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Masterful Time Management

[By Louis Lautman]

It's 11:00, and you realize that you didn't get everything done that needed to get done for the day and you must be awake at 6:30 to be on time for work tomorrow at 8:00 a.m. You go to bed and toss and turn, thinking about all the things you forgot to do during the day and are tired when you wake up the next day because of your lack of sleep.

This is just another day in your life that looks like all of the preceding ones. When does it stop? It will stop when you decide it should stop—hopefully after reading this article.

Why do some people accomplish more in a day than some of us do in a week? Why do some of us accomplish more in a month than others do in an entire year? We all have the same 24 hours in a day, so how can some people do magic with these 24 hours while others watch in awe? The answer is masterful time management.

You must learn to tend to business, not to busyness. Place more value on results and less on putting in time or effort. If your goal is to produce x number of widgets in y amount of time, is your time most effectively spent putting together the widgets, or can you delegate the assembly of the widgets and earn more money doing something else? You must focus on your highest-payoff activities.

There is the old story of the jar in which you have to put a bunch of rocks, gravel, sand, and water. In what order do you put them in the jar? Well, if you put in the water first, then the sand, followed by the gravel and, finally, the rocks, chances are you won't be able to fit in the rocks. If you reverse the order, everything will fit nicely in the jar.

What does this story have to do with time management? Everything. If you do things in their order of importance (big rocks first),

everything fits nicely into your day, and the smaller, less urgent, and less important things tend to fit in just as nicely.

"So the story was great," you might be thinking, "but, Louis, I need help. Put it to me in English." Okay. There are three important keys to masterful time management.

The first key to masterful time management is prioritizing. Why do so many people say "Well, I would do that, but it is just not a priority now" or "When I find the time, I will get around to that"? You must decide what is a priority and what is not. You must also not hope to find the time; you must make the time. To begin, get out a sheet of paper and list all the things that you must do in the next year, month, week, and day.

Under each column, place an A, B, C, or D next to each item, with A being the most important thing that must get done and D being the least important. Your list may have just a few items or be many pages long. However long it is is okay. This will tell you what you must do, and after mastering your time for a while, you will be able to do a lot more in less time.

Look at each item and write a plan for how each of these activities is going to get done. This will be like an instruction manual for your life or like the recipe for a great meal. Please make sure that the steps are spelled out, because if things are not done in the

correct order, rarely can we run before we can walk.

This brings us to our next step in the process, which is delegation. Delegation is simply assigning a task to another to complete. What do you delegate, and what do you do on your own? I once heard someone say, "The less I do, the more I make." Well, if you do not like mowing your lawn and you make \$30 per hour and the kid down the street will mow your lawn for \$20, I would suggest working an extra hour and giving the kid his \$20 to mow your lawn. Not only will you be helping the economy, but you will also be helping yourself manage your time effectively.

Never step over a dollar to pick up a dime. That is why the wealthy can afford to have someone cooking their food, cleaning their clothes, and taking care of their houses. It is just not cost-effective for them to do these things themselves. They would be taking from the economy if they were to do these things themselves. Support your local economy and figure out what is worth your time and what is not.

How do you figure out what your time is worth? A good gauge is how much you make per hour. A better gauge is how much you want your time to be worth. Do the things that someone whose time is worth that much would do. Don't forget, people are in business to serve you, and those who think



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govern those who labor. Are you a thinker or a laborer?

You've prioritized your activities, and you've delegated the things that are not worth your time to do. Now for the third key to masterful time management: scheduling.

"I have a date book," you say. Keep it in the drawer, because the following will revolutionize your days to come. Go back to your list of things to get done for the next day, week, month, and year. Begin with all the things that have As next to them and work on them until they are complete before you work on the Bs. Do the same with the Bs before you start on the Cs and the same with the Ds.

Your daily must-do list should be comprised of the working parts of completing your weekly must-do list. The same goes for your weekly list, which should be made up of the action steps for your monthly list, which in turn should reflect your yearly things to accomplish. When you begin to plan your day, time becomes your friend. You must plan your work and work your plan because, if you fail to plan, you are planning to fail. UPS drivers have 340 time-saving movements they use when delivering packages. These movements address everything from which hand buckles the seatbelt to accelerating on the gas pedal. How is that for micro management?

Sometimes working on the biggest rocks first is not as fun as knocking out some of the other gravel-type tasks. If you were in an office and had to call back that one customer you have been putting off for days, would you rather call him first thing in the morning or keep putting it off hour by hour until it is time to go home and never make the call because the same thing happens day after day? If you called him first thing in the morning, the rest of the day would be yours to enjoy without having to worry about making that call.

The same goes for a relationship. Would you rather marry someone and not really love him or her and stay married and have a miserable life, or would you rather address the issue immediately and enjoy the rest of your life? Now that's time management.

People fear scheduling many things that they know must get done but are comfortable knowing that they can do something later. Sometimes it doesn't matter if you go over the fence or just jump back down; you just can't stay on the fence for the rest of your life. When you decide to get off that fence, there are many more options out there for you.

There is also the old saying of "Poop or get off the pot." I find it appropriate to mention this only because too many people are comfortable not scheduling things because if they stay in their comfort zones, they cannot fail. In reality, when they continue to put things off again and again, they are constantly failing.

Start with your next day and look at the activities that must get done. Starting with the As and then the Bs through Ds, set times to accomplish each task. Ask yourself, "How long should this task take?" Once you answer that question, get a day planner and write in that task in the appropriate time block. Make sure you have scheduled all your As before you work on the Bs through Ds.

You may be asking, "What if I don't get to all my Cs and Ds before the day is over?" Every day, transfer them to your next day, and eventually you will finish everything. There are many computer programs that do all this for you automatically. I personally use Microsoft Outlook and Act, but there are many out there that work just as well. I suggest you find the way that works best for you, but you must implement immediately.

Every night, before you go to bed, you should know what the next day will look like and

when you will be doing what. These tasks should all be broken down into blocked time. Please don't forget to schedule time for yourself to have some fun. A secret that I learned some time ago was to enjoy your work somehow by being creative with your activities. (Please check out my article "Balance in Life—No Longer a Balancing Act.")

The only time when we are bored doing something is when we lose interest in doing what is boring us, so find something exciting in all tasks and you will suddenly find energy. Maybe you can make a game out of whatever you are doing and challenge yourself. It is great to want to do a lot of things, but never sacrifice quality for speed. If you put a gallon's worth of water in an eight-ounce cup, you have wasted most of your water.

Don't be like someone who ate a Chinese dinner—initially feeling full and satisfied but hungry again and looking for substance soon thereafter. Make sure you are doing things that are aligned with your values, beliefs, and rules. Make many mistakes, but only make each one once. When you master the three keys of prioritizing, delegating, and scheduling, you will be a master of time management.

No one is perfect, so anticipate problems in all of your tasks. Handle one thing at a time, because when your focus is not 100% on the task at hand, you are cheating yourself and not utilizing your energy to its fullest.

Have you ever heard the phrase "If you need something done, give it to a busy person?" This is because busy people know the value of the three keys of masterful time management and know how to get things done. Bad habits aren't followed by bad people, just the unbusy. When you have a full schedule, you will not have time to waste and be unproductive. Time wasters will slowly realize that they have to schedule time with you to try and waste your time.



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When you are working, work. When you are playing, play. If you are thinking of work at play or play at work, you will not get the most abundance out of what you are doing and will not be using your time as effectively as you should be. Is it in your best interest to pick up the phone when you are in the middle of things? Do you run your business, or does it run you? If I challenged you to turn off your cell phone and computer for a week, could you handle it?

Don't react to things; plan for them. Yes, I am suggesting that you schedule time to return telephone calls and emails. Do you read junk mail? Do you wish you had all the time you wasted reading junk mail back? What could you do with that time now? Here is your chance to decide and schedule because you can decide not to read junk mail anymore.

I am also going to mention a few more things that may open your eyes to new possibilities of gaining a few extra hours a day for you. Do you watch sitcoms on television? Would you wait in line for over an hour to save \$5? Have you ever arrived at an appointment only to find that the person you were meeting with had to reschedule? This is my pet peeve, so I

will give you some quick tips to prevent this from happening. (For more on this topic, see my article "Commitments—If You Make 'Em, Keep 'Em.")

Any time I set an appointment, I ask the person to call me the morning of to confirm, and I ask the person to call and reschedule if he or she can't see me. This is done when setting the appointment, so the responsibility falls into the other person's lap if he or she cannot see me. This will prevent 95% of your no-show's; the other 5% usually have their heads so high in the clouds that you may ask if it is really worth your time to meet with them.

You have learned many things in this article about time management that should make you more productive and earn you a few more hours in your day to enjoy. In closing, I would like to share with you some statistics I found rather surprising. Is there an area in the following list where you could free up some time for yourself? You should be able to make cuts of up to at least 50% in this list of wasted time. In a lifetime, the average American spends:

1,086 days "sick."
Three years in meetings.
Eight months opening junk mail.
17 months drinking coffee and soft drinks.
Two years on the telephone.
Five years waiting in line.
Nine months sitting in traffic.
Four years cooking and eating.
One and a half years grooming.
One and a half years dressing.
Seven years in the bathroom.
12 years watching television.
Three years shopping.
One year looking for misplaced items.
24 years sleeping.

About the Author:

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