

# Managing Your Time

by Michael Davis

**H**ave you ever heard one of those self-help gurus claim he can save you two hours a day? Well, I'm sorry to be the one to tell you: You can't save two hours on Monday, then add them on to Tuesday to make a 26-hour day. The first step to good time management is to realize that you can't save time at all — you can only spend it wisely.

"Time is money," the gurus also tell us. Well, how much money? It's not hard to figure: Pull last year's tax return, and divide your gross income by the number of hours you work. Assuming that the dollar value you came up with hasn't sent you running out of the room screaming, "Let me out of this business!" think about how you spend your time and money. Let's say, for example, that you find yourself cooling your heels every day at the lumberyard, waiting for your order to be filled, or maybe you spend an hour waiting on a subcontractor. Throw in a half-hour fighting traffic both ways and you've just lost two hours. If your time is worth \$20 an hour and you waste two hours every day, you're down \$100 every week, times four weeks, times twelve months — there goes \$4,800. Once you start looking at time this way, you'll hear yourself saying things like, "I could buy a bass boat for what I spend waiting on you in a year."

## The Three Ds

Armed with this new insight, it's time you learned the "three Ds" — Dump It, Delegate It, or Do It. Since it seems that half a contractor's life is taken up with shuffling papers, let's use something simple as an example, like opening the daily mail. When I open my mail, I make space for three stacks of paper, plus a wastebasket. I pick up the first item and I begin my three-D filtering process.

**Dump it.** First, I look to see who it's from. We all get a lot of junk mail, and most of it comes from the usual suspects. If the return address is Big Bertha's Basket-of-the-Month Club, out it goes. The same goes for anything with Ed McMahon's picture on the envelope.

**Delegate it.** When I dig through and find something that intrigues me, I actually open the envelope. Now I have to decide what to do with it. Fortunately, I still have two Ds left. If it's a letter asking for basic information, I read enough of it to see what they need, jot some notes in the margin, and put it into pile "A" for my secretary to take

the first medical team on the ground after the Chernobyl meltdown. You have thousands of injured people — everything from scrapes, scratches, and broken bones right up to folks who have been completely toasted by radiation. What do you do first? Medical personnel call this system of deciding where to apply limited resources "triage." While your initial impulse might be to ignore the scratches and scrapes, experience has taught them that left untended, infection will set in, and those minor injuries will quickly become serious problems. You'll probably feel pretty silly running around with Band-Aids and iodine at a nuclear disaster, but if

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care of. I've just delegated something. One pass, a couple of quick notes, and it's out of my life forever.

**Do it.** Working my way through the mail, I eventually come upon something I can't dump or delegate. I have to deal with it myself. Now the question is: How much of my attention does it deserve?

If it's mindless stuff, like a bill that just needs to be approved, it goes into pile "B" — paperwork I can blow through and be done with. If it's serious business, it goes into pile "C," the pile of stuff I need to devote some time and effort to.

## Order Out of Chaos

Now that I'm down to two stacks, my "Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster Theory" comes into play. Imagine you are among

you treat those minor injuries, they'll be "off your desk."

What's next — comfort the dying? Wrong again. You should use your limited resources where they will do the most good. The dying are going to die no matter what you do; you need to help those who have a chance to live. So off you go with splints and plaster of Paris, mending broken bones.

Triage helps a medical team handle an overwhelming task efficiently. They know they can't save everybody, so they break the task into smaller parts and work on those who have the best chance of surviving. In construction projects, we face similar emergencies; they may not threaten our lives, but they sure affect the health of our business. Instead

of writing “Finish the punch list” on your to-do list, break the task down into smaller steps. Treat a small problem, like a leaky sink trap, before it gets worse — a flooded vanity cabinet.

You still have to get everything done, but by checking off each small task as it is completed, you’ll gain the psychological advantage of knowing that the big job just got a little smaller. And if you’re dealing with several jobs at once, at least someone will be happy with you.

### Make a List, Check It Twice

After I’ve cranked out all the easy stuff in pile “B,” I’m still left with pile “C,” which is going to require my undivided attention. But my attention is rarely undivided — phones are ringing, people are barging in with questions, faxes are piling up.

To solve the problem, I draw a blueprint of my day. I wouldn’t build a house without one, so why approach my job with any less care? Step one is to make a list of everything I need to get done. This first time through, I don’t worry about the order of importance; I just write it all down, one item per line. Then I go down the list a second time to prioritize, labeling each item A, B, or C, with A being the most important. When I’m done, I take a minute to think about it, then go back through again, labeling items 1, 2, and 3, with 1 being the most important. I usually make a few changes, but in the end the list is pretty well organized. Now I can take on each task according to its priority, beginning with items labeled “A1,” “A2,” “A3,” right on down through “C3.”

I used to make lists like this on the backs of envelopes or on those little “While you were out” sticky-notes. Sometimes I’d absentmindedly jot them down on the corner of the blueprint I was working on, but once I’d finished the takeoff and turned the page, my notes were gone forever.


Now I use a spiral notebook. It serves the same purpose as an expensive leather-bound Day-Timer, but when I go to the job I don’t look like some kind of yuppie. I keep the notebook with me all the time. If an idea comes to me, I jot it

down. Having it all down on paper in one place helps convince me that there is a finite number of things I have to get done. Just knowing that there is an end to my list is a comfort. And when I finish something, I cross it off. Even if it is just a small thing, at least I can see that I am making progress.

### Plan the Day

Once I have my list just the way I want it, I set aside a block of time for each task. Be sure to assign tasks and time blocks in accordance with your own natural rhythm. You may wake up sharp and ready to take on the day; if so, you’re a morning person. Maybe you drag through the day and don’t really catch your stride until late afternoon. Either way, know when your most productive time is, and schedule tasks accordingly.

Here’s how my daily schedule might look. I check on jobs and make phone calls from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. Then I lock myself in my office and hold all my calls. From 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. I really focus on getting something done. It might be an estimate, an important proposal, or a few letters. After a couple hours of solid concentration, I take a break and pop my head out to see what happened while I was working. The first few times I did this, I was actually a little disappointed to find that the world didn’t come to an end in my absence, but I got over it. I get my messages and return my calls, then grab a bite to eat and plan out round two of my day.

You have to tailor this routine to fit your needs. Use short-term lists to plot out the day and long-term lists to plan the week or month. Your routine will probably change from week to week. When you have jobs to bid, you’ll need to spend more time at your desk. Once you’ve started those jobs, you’ll spend more time in the field. Either way, plan ahead. Do your best to ensure that you are in control of your day. Otherwise your day will take control of you. 

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