Performance Improvement: Making better use of Time

Billy Futter

Time waits for no one. Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That’s why it’s called the present. Eleanor Roosevelt

The three E’s

A useful starting point, particularly in the present difficult times is to appreciate the difference between efficacy, efficiency and effectiveness.

- Efficacy refers to the ability to produce an outcome in a controlled trial. Useful if you have the time/money to experiment with new strategies.
- Effectiveness is all about results in the real world. Was the desired outcome achieved (whatever the cost)?
- Efficiency is concerned with the best use of resources. Can the same outcomes be achieved with fewer resources (e.g. quicker and cheaper)?

If you are proposing to introduce a new strategy, the ideal would be to test it in controlled conditions (efficacious), try it out in the real world (effective) and then examine ways to do it better, cheaper or quicker (efficient). There is a danger of becoming so fixated with improving efficiency that you lose sight of whether you are doing the right things (effectiveness). Time saving strategies may undermine your critical success factor – the reason for your client support. For example, quicker processing of clients result in a loss of clients – they may no longer perceive you to be adding value to the medication you are dispensing.

How valuable is time?

Time is one of your most precious resources. At the start of each day you have a credit of 24 unique hours in your time bank. At the end of the day, they are gone and can never be recovered. As a consequence of bad time management, deadlines are not met, costs increase, relationships deteriorate (with clients, colleagues and partners) and pressures build up. There is no time to spend on reflection and improvement. Your preoccupation with the present does not allow you to think carefully about the future.

If you are not convinced about the value of time, reflect on the thoughts in Table 1.

How well do you manage your time?

Here are some indicators of a person who manages his/her time well. Score yourself out of 10 for each (See Table 2). Whilst you should not expect to score 100%, this exercise will help you diagnose time waste symptoms and areas for improvement.

How to improve TM?

Improvement requires a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Start by sorting out your attitude. Without an appropriate frame of mind, no amount of knowledge or skill is going to improve your TM. So, can you commit yourself to the following?

1) Accept responsibility

If you have problems dealing with time, there is only one place to find the problem – in the mirror. If you are overwhelmed by time pressures, don’t blame others. We all make choices. Our choice is to live with the consequences, or do something about it. There is an old saying “If you can’t stand the heat, leave the kitchen.”

Table 1: Perspective on Time values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To appreciate the value of ONE YEAR, ask a student who failed a grade.</td>
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<tr>
<td>To appreciate the value of ONE MONTH, ask a mother who gave birth to a premature baby.</td>
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<tr>
<td>To appreciate the value of ONE WEEK, ask the editor of a weekly newspaper.</td>
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<td>To appreciate the value of ONE HOUR, ask two lovers who are waiting to meet.</td>
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<td>To appreciate the value of ONE MINUTE, ask a person who missed the plane.</td>
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<tr>
<td>To appreciate the value of ONE-SECOND, ask a person who just avoided an accident.</td>
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<tr>
<td>To appreciate the value of ONE MILLISECOND, ask the person who won a silver medal in the Olympics.</td>
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2) Take control
“The bad news is time flies. The good news is you’re the pilot.” – Michael Altshuler. You are the person who can make the biggest difference. Do not expect others to plan your life for you.

3) Plan your time
“Living your life without a plan is like watching television with someone else holding the remote control.” – Peter Turla. Yes, planning is time consuming because it forces you to think about goals, alternatives, opportunities, changes and resources. But, with a plan you are more likely to get to where you want to be rather than leave it to chance.

4) Just do it!
Be willing to make decisions and take action. You will be faced with choices, some of them very difficult, especially when your personal and occupational priorities are in conflict. But the decision is only the first step. Delayed action eats time faster than Americans eat burgers. The longer the delay, the less time is available. “Don’t fall victim of the ready – aim – aim – aim syndrome. You must be willing to fire.” – T Boone Pickens.

5) Get it right first time
Mistakes happen but they occur more frequently when you are in a rush. Correcting mistakes is a time guzzler. They also create serious adverse reactions with clients, colleagues and partners.

6) Check the detail
Small things matter. The best plans can fail because details were considered to be unimportant or glossed over. As a pharmacist, you don’t need to be reminded of this principle.

7) Beware of trivia
The converse applies – Don’t get side tracked by trivia. Keep the big picture in mind. Small things have a way of making themselves become more important than they really are. All energy (individual and corporate) is invested in trying to solve a tiny problem whilst big opportunities are escaping and huge threats, like tsunamis, are ready to destroy everything that is worthwhile.

8) Learn from tsunamis
Reflect on all the lessons that occur around you. Experience is an excellent teaching tool, especially when you learn from other people’s mistakes and experiences. For example, you know that when there is a tsunami warning, you move like lightening to get out of its way.

9) Avoid email sludge
Don’t start the day by reading your emails – or if you do, allocate a limited time to do so. Be ruthless in culling those you are not going to read. Those that you might read, put into a temporary file (you probably won’t read them). Those that you have read, file or delete.

10) Stay focused
Above all, keep your eye on the ball. There are many distractions and interruptions that must be carefully managed. “You can’t catch one hog when you’re chasing two.” – Moe Schaffer.

Finally, don’t expect everyone to have the same attitudes towards time management as you. Priorities differ. Some people are less analytical than others, and are prepared to make decisions with less information. The one thing that we do know is that successful people make the best use of the limited time that they have available.

Table 2: Test yourself

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I know exactly what I want to achieve.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I routinely take time to set my goals and check how I am doing.</td>
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<td>3. I have a ‘to-do’ list that I update regularly with estimates of time needed and deadlines.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. The items on the list are ranked from most to least important.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. I anticipate interruptions and provide extra time for them.</td>
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<td>6. I am able to distinguish between urgent and important tasks.</td>
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<td>7. When something has to be done, I do it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. I schedule my time and at the end of the day/ week, I can usually pat myself on the back for having planned well.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. I am seldom stressed by having to meet deadlines or commitments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. In a nutshell, I set goals, prioritise tasks, schedule activities, manage interruptions and do not procrastinate.</td>
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PS: The following links provide useful guidance to the many dimensions of time management. I suggest that you find a quotation for each week to reflect on the wisdom of others see the first link. Just do it!

1. How to put principles into practice
http://www.lifeoptimizer.org/2007/06/16/quote of the day a practical way to put your principles into practice/

2. Quotations on Time management
http://www.timeman.com/Articles/timemanagementquotes.shtml
Time management quotes and sayings collected by Peter “The Time Man” Turla
http://www.presidentlincoln.com/Time%20is%20a%20bank...html
Quotations and tips on time management and personal productivity by Gene Griessman
http://www.lifeoptimizer.org/2007/04/04/4 simple ways to better use your time/

4 Simple Ways to Better Use Your Time by Donald Latumahina

3. Practical Time Management skills
http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE 90.htm
Mind Tools.com provides a variety of strategies to deal with the different types of time management.
Self management websites many of which are concerned with time management.