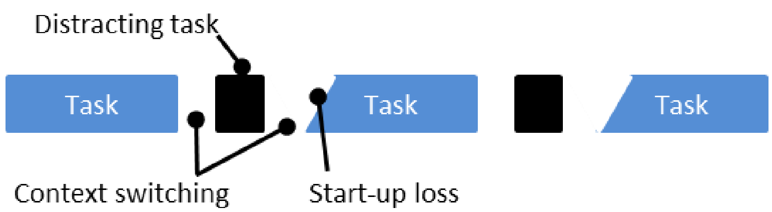


Figure 1. Illustration of wasted processing time due to multi-tasking

To exemplify a study[2] showed that it on average took 64 seconds to re-focus on a task when we have been distracted by a new mail dropping into our inbox. With an average number of mails per employee continuously increasing and 2014 hitting average 121 per day[3], this disruption time is becoming a rather large time bandit in our offices.

Getting it Right First Time

Next to avoid falling in the trap of multi-tasking, ensuring to get things right the first time around will make you in control of your time. Rework comes in all kinds of forms that we do not always think about (e.g., having to have a second meeting as the outcome of the first meeting was not good enough or all key decision makers was not present in the meeting; a manager reviewing the work of his/her subordinate asking for adjustments of the work; sending a reply as the answer in an email was not exactly what you were looking for etc). The concept of *Right First Time* is truly crucial in Time Management. When we map processes during lean diagnostics it is

[2] Danwood Group, http://interruptions.net/literature/Jackson-EASE02.pdf

[3] Email statistics report 2014-2018, The radicati group, http://www.radicati.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Email-Statistics-Report-2014-2018-Executive-Summary.pdf

not unusual that we find re-work loops where clients are asking for more information or redoing activities that spans up to 25-33% of the actual working time in the process and up to 50% of the total elapse time of a task. Spending so much time on re-working tasks that was not done correctly the first time is truly wasteful. There are many ways in which we can try to improve the this and some of the most basic ones are; never start a meeting where you don't know the expected end product or who needs to be in it, never ask for information without understanding what you are looking for.

To find some simple evidence of your ability to get things *Right First Time*, take a look in your mailbox and understand in how many of the cases when you sent an email asking for something you actually got exactly what you wanted back. Remember that the same way this applies to you, it also applies to the replies where you provide information to others.

So what do we do to avoid multi-tasking and ensure we get things *Right First Time*? At reLean, we have divided this up in two types of important levers; those levers that will help you manage your time, and those levers that will help you help others to manage their time

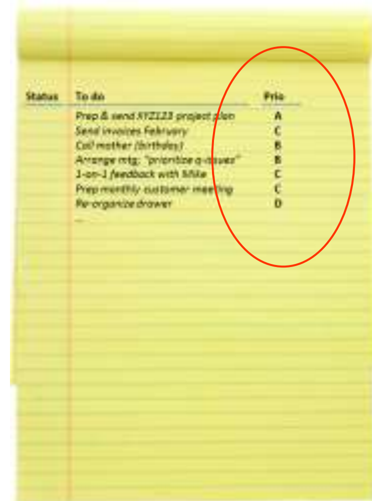
Manage your own time

#1 The to-do list

The most basic of tools is still the most important and fault-proof way to stay on top of your time management. The to-do list offers immediate overview of the actions at hand and ensures you are never without idea about what to do. With to-do lists, you avoid unnecessary downtime driven by not knowing what to do next. The to-do list can be done in two basically different ways; all tasks or just larger tasks. Which one you choose often depends on the type of job role you have. A job role with a large degree of standard tasks throughout the day usually only writes up the non-standard tasks, whereas a job role that has more changing tasks tends to want to track all tasks on the list.

