

Taking Time to Think

If you haven't got time to do everything, at least do the things you need to do, in order to be successful! But what are they? Many people face conflicting and seemingly overwhelming pressures. Short-term, urgent tasks compete for space with the important, the longer-term and the developmental. It is easy to fall into the 'busy trap' – fighting fires and efficiently getting through volume of workload, even though this can be at the expense of not having the time for longer term, proactive tasks.

'Urgent' tasks can be exciting, high profile and 'heroic', while the 'important' tasks are often a slower burn – longer term, lower profile and with less instant gratification. Taking time to think and establishing priorities will provide the feeling of being in control and will make it much more likely that you will be working towards achieving your own definition of success.

Break the cycle and get more effective using the 7 Steps below:

Step 1

Think about the Main Drivers in your Life – How do you allocate your time currently?

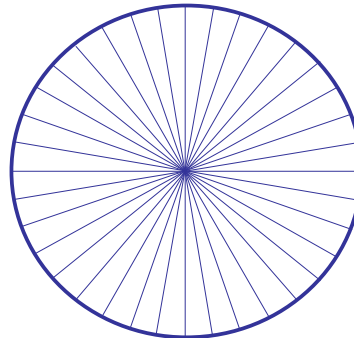
Using the list of headings below, complete the two pie charts – showing your current time allocation in the first and how you would like it to be from now on, in the second.

- How could you allocate your time differently?
- What would be the benefits to you and those around you?

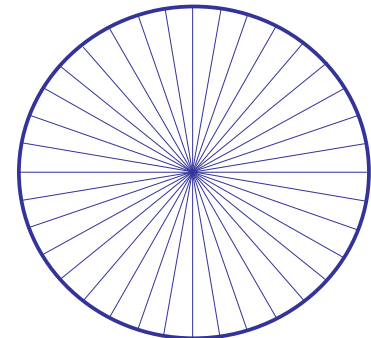
If you need to, add new headings and redraw the circles onto a bigger piece of paper.

Use colours and be creative!

- Career
- Family
- Social
- Spiritual
- Self
- Health
- Wealth
- Leisure
- Community activity
- Professional development
- Planning for the future



How it is now



How I would like it to be this year and beyond

Step 2

Take 15 minutes a day to plan – Check that any commitments already scheduled for 2009/2010 are still relevant and remain high in your priorities. If not, change your plans! Search for low-value meetings and either send a representative or your apologies, asking another attendee to brief you after the event. If you do attend, make sure that your presence adds real value.

Step 3

Use the Salami Technique – If you haven't got time to tackle the whole of a task in one go, break it down into several smaller chunks, taking the completion of each slice as a victory. Schedule when you will take the next bite. Chopping the Salami into more digestible pieces will make it easier to find time to eat a piece every day – giving a real sense of progress.

Step 4

Use 'To Do' Lists – A fantastic way to get overview and to begin to scope out priorities.

- **Apply the 4 D's** – What do you need to Do? Where have you got an opportunity to Delay, Delegate or to Dump tasks?
- **Go for quality over quantity** – Distinguish between high return tasks and those that will have less impact when they are done. Doing a few of the tasks that are important is better than completing a lot of tasks that are not important.
- **Do one thing that you do not want to do but which is important, every day** – Do it with energy and passion and you can feel good about having crossed a high value / high return task off your 'to do' list.
- **Use your 'to do' list to fill gaps in the day** – Fill your day with big and important things, while recognising the little things for what they are – ideal gap fillers for the gaps in the day!
- **Identify your Prime Time** – Identify periods in the day or the week when your energy is high and fill it with your most demanding and high value tasks. Use low energy times for quick, easy, less valuable tasks.

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Step 5

Protect your own time and learn from people who seem to get a lot of your time currently –

How do they do it? Probably they push hard to get an appointment in your ever filling diary.

- **Book appointments with yourself and get your things done first** – If you want more time for you and for your priorities, book it before anyone else does and then protect it, just as you would a commitment that you had made to another person.
- **Block out time in your diary and channel people to suit yourself** – If you use Outlook and other people can access it, they will assume that if you haven't got a meeting booked in, then you must be 'free'. Find a way of showing times in the day and the week when you are happy to be available and the times when you are not. You may link this to