

Stress Management

It's About Time: The myths and realities of time management

Have you ever heard of Pareto's Principle, or Pareto's Law as it's sometimes called? It's the 80/20 Rule, and it's based on the principle that 20 per cent of anything is always responsible for 80 per cent of the results. It caught on in the late 1940's and still remains relevant today. You can successfully and easily apply the 80/20 Rule to almost anything — including time management.

The value of the 80/20 Rule, as it relates to time management, is that it serves as a daily reminder to focus time and energy on the 20 per cent of the work that really matters. In turn, this 20 per cent can produce 80 per cent of the required results.

Mastering this Rule, and incorporating it into your work, can be a powerful tool to keep you organised and efficient, especially when you are under the pressure of tight deadlines. The key thing to understand is, that 'time management' is really about 'self-management.' It's about learning how to leverage the time that you have; for example, how you plan, prioritise, delegate and organise your daily activities.

There are a number of tools and techniques that you can use to help incorporate the 80/20 Rule into your workday. But, in order to understand how to apply these, it's important to recognise and overcome a few of the more commonly accepted myths we sometimes adopt, in relation to our ability to produce and perform.

Myth number 1: "I work best under pressure, so I put things off until the last minute."

Some people convince themselves that pressure stimulates creative thinking and productivity. In fact, nobody is at his or her best under pressure. Procrastination only makes things worse. The more you avoid a task, and therefore reduce the amount of time available to properly complete it, the more unpleasant the task becomes.

Instead, try breaking down larger projects into smaller, more manageable activities. Then try working on each task in short bursts. Not only will the 'bite-size' activities help make the task seem much less daunting, these short bursts of activity will help you overcome your resistance to starting the project.

Myth number 2: "I get twice as much done when I multitask."

Be careful when you multitask. While doing this can be both necessary and, at times, a real lifesaver, it can also quickly spin out

of control and impair your ability to complete any one task effectively. Researchers have discovered that when you multitask, you do two things worse, than you would do if you did just one. Not only do you lose time when you switch back and forth from one task to another, the speed at which you perform each task decreases.

The bottom line is that the brain isn't set up to do two things at once effectively. And for many people, frequent multi-tasking only leads to cluttered workspaces and multiple, half-finished projects. Try to block out the time required to accomplish each individual task, and concentrate only on the task at hand. If any given task requires an extended period of time, you can help by 'resetting' your brain with five to ten minute breaks every hour or so.

Myth number 3: "*I'm too busy to get organised.*" The truth is that you're too busy not to get organised: One sure way to guarantee that you don't use your time effectively is to surround yourself with unnecessary clutter and disorganisation. As a matter of fact, the average worker loses at least one hour a day looking for misplaced information or materials. Not only is this a huge drain on your time and energy, it can lead to distraction, frustration and produce unnecessary stress.

If you need to 'de-clutter,' you can help make this seem less daunting by not trying to do everything at once. Divide your workspace into small, manageable areas to be 'de-cluttered.' As you work on each area, choose one of the following four actions:

- refer it to someone else;
- act on it;
- file it; or
- toss it.

When you 'file it' bear in mind that more often than not, work areas contain outdated materials that could be stored elsewhere. If you work in a computerised environment, get rid of the biggest clutter culprit —paperwork — and store as much information as you can on your computer rather than in printed form. Doing this will make the information more accessible and free up additional space in your work area.

Once you have found a suitable home for everything, things will be easier for you to retrieve and no longer cluttering up your workspace. You can maintain this newfound organisation by allowing 10-15 minutes each day to straighten up. A few minutes a day can prevent clutter and ensure that you waste less time looking for information.

Tips for Applying the 80/20 Rule:

Now that we've reviewed a few of the basic myths in relation to how we work, we can learn to apply everyday techniques that will help you focus on the 20 per cent of your work that is really important.

Learn to Prioritise: Prioritising is about learning to differentiate between essential and non-essential tasks. Activity lists are excellent tools to help you achieve this goal. Successful people make lists all the time. It enables them to stay on top of priorities and remain flexible, when they encounter changing priorities.

The key to making activity lists work is to review items on the list at least once a week with your manager or supervisor. If you both see that the value of an activity is less than the value of the time required to complete it, agree to 'bump' the activity down the list or remove it from the list altogether. Not only will this help create clarity, but it will also keep you and your boss on the same page regarding expectations and priorities.

Understand What is Expected of You: To define and understand goals, you require clear communication. There are some simple, key questions that you can ask yourself each time you take on a new task. These questions will help provide you with an understanding of where a new task fits into your activity list. Try posing the following questions: "What is the purpose of the activity and/or project; what is the measurement for success; what is the deadline; what resources are available; and, who else is involved and how is their involvement related to the activity?"

Learn to Delegate: Being able to delegate is considered a key skill for anyone leading a team project. The key to good delegation is the ability to trust and rely on other peoples' ability to perform, and to understand what tasks others can accomplish. A good rule of thumb is, if someone can do a task 75 to 80 per cent as well as you can, then delegate it. This will allow you to focus on tasks that need your specific attention, and will also allow you the time to review and support the other person's work.

Let Go of Perfection: Keep things in perspective. While it's good to aim high, perfectionism can also set you up for failure. It's not uncommon for individuals to turn in work late, or never finish tasks because they're waiting for perfection. The bottom line is that life is not perfect, so why should you expect everything you do to be? Try setting a realistic amount of time to complete each task. If you use up the time allocated for the task and are still unfinished, ask yourself the following: "Is my effort in proportion to the value of the task; and, will other activities be delayed if I continue to work on this?"

If the answer to either of these questions is "Yes," then maybe it's time to move on.

As you begin to overcome some of the more common myths that affect your ability to perform, and apply new time management techniques, you will be able to keep focused on the 20 per cent of your work that really matters. And remember that this process is a transition, not an event; it's a matter of gradually accepting 'change' in the way we work, and how we think about the work that we do.

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