#2 Prioritize tasks

reLean AB
Sördalavägen 9
141 60 Huddinge
Sweden
http://www.reLean.se
+46 (0)8-23 05 05
info@reLean.se



Once we have the to-do list it is time to start prioritizing it to make sure we focus on the most important things first. Take your list and give each activity a priority between A-D, where

A: to immediately
B: do today
C: to this week
D: do when time permits

These categories may of course be different for your role, but have the ambition to make the categories time-based as this will help your planning. Re-hash your list to make the most important items pop-up on the top and make sure to actually stick to your prioritization. If you are uncertain, review your priority with your manager to ensure you are both seeing it the same way (or receive the opportunity of learning if you did not prioritize the same way as your manager).

#3 Schedule of tasks

When it comes to scheduling the execution of tasks, we should first understand our own behaviour. When are you the most efficient to get things done? Some people are great at getting things done in the early mornings, others require the later hours of the day. Knowing yourself, you want to ensure doing a-priority items when you have the most energy and vitality.

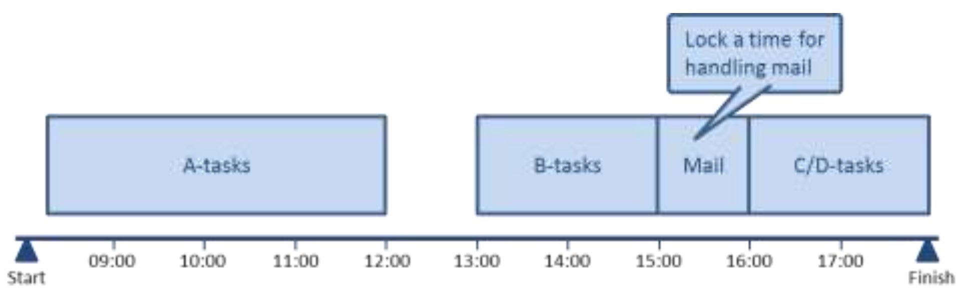


Figure 2. Setting your standard diary

A reasonably common pattern tends to be that people are most energized in the mornings. Which unluckily often is the time when we sit in meetings that drains our energy. Time boxing the day to suit your most productive work pattern is a good idea, but needs to also consider the needs of the business and the needs of your colleagues. Time boxing a little time in the morning for A-priority and in the afternoon for mails should never be an issue however. Some people prefer instead of fixing certain points of the day to rather fix one day every week where they work from home to get most “do not disturb” tasks done. In an ever so increasingly electronic world, this trend has been increasing. Working from home has several advantages and disadvantages, so it is really a point of understanding the particularities of the workplace to understand if this is a feasible solution.

Understanding how ones work is cyclic will also allow for heijunka (levelling) on various dimensions of time. Typically, for roles that are cyclical it is important to keep a well maintained to-do list and change the scheduling during “down-periods” and “up-periods”.

#4 Avoid procrastination

One of the common pitfalls in planning and big time bandit is procrastination. When we are faced with a difficult and large task, where we don’t really know where to start, it is easy to push it a bit to the future and get cracking on things we know how to handle. This is very dangerous. “Dead stock never gets cheaper” is a classic saying in logistics and the same applies to problems. The further away from the point when a problem was created, the more difficult and the more expensive solving it becomes. When we push large issues to the future, we typically install a smaller organization and follow-up procedure just to administer the issue, sit in meetings to review the issue, make reports on status of the issue and handle “moving the monkey” on who should be responsible for the issue.

Some organizations we have worked with suffers from such procrastination that they feel they needed twice as many people to get through their issues, but only needed half as many if they could execute their backlog of procrastinated tasks. Stay true to your to-do list and keep doing the tasks. If a task feels overwhelming it is important to get started on it (usually this helps a lot!) or problem solve how to approach it with a colleague or supervisor.

#5 Avoid disruptions from emails

Finally, we have come to the largest element of managing our own time – getting control of the inbox. There are predominantly three things that will have a big effect on your own time management;

i) Avoid being disrupted by notifications

ii) Prioritize your inbox using rules to quickly see what to action when

iii) Reduce the demand of email coming your way

To avoid being disrupted by notifications, you should make it to your settings and stop all notifications and alerts when receiving emails. This will stop the pop-up of boxes, mail-logo in the activity field and any other distractions. Checking for new items in the inbox is now in your control to choose when you want to do.

