

Managing Your Time and Work

Presented by Mary Lowman

She worked very hard; she stayed late every evening; she hardly ever took lunch breaks; she always seemed overwhelmed and overworked. She was working so hard that she generated a good deal of sympathy. "Poor Susie, I feel so bad for her. She has so much to do and never gets out of here on time." Those were typical comments her coworkers made about her.

I was one of those coworkers, often feeling guilty myself for not working as hard or as long as Susie did. However, after getting to know the situation better, I began to see that Susie did indeed work long hours and expended a great deal of energy, but many of us were accomplishing the same amount of work in much less time because Susie did not use any discipline in planning her work, scheduling her time, or controlling her energy.

Sometimes I even got the idea that she was trying to solicit those expressions of sympathy. It made Susie feel good about herself to be able to say how late she worked last night, to remind us that she didn't have time to go to lunch today, to be there at the office every morning before the rest of us. I concluded that Susie was doing this in part to convince herself that she was important and valuable.

Many times, in my career I've worked with people who worked hard but not smart. People who really thrive on their jobs are ones who know how to use that eight or nine-hour day really well, completing assignments and keeping up with the work in a fairly normal schedule, leaving time for the rest of their lives and achieving a balance in lifestyle.

Have you heard the slogan "Plan your work and work your plan"? I remember having that drilled into me early in my career, and there's an awful lot of good advice wrapped up in those few words.

Time is our most valuable resource—the one we can never replace once we use it. God will hold us accountable for our use of time. We've each been given twenty-four hours each day, but some use those hours more wisely than others.

Paul told the Ephesians they should "be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:15-16 NASB). We need to learn practical ways to make the most of our time, and in so doing, we will become approved by our Lord as wise servants.

Time management is a topic that has been covered in depth by many other people, yet few of us really manage our time well. Certainly, we cannot say it is from lack of information or help, because most any bookstore or library is a resource for good help in how to plan your work and work your plan. Mostly it's a matter of just making up your mind to do it.

However, I've discovered that some people really have no concept of what they need to do in order to get the most out of their twenty-four-hour days. So here are some practical ways to make good use of your time—whether it's on your job or in your personal life.

Become Goal-Oriented

Do you know the difference between a wish and a goal? A goal is something that is realistic and achievable. I could wish all day that I could be an astronaut, but that could never be a goal because it's not achievable for me. A goal has a time schedule and is measurable in some way or another. I may wish to lose weight, but in order to do that, I need to set a goal and a time frame for that goal. "I will lose ten pounds in four weeks." That's a goal.

Given that definition of a goal, are you truly a goal-oriented person, or do you just wish a lot? I find many of us are very good wishers, but not many of us take those wishes and turn them into goals that we work to achieve. After all, wishes don't take any energy or discipline; goals do. Wishes don't require any commitment from us; goals do. Here are some examples of wishes and how they can be turned into goals:

Wish	Goal
I want to be more organized.	In order to be more organized, I will start using a to-do list on a daily basis beginning today.
I want to get along better with my coworkers.	In order to get along better with _____ (specific person), I will invite her to have lunch with me next week and try to develop a better relationship with her.
I want to get out of debt.	In order to be a better steward of my money, I will pay off all credit card accounts before charging anything else, and then I will only charge what I can comfortably pay off each month.
I want a more interesting job.	In order to find a job that interests me more, I will take a course in computer skills beginning in January at the local community college to get the education needed for advancement.

Think of one thing you want to achieve—one thing you want to improve in your life, on your job, or in your relationships. Write it down. Now ask yourself, "Did I write a wish or a goal?"

Once you've written it down and gotten it into the form of a goal, ask yourself, "How much do I want this?" If you're not truly committed to achieving that goal, it simply won't happen. Jesus said we find God when we search for him with our whole heart. Lots of people would like to know God better, but few are willing to put out the time and effort required to search for him with the whole heart. As you look at your goal, you have to be certain you are truly committed to it.

To become a goal-oriented person, you must list your long-term goals, list your daily short-term goals, divide your goals into manageable portions, and make yourself accountable.

List Your Long-Term Goals

First, sit down and make a list of the long-term things you want to do, both job-related and personal. Most of us have dreams and plans of things we're going to do "when we have time," but somehow a lot of those things never happen because we keep running out of time. Often they are the really important things that should be done. If you don't plan to put them into your daily schedule, they'll never happen.

