

Done a time log recently? It's never a waste of time

Working efficiently and effectively is always important, but especially when you are busy or when times are tough. In the second of a series of short articles on aspects of people and organisations, Dr Tony McNulty discusses how doing a time log can help you focus your time and energies properly.

When doing coaching assignments we often ask clients to keep a time log for a couple of weeks. It is a useful discipline. It gives people the facts about how they are using their time. They can analyse where their energies are going, and check whether they are spending the right amounts of time on their priority goals and tasks.

Most people will have seen a time log, and many sorts exist. We favour a simple format with separate columns for recording: tasks; their purpose; the time spent; whether the activities were planned; and an assessment of overall effectiveness.

Why bother doing a time log? First of all, the discipline of writing down your activities for a few days forces you to think about what you are doing and why. That in itself makes some people more productive. But the real shock comes when you have finished your log, and you start analysing the results:

- Many people find that they consistently underestimate: (1) the amount of time they need to carry out their assigned tasks or projects; and (2) the amount of time they have available for doing them. Learning to allow more time for your important work, and developing more realistic deadlines, reduces stress and also improves work quality.
- People often discover that they get blocked into trivia or spend significant portions of their day on low value or unimportant matters. This leaves less time for those priority tasks and activities with a higher pay off. Do your important work first and ignore the trivia. Don't fall into the trap of prioritising low pay off trivia just so you can 'clear the desk' for your more important tasks. You may never get to them.
- A time log often highlights how we tend to repeat patterns of behaviour. For instance, certain colleagues often take up disproportionate amounts of our time, to the detriment of our own work. Understand why you are constantly being interrupted and take action to deal with the cause.
- Few of us make best use of our time *all* of the time, and the data often show we waste time in surprising ways. Many of our wounds are self-inflicted. For instance, what starts as networking can turn into excessive socialising. And some of us seem to spend too much time playing in our favourite sandpits. We do some jobs not because we need to do them, but because we like doing them, and we are often very good at doing them. This behaviour is especially dangerous if you are a manager. Holding on to tasks you should have delegated can have three effects: (1) you are now doing parts of your old job as well as your current one, which adds to your burden and causes stress; (2) you may be failing to perform in some aspects of your present role, through lack of time; and (3) you are depriving your team of work as well as opportunities to develop.

On the more positive side, some of the patterns that emerge from your log can be very helpful to you. One manager we worked with was able to identify his most productive times of the day and he then protected these slots for working on his most important tasks.

So you have decided to do a time log. Where can you get hold of a suitable form? Traditionally, these have been paper-based, and the web is full of examples you can download. We recently developed an electronic version that can be completed on a laptop or PC. Contact me by e-mail if you want a copy. It includes guidance notes to help you analyse and interpret the results.

By all means do a time log. It should give you insights that will help improve your efficiency and effectiveness. You might even get your work done during work hours, and increase the time available to you for other activities. If you wish, drop me a line and let me know how you got on. I would be delighted to hear about your experience.

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