Once this is done it is time to start prioritizing what mail that should be actioned. We typically split mails under categories;

A: Action immediately (from boss, customer or other important stakeholders, where 2 minute rule applies)
B: Action during mail time box session (e.g., 1 15-16), max 24hr or 36hr turnaround
C: No action required (newsletter, CC, FYI)

For the A-priority mails requiring actions immediately we should do as I sounds, action immediately. These should typically go into the inbox so that they are clearly kept track on. Except for mails requiring action from important stakeholders, customers or bosses we should also consider the 2-minute rule for all mail;

"If the mail can be actioned within 2 minutes, just do it, you will loose much more time filing the mail to action later"

B-priority goes into FIFO-queue (first in first out) to be actioned in the time boxed space for handling emails. To ensure this queue is manageable it will be important to first separate all the C-priority emails. This is typically done through creating rules for when receiving emails. The most common rules are;

Private, ensure all emails from friends and family are directed to a "private" folder for to be actioned when time allows

News, create rule to send all newsletter and (the few needed) software updates and social media updates to a specific 'news' or 'digest' folder to read during travel, commute or similar downtime

Travel, direct all your travel bookings to a folder to keep them nicely in order, quickly find them when you need them and remove them from disturbing your by now much more effective mail management

CC, As a general rule, any email that is not directed to you does not require your action. You can create a rule do direct all mail where you are CC to a folder of its own and read later.

Applying these rules should start to straighten out your inbox and reduce the amount of disturbances you are receiving. In general, it is of course also important to unsubscribe to non-wanted mailing lists, remove all auto-updates where critically not needed and make sure not to sign-up for things with the company email address.

The third thing to manage emails is to reduce the overall demand. Analyse your inbox to understand who send you email and why. You will likely see a few patterns such as for instance;

- Notorious over-mailers. Go talk to them and explain which mails are not needed by mail and what to do instead
- Many emails with issues that seems to relate to same root cause which is not being solved properly (e.g., no clarity on roles and responsibilities, a lack of properly addressing a problem (procrastination?))
- Emails could be handled in other, more effective, way (e.g., if many an similar mails - through a brief daily or weekly status or decision meeting, if truly urgent - through phone call or by speaking in person)

Help others manage their time

Equally important to manage your own time is to help others manage their time, since this applies straight back at you if done from other parties too. Even though we apply the *Right First Time* concept to meetings below, this generally applies to pretty much everything we do at work, so consider it not only for meetings. The main items we can do to help manage other peoples time are;

#6 RFT Meetings

We should, as earlier states, never invite to a meeting where we do not know the expected end product or who should actually participate. We should have all, and only, the people needed for the meeting. If not, we have not given the meeting a chance and it is most likely not going to be an effective, nor efficient one. Before we talk about how to arrange meetings, we should first surface the fact that there are different meetings for different purposes. The most common meetings are;

i) **Information meeting.** The information meeting is short, often a stand-up meeting and serves to provide a brief status or information to a small or large group. The information meeting is often given with a reference to a document or source where more information can be found.

ii) **Decision meeting.** Many believe the lean morning meetings are information meetings. They are not. They are decision meetings. Having a good understanding of today's status allows the meeting to take decision on any focus/priority for the day, alternatively which actions from the improvement/backlog list that should be attacked today. All participants should be aware of all the facts before the meetings starts, so that decisions are aligned and agreed. All key people needs to be involved in the decisions meetings. The aim of a well-designed decision meeting is that the decision has pretty much been taken before the meeting. This allows the decision meeting to rather focus on the commitment of resources and how to execute the decision aftermaths.

iii) **Problem solving meeting.** The third type of meeting is the problem solving meeting, where the inviter really does not know how to approach something and invites the subject experts and owners to problem solve a way forward – usually a long meeting, as he or she does not really know how to progress but realises it is a big problem. These meetings tends to be the chaotic meetings that never leads anywhere, everyone disagrees and nobody is particularly happy afterwards. Naturally, the end result (if defined) was seldom achieved, so a new meeting that nobody is looking forward to needed to be booked, but everyone seems to find excuses for, so it never really happens.

Regardless which meeting type it is we should follow the 5P for effective and efficient meetings. These are naturally more adhered to in standardized meetings like the lean morning meetings with its whiteboard status and structure, but when it comes to the problem solving meetings these rules are a magnificent time saver. The 5P's are;

Purpose. Why do we need the meeting? Do you know? Does all participants know? Explain in meeting invite and in opening of the meeting. And most importantly – ensure that it actually is a good purpose for the meeting.

(end) Product. What should we achieve as outcome of the meeting? A decision or a action list? Something else? As a minimum, we should always capture an action list of commitments from the meeting. Typically we spend too much time writing notes for the meeting when the key thing really is the action list and commitments to the actions.

People. We should have only, and all, the people needed for the meeting. It is important not to over-invite for meetings, but equally important to have all needed people there to avoid rework of the meeting due to missing one key person. Who do we need to achieve the right end-product? Looking at the last week's meeting, how many of them do you consider crucially important that you went to and how many would have worked just fine without you?

Perspective. Ensure we cover all needed perspectives on the subject. Do we miss a BU or a support function? Has this been tried before? What does expertize say?

Process. Ensure the process is strict, but flexible. Make an efficient, but realistic agenda, ensure to send out pre-reads and prompt participants to read. The facilitator is important to ensure progress to end-product, that everyone is heard and that meeting time thieves are kept managed (the notorious talker, the always disagrees, the 'there was this one time' and all the other characters).

Using the 5P helps a lot in managing meetings for the individual, but when the whole organization used it – then magic occurs.

One other quick win for meetings is to ensure meetings always finished on XX.55 or similar, e.g., never let a meeting finish at sharp-a-clock since that will take away any chance of the next (usually back to back) meeting starts on time.

#7 Don't be an email offender to others

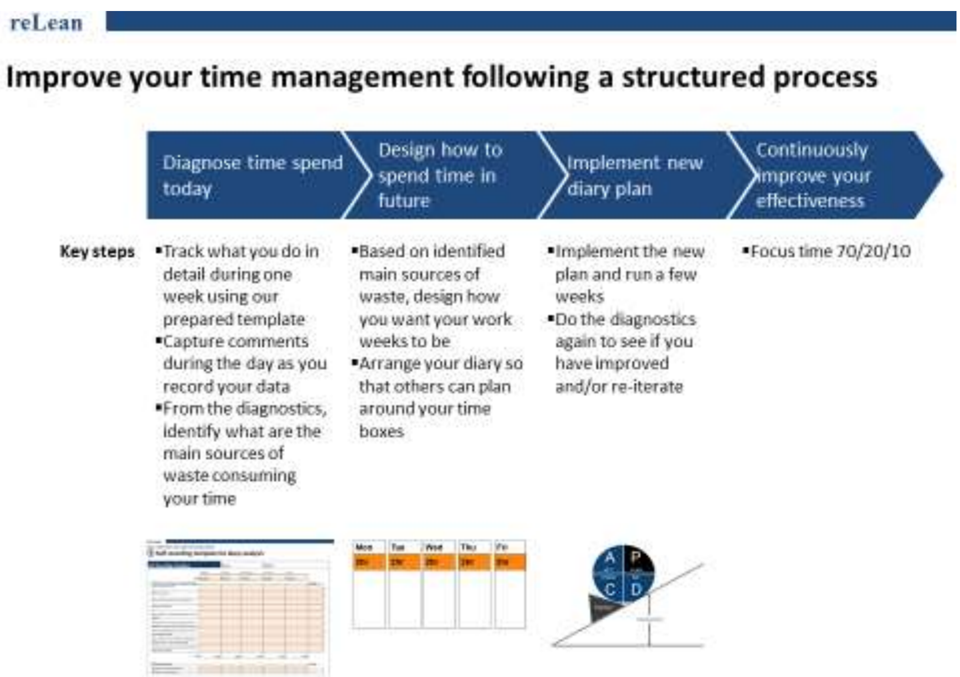
In the previous section on manage your own time, we talked about the importance of dealing with notorious over-mailers. Make sure you are not one of them and life as we are now learning. Be precise in what you want from an email. Send it to the right receiver with as few additional receivers as possible. Also, consider implementing standard wording in the message title, to allow even better rule-setting, such as for instance: INFO; ACTION REQD; URGENT; PRE-READING or similar.

#8 Take a break and do something nice for a colleague

Aside from managing tasks and emails, it is also important to re-energize yourself so that you can keep going throughout the day. A zip of fresh air, a cup of coffee, some water or a visit to the bathroom will temporarily create some more energy, but it is important to realize that this is typically not the best way of spending a micro-break at work. A study[4] done by XXXXXXXXXXX shows that you actually get more energy from learnings something new, doing something nice for a colleague or reflecting on the work so far during your micro-break. So it might actually be better to re-fill the bottle of water and take the micro-break trying to learn something new about time management or write and email to a colleague and thank her for her great preparation for the last meeting she facilitated. Provided some positive feedback to a colleague will also have the knock-on effect of building relations, creating positive mind-sets and re-energizing others.

Take control of your time now!

If you've found this paper interesting so far, we believe it is high time for you to try doing this. To do so, we would suggest following a set process as outlined below.



4 "Coffee breaks doesn't boost productivity after all" Charlotte Fritz, Harward business review, https://hbr.org/2012/05/coffee-breaks-dont-boost-productivity-after-all

Figure 3.

Start by diagnosing yourself. We have made a simple self-recording template tool, see below, that you can fill in during one week's time. It will allow you to understand what you are currently doing and how the principles in this paper can help to improve.

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Self recording template for diary analysis

Self Recording Template	Team:		Name:			
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	
Date	DD/MM	DD/MM	DD/MM	DD/MM	DD/MM	

1 Estimated % of time per day spent doing:						Average	
Training & Coaching							a
Ad-hoc projects							b
Internal E-mails and Communication							c
Internal Meetings							d
Interruptions, or delays waiting for work or others							e
Time spent learning new tasks and time needed as you are not familiar with a task.							f
Time wasted because of rework or other unnecessary tasks							g
Non customer focussed deliverables (E.g. Compliance or internal reporting)							h
Customer focussed deliverables (customer may be business)							i
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%		

2 Estimated activity:						Average
Volume of E-mails Received						
Volume of E-mails Sent						

Figure 4. Self-diagnostics template

To help complete the self-recording template see below explanation of the various points you should be tracking;

a. **Training and coaching.** Include Trainings provided such as Talent Connect, lunch and learns, product training, internal knowledge training, system training, reoccurring training, and peer-to-peer training

b. **Ad-hoc projects.** Projects you are pulled into for a particular purpose outside of your normal job.

c. **Internal E-mails and Communication.** Time spent reading, writing and reviewing emails not directly related to servicing a customer. E.g. listening to Town halls, and other communication such as Ex-Co Live, Intranet, and internal announcements

d. **Internal Meetings.** Excludes client meetings. Includes internal meetings such as sales meetings, planning, budget meetings, team meetings, conference calls, pipeline meetings, claims meetings, quote meetings, war rooms, or coaching and feedback such as any 1-2-1s with your managers/peers.

e. **Interruptions and delays.** Time wasted due to waiting for work, chasing people and delays due to unnecessary interruptions.

f. **Time spent learning new task/processes.** Time spent outside of training learning how to do something

g. **Rework.** Time wasted because of rework due to errors or miscommunication and other unnecessary tasks that do not add value.

h. **Non customer deliverables.** Deliverables that are not for the customer, typically internal reporting and compliance tasks

i. **Customer focused deliverables.** This includes completing tasks for the customers (clients) including meetings with them. For middle office and back office operations and support functions the Customer maybe a front office team.

Once you have used this tool it is time to draw conclusions on what it tells you. Depending on which areas you are spending the most time on, several of the different tips provided in this paper should become available to aid in taking control of your time.

Hopefully, this paper has served you well in understanding how you can use the basic principles of time management to take control of your time.

Good luck!

Jonas Svanäng,
Lean and Leadership expert, reLean