

Using your time wisely

- How can you plan your workday?
- How can taking time to plan save you time?
- What tools can you use to plan?

Planning helps you reach a goal on time. Just imagine that you are going on holiday to a part of the country you have never visited before. You may sit down with a map book and work out the best route. If you are a member, you may contact the AA and ask them to supply directions. Or you may simply set your SatNav system to get you there. Each of these is a form of planning. Each of them involves you in using 'tools' of some kind to help - a map book, the AA or your satellite navigation system.

Why do you plan? Because a plan helps you to make sure that you achieve your goal. If you start a project or a major task without a plan you might make mistakes. You might have to stop and start again. A plan helps you to set aside time for each task and avoid problems. Many people feel that they don't have time to plan. When you're under pressure, planning what you are going to do seems to take time away from completing tasks. In reality, good planning saves you time and helps you achieve your goals. In this session we will look at how you can use planning to make the best use of your time.

Why are you short of time?

Most people are short of time these days. They are often said to be 'asset rich, time poor'. In other words, most people have more in the way of personal goods and services than their ancestors ever dreamed of. From owning their own homes, cars and electrical goods to taking foreign holidays, we are generally richer than ever before. But we all claim to have so little time. Why?

The big problem for most people is being able to make the best use of the time available. We feel under pressure to do so much. We also let people talk us into doing things that we don't need to do. Using time wisely is all about taking control of your work and planning your tasks effectively.

The starting point is to know how you currently use your time. A week has 168 hours, of which we spend about 80 hours asleep, travelling to and from work, and eating food, leaving us with 88 useable hours on average. A lot of that remaining time is not free for us to use however we want because of tasks we have to do at work and chores we have to do at home (such as shopping, cooking, collecting the kids from school, cleaning the house, watering the plants).

However, we do have some choice over *when* we do our tasks and what else we do on top of these chores. If you want to improve your use of time, keep a record for just one week of what you actually do with your time. Use the table on page 3 and record what you do with each hour. Then total up the hours you spend on different types of task (such as travelling, eating, preparing food, housework, in meetings, doing particular types of task, talking to neighbours, or taking exercise). The right hand column is headed '*My choice?*'. Tick this if you decided to do the activity then.

Analysing your use of time

When you have recorded how you use your time, look at it and add up the amount of time you spend:

- ❖ Completing tasks that someone else has decided you should do then
- ❖ The amount of time you spend on tasks that someone else should do
- ❖ The amount of time you spend on correcting things that someone else has done wrong, or waiting for someone else to do something

Time record

Write down how you used each hour. If you work nights, change the timings on the left. Note the main activities during each hour.

Day: _____	My choice?
7.00	
8.00	
9.00	
10.00	
11.00	
12.00	
13.00	
14.00	
15.00	
16.00	
17.00	
18.00	
19.00	
20.00	
21.00	
22.00	
23.00	
24.00	

- ❖ The amount of time you spend doing things that you want to do
- ❖ The amount of time planning or preparing for other tasks

Review what you have found out. Ask yourself if you are surprised at the result. Do you have more or less control over your time than you had expected? Who else tends to control your time? How much of your time is spent on tasks that you shouldn't do or which someone else could or should do? Do you spend as much time on your family or private life as you would like? (Do you have a good work/life balance?)

Before you can manage your time better you need to know how you use it at the moment.

Planning to use your time

The first step in taking control of your time is to plan what you are going to do. It's the same as budgeting your money. You should look at what you have to spend your time on (just as you have to pay the mortgage or rent, and the electricity bills, etc) and what is **discretionary**. Discretionary means that you have some choice over how you use your time, just as you have some money that you can spend on clothes or entertainment, or save.

Look at the activities in your time record. How many of them are fixed in some way? This may include time spent travelling to work, or time spent on tasks at work that have to be done at certain times. This could include getting tools or equipment ready, opening the post, or cashing up at the end of the day. Do you have to do all these tasks? Can others do them? Can you delegate them to members of your team? Some tasks are symbolic - the team leader does them because that's what sets the team leader apart from the team. But does the team leader have to do them?

Then look at those activities or tasks over which you have some control. Again, do you have to do them all? Can you delegate? How urgent are they? How important? (There is more about *urgent* and *important* in *Setting SMART goals*.) Use this to set your priorities. Decide when you will do tasks, using their urgency and importance to guide you. Think how long they will take, what resources you will need, whose help you will need. Use this information to plan when you will do them.

Planning helps you prepare, work out priorities and anticipate problems. But it can also make you too rigid, if you aren't prepared to adjust plans to changing circumstances.

People who don't plan may be able to respond to emergencies and get on with work quickly. But they may also waste time having to stop and redo work which isn't properly prepared. And they may have difficulty hitting deadlines, as they haven't worked out how long tasks will take.

Planning helps you complete tasks better. But never let the plan stop you doing what is urgent.

Exercise

How good are you at planning ahead? Do you always tend to make a plan for what you are going to do or do you tend to 'get stuck in' and work out each step as you go along? Use this chart to place yourself (circle the appropriate number) somewhere between the two extremes. To help you, think of two or three other people you know (at work or elsewhere) and put them on the chart to compare yourself to them.