List all those things you want to do. Perhaps it's "take a course in writing skills," or "rearrange the filing system to be more efficient," or "take a Bible correspondence course." Once you've listed those long-term goals, prioritize them, and set a deadline for each one. Be realistic about those deadlines, but you need to put some time frames in place.

List Your Daily Short-Term Goals

Now, make a second list—your to-do list of things that are on the schedule for today. I strongly encourage you to work with a list each day. You don't have to spend lots of time making the list—a few minutes should do it—but it is very helpful in keeping you on track through the day.

In order to get those long-term goals accomplished, you have to put parts of them on the daily to-do list. So, each day try to do at least one small part of a long-term goal. Maybe you can only devote fifteen minutes to it, but if you keep on, you'll start to chip away at those long-term goals you never seem to get around to doing.

Remember to include on your list things like: "Write a note to Barbara to encourage her," "Send a card to Jane for her birthday," and "Call Sue and invite her to church." If you don't, they'll frequently get lost in the shuffle.

Divide Your Goals into Manageable Portions

To achieve those larger goals, make sure you bite off small pieces at a time. Sometimes we discourage ourselves because we see the job before us as so large that it looks like we'll never make it. But if we take the large goal and turn it into a series of small ones that don't look impossible, soon we'll find we've achieved our goal.

This is the sixth book I've written. Each one seemed an impossible goal at the beginning. I was overwhelmed and discouraged. But each time I turned that big goal into a series of small ones, setting deadlines for each chapter, each section. I could tackle writing a chapter but not writing a book. But after writing thirteen or fourteen chapters, I have a book! That's one of the most important principles in setting realistic, achievable goals: Divide it into small sections that don't overwhelm you.

Make Yourself Accountable

I would encourage you to establish accountability for yourself in these goals that you set. Ask someone to check up on you. Let some people know what your goals are.

That accountability is very important.

Setting goals is a technique that works in all areas of our lives. As we become goal-oriented people, we will be pleasing to our Lord for we will become increasingly better stewards of the time and resources he has given to us.

Internal and External Prime Time

One way to manage your time better is to be aware of your internal and external prime time. Internal prime time is that time when you work best. For me, it's 5:00 A.M. to noon. I'm running at highest capacity then; my energy is high, my drive is high, my creative juices are flowing. As much as possible, I save my prime time for time with God and for writing.

It's easy to let your prime time slip through your fingers, eaten up with telephone calls and incidentals that could be done in non-prime time. I always try to schedule appointments outside my office in the afternoon if I can. My staff is very helpful in keeping interruptions away from me during the morning hours. I try to push tasks that are not as mentally demanding into afternoon and evening time when I slow down.

As much as possible, use your internal prime time for your most important tasks—the ones that require the most energy and creativeness on your part.

External prime time is when external resources—usually people—are most readily available for decisions, inquiries, and information. Make telephone calls when you have a high probability of getting through to that person. Learn the best time to catch your boss for those needed times of interaction. When are you most likely to find office equipment available? Plan your duties to eliminate as much waiting time and telephone tag as possible.

Plan for Interruptions

Unexpected happenings take time, and I seriously doubt we ever have a day that isn't interrupted at some point or another. We certainly have to plan to be flexible as we plan our work and work our plan. But starting out with a plan, even if it gets changed, is still the smart way to manage your time and make the best use of it.

Simplify and Unclutter Your Environment

What does your desk or your work surface look like right now? Is it totally cluttered and covered with stuff? Do you hang on to things too long? How often do you just reshuffle things that need to be done? Is your desk or workstation loaded down with papers and projects that you keep rearranging, refiling, relisting on your to-do list? If you added all the time you spend shuffling the papers, you could have accomplished many of the tasks while you were rearranging the papers!

Sometimes I have to stop and make a high priority of getting rid of the projects that are sitting on my desk and gumming up the works. As you reshuffle papers, ask yourself, "Why should I not do this right now?" If you can't think of a good reason, and if it truly has to be done, then get it off your mind, off your desk, out of the reshuffle mode. "Handle each piece of paper only once," is a good rule to follow. If it can be done now, do it now.

Procrastination—a Deadly Habit

Of course, sometimes we go in the other direction and keep ourselves busy doing low-priority items in order to avoid facing the more difficult and demanding priorities. Perhaps you just don't know how to begin one of those projects on your list, so you've been keeping busy doing a bunch of little stuff to avoid facing it.

I have learned that the only way to start is to start. Just jump in with both feet, over your head, and start swimming!

Procrastination is a deadly habit. How many things do you have lined up to do that you just haven't started? I encourage you to do something today that makes a start on the project. Make a telephone call, ask a question, write the first page—*start*. That's frequently the hardest part; if we don't *start*, nothing will ever happen.

Learn to Say No

A good time manager is one who knows how to say *no* when appropriate. I have to admit that I find it difficult to say no, but I'm learning.

Just because you're asked to do something doesn't mean you necessarily are the right person to do it. Don't be pressured into saying yes. Be careful of saying, "I'll do it right away," when you know you can't.

If your boss asks you to do something you feel is not the best use of your time, you could say something like, "I'll be glad to do that for you now, but if I do, I won't be able to complete this other project you gave me yesterday. It was my understanding that it had a higher priority. Is that right?"

When people say, "Do you have a minute?" they usually want much more than a minute. You could ask, "Are you serious about one minute? I have a minute now, but if it takes longer, we'll have to do it later."

Minimize Interruptions

Who interrupts you the most? How can you minimize those interruptions? Perhaps you can suggest to that person that the two of you can confer at specified times and try to cover all that needs to be covered at one sitting instead of those multiple conversations that interrupt your workflow and eat up so much time. That would be a great time saver.

Group activities together to avoid start-up time. Instead of writing a few checks every day, for

example, write checks on Friday. You'll eliminate a great deal of start-up time.

Set some routines in place to avoid delays and harassment. For example: Are you always running out of needed supplies and inventory? Set up a routine and a checklist that forces you to check all supplies on certain days or turn in an order form when supplies are low. This will help you avoid those panic moments when you're trying to locate what you need. It can save lots of time and hassle as well as money.

Give God the First Fruits of Your Time

Let me conclude these thoughts on time management by reminding you to reserve a key part of your prime time each day to spend with the Lord, reading his Word and praying. Every Christian should have that at the top of his or her to-do lists.

It appears we have a hundred good reasons to skip that time with the Lord, and so many things seem to get in the way. But I can tell you from firsthand experience that if you try to operate without quality and quantity time with God each day, you are handicapping yourself.

If you'll spend time with God at the beginning of each day, you're going to discover that the rest of your day will be much more efficient and productive, much less hassled and frantic. Believe me, you cannot afford to not make that your highest priority.

I believe much of our frustration comes from poor use of our time. It causes confusion, it makes us feel like failures because things don't get done, and it adds much stress to our lives.

Remember Ephesians 5:16 "*[Make] the most of your time, because the days are evil*" (NASB). It may not seem like a spiritual function to plan your work and work your plan, but indeed we honor the Lord when we make the very best use of what he has given us—time.

Use the following exercise to evaluate your time-management skills.

Time-Management Checkup

Find out how you rate as a time manager by checking the most appropriate response to each statement.

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Never
1. Most of my days begin in a calm fashion because I get up early enough to avoid rushing.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I use a daily time-management technique to keep track of what needs to be done, and I set priorities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I am usually not late for appointments, work, or other commitments.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Most of my assignments are completed on schedule.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I have some specific long-term goals that I am working on consistently (work-related or personal).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I do not keep shuffling and reorganizing the papers on my desk but regularly go through and clean it off.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I use a filing system to keep track of needed information and paperwork.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I am not a habitual procrastinator, and I try to avoid the last-minute crisis mode.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I can usually get my job done in the allotted time without undue overtime. (If you are working overtime often, determine if it is truly due to an unrealistic workload or because you don't work as smart as you could.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I rarely drop the ball on any responsibility that I have and don't lose track of what I'm supposed to do and where I'm supposed to be.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

To score yourself, count every time you checked "Always."

Total Points:

- 9-10 You're an excellent time manager.
- 6-8 You're a good time manager.
- 4-5 You have much room for improvement in your time-management techniques.
- 2-3 You have a poor record of time management.
- 0-1 Help

This material is an excerpt from Mary Whelchel's book *How to Thrive from 9 to 5*. With easy-to-follow self-tests and quick-review summary lists, *How to Thrive from 9 to 5* is a practical, down-to-earth guidebook for personal improvement. It's also a valuable tool for personnel managers to use as an employee-training manual or as a reference handbook of practical skills needed in successful workplaces. Whatever your work role, in these pages you'll find timely advice and sound principles for moving beyond the survival mode and learning how to thrive in your job.

This book is available by calling *The Christian Working Woman* at **630-462-0552** or by going on-line to order using our secure website: **www.christianworkingwoman.org**.



The Christian Working Woman
205 N Washington St ~ Wheaton IL 60187
630.462.0552
christianworkingwoman.org