	<i>Always work out very detailed plans.</i>					<i>Never plan ahead, just get on with the job.</i>		
Me	+4	+3	+2	+1	-1	-2	-3	-4
1.	+4	+3	+2	+1	-1	-2	-3	-4
2.	+4	+3	+2	+1	-1	-2	-3	-4
3.	+4	+3	+2	+1	-1	-2	-3	-4

Look at the people you have scored +3 or +4 and -3 or -4 (one might be you). What benefits and what disadvantages do they both experience from *always* or *never working out plans*?

	Always work out very detailed plans.	Never plan ahead, just get on with the job.
Benefits		
Disadvantages		

Planning enables you to make sure that you have prepared properly, You can get the equipment and materials you need. You can ensure other people are available to do their part of the task as well. You can also check what exactly needs doing and when it is required by. If it will not be available by then, you can warn people or ask for more resources to be made available. Without a plan you may waste time having to wait for resources that you should have ordered earlier, may disrupt other people's work and not be able to tell people when to expect you to complete.

However, planning can mean that you find it difficult to respond to emergencies, because you are tied up with the task you planned for. It also assumes that you can always foresee what needs to be done. If you try to follow the plan slavishly you may miss important opportunities to do things better.

Exercise

Carry out an assessment to see how prepared you and your team are for the range of tasks you perform. Use the grid to assess yourself. Try to be as honest as you can about your team's readiness for the tasks you perform.

	Always	Usually	Some-times	Not often	Never
1. Is the equipment (tools, machines, workstations etc) you need always available and ready to be used?					
2. Are the materials you need always available/in stock and accessible?					
3. Are the work areas kept clear, clean and tidy?					
4. Do you usually complete tasks on time?					

If you can't say 'Always' to each question, consider what steps you can take to improve the situation. Why not spend 20 minutes with your team looking at the area where you have the biggest problem and seeing if there are any simple ways of improving the situation.

Case Study

Gary is a leading fire fighter. He is responsible for checking the fire appliance as soon as he comes on duty. He checks the hoses to make sure they are functioning. He uses a checklist to make sure the radios are working. He also logs all of the equipment and tools. By checking the appliance, Gary knows exactly where to find the equipment that the fire-fighters in his crew will need for a fire.

He also has a number of other tasks that he and his crew must perform. He always draws up a list of these tasks and plans who will do them and when. He writes these up on a whiteboard so that everyone knows what has to be done, and when. He does this at the end of each shift ready for the next day, so that the crew can get on with their tasks while he checks the appliance.

Tools to help you schedule your time

Scheduling your time means planning when you will do tasks. Tools that can help you do this enable you to make better use of your time. Most of these are very common, everyday items that most people have, but don't use effectively.

- ❖ A **calendar** or **planner** is a simple tool for recording important information about tasks that have to be performed on particular days, such as meetings, visitors, events, deadlines for completing projects or achieving specific goals, holidays and days when you or others in your team will be away from work. If you use a large, wall mounted calendar, it can act as a team planning tool for everyone to see what is happening. When you write something on your calendar include any information you might need, such as the names and telephone numbers of visitors. You can also record unplanned visitors, absences or the like. That way your calendar can become a record of significant events.
- ❖ A **to-do list** is a list of all the tasks that need to be done. In the case study, Gary had a to-do list, using a white board. It could just as easily be a large sheet of paper pinned to the wall. You can use different colours or highlighter pens to identify different types of tasks, and stars to show priorities.
- ❖ A **schedule** is your plan of how you are going to use your time each day to complete tasks. The simplest schedule is a diary, but more sophisticated versions include Filofax™ and com-

puter schedulers, like Microsoft Outlook™. Events from the calendar and tasks from the to-do list should be allocated specific time in your schedule (or diary), including enough time to finish each task.

- ❖ A **tickler file** is a file that helps you to keep track of tasks that must be completed by a certain date. To create a tickler file, label file folders with the days of the week, the months of the year and one with *Next Week*. Put the files in date order in a cabinet or drawer. All the materials relating to your tasks for this week can be put in their folders for the day you intend to do them. At the end of each day that folder should be empty. Tasks for next week go in the *Next Week* folder. Any tasks for the rest of the month go in this month's folder; the rest go in the folder for their month. Update your files every Friday and plan next week's tasks. Check the folder regularly to make sure that you are making progress on all the tasks.

These tools will help you make the most of your time. You need to get into a routine of using them so that, as far as possible, you plan when to do your tasks. You can also check your progress as you complete tasks or parts of them. As you complete tasks, cross them off the to-do list. Review and revise your schedule if you are interrupted. If you must do something that you didn't know you would have to do, adjust your schedule. Reschedule some tasks. At the end of the day, make your to-do list for the next day.

Stay on Track

Create a daily routine that helps you stay on track. Your routine is the regular way you do things every day. At work, your routine might include checking your to-do list when you get to work. Update your schedule for the day. Group similar activities together. For example, if you must make several phone calls, plan to make each one right after the other at a certain time. By planning 'phone calls and keeping a record of each one, you can save a lot of time.

The only person who can help you use your time effectively is you. Develop these good habits and you will find that the time you spend planning your tasks is time you will save several times over. The hardest part is starting. Once you have got used to using the tools, you will find they make it easier to manage your time. You will also find it easier to lead your team if you are in control of your own work tasks.

Look through the following list of 20 rules for using your time wisely, and see how many of them you can follow.

20 rules for using your time wisely

1. Be very clear what your job is - and where the boundaries are between your work and your private life
2. Set yourself clear objectives - know what you are trying to achieve and why
3. Set priorities - use the *URGENT/IMPORTANT* matrix to distinguish between the different types of priority
4. Plan your time - set aside fixed times for various activities and stick to them
5. Balance enjoyment with chores - don't put things off because you don't like doing them, but do them first and give yourself rewards for completing them
6. Use time wisely - working long hours is not a productive way to work, so plan time off
7. Have a daily 'to do' list - planning time is most effective when it is concerned with the immediate
8. Keep your desk clear - don't just file things, but throw away items that you won't need in future or which someone else has on file if you need it, and keep electronic rather than paper copies wherever possible ('If in doubt, throw it out')
9. Don't let other people's poor time or task management endanger yours - if someone else hasn't prepared properly or is wasting your time, be firm but clear about your own priorities
10. Don't volunteer (or let yourself be volunteered) unless the task is appropriate and 'do-able' - in particular, don't let others evade their responsibilities by poor performance and expect you to pick up the pieces
11. Use meetings effectively - set start and finish times, stop time-wasting, review each meeting at the end for effectiveness (eg each member lists three positives and three negatives about the meeting)
12. Have meetings standing up - when a meeting should be short, avoid sitting down as this encourages people to talk more.
13. Control your telephone, don't let it control you - plan calls, don't allow other people's decision to call you interrupt your own time plans, use an answerphone/voicemail to intercept calls for you

14. Use email constructively - it cuts down time for sending to multiple addressees and its conventions allow shorter, more abrupt messages, but don't spam (simply send messages to everyone to avoid deciding who needs it), and reject spammers' messages by filtering out those who do it regularly
15. Handle a piece of paper only once - or at most twice, if the first time is to put it into next week's pile
16. Write only what's needed - for example, put answers to memos in the margin and send them back
17. Read what you need - just read summaries or skim read long documents, concentrating on only those bits which are relevant, and don't allow leisure reading and work reading times to get crossed over
18. Travel in good time - if you arrive early use the time saved, rather than try to save it in advance and arrive late
19. Work in the right environment - avoid distractions by going to a quiet place for concentrated work, if you can
20. Tell other people what you are doing and why - nobody works in isolation, you need other's support, so explain why you can't do something now and when you can.

Comprehension Check

Complete the following exercises. Refer back to the session if necessary.

A. Name one way that making a plan can help you save time.

B. List three skills you should use to help you plan.

1.

2.

3.

C. Read each sentence. Circle the letter in front of the answer.

1. Time over which we have control is called:
 - a. our own time
 - b. personal time
 - c. discretionary time
2. People who don't plan:
 - a. have more time.
 - b. may miss deadlines.
 - c. aren't committed to their jobs.
3. A diary is a kind of:
 - a. 'to do' list.
 - b. schedule.
 - c. file.
4. Which of the following will not help you budget your time?
 - a. making a schedule
 - b. giving your work to a team member
 - c. checking your progress

Making Connections

Answer the questions following each case. .

Case A

A assistant manager in a stationery shop needs to plan the shop window displays for the spring sale at the end of March. Last year the sale display wasn't planned and items were simply stacked up at the last minute. Sales were down on the previous year. She intends to prepare a schedule to help her plan the task so that the display is more effective. What should the assistant manager do to prepare for the task? What does she need to work out to draw up her schedule?

Case B

A controller for an emergency drain clearing company needs to plan the route of calls for the mobile teams. The controller must tell the teams where to go and what to do. How will each of the following items or pieces of information help the controller:

- ❖ map
- ❖ customer names and addresses
- ❖ list of mobile teams on duty
- ❖ knowledge about how long each job will take

Think and Apply

How well do you use the skills in this session? Think about a project that you recently finished (at home or at work).

- ❖ How well do you use these skills?
- ❖ Do you plan well?
- ❖ Do you prepare for the tasks?
- ❖ Do you budget your time?

1. Read the list of skills. Tick the boxes to show your strengths and weaknesses.				
Skills	<i>strengths <- - - -> weaknesses</i>			
	I'm good at this	I'm quite good at this	I'm not so good at this	I'm quite poor at this
■ planning my workload	☐	☐	☐	☐
■ using a calendar	☐	☐	☐	☐
■ preparing materials and equipment in advance	☐	☐	☐	☐
■ making a to-do list	☐	☐	☐	☐
■ making a schedule	☐	☐	☐	☐
■ using a tickler file	☐	☐	☐	☐
■ using a routine to stay on track	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. Do you want to improve any of these skills?				
3. How do you plan to improve the skills you listed in question 2? (You might want to discuss this with your line manager or your tutor/mentor/coach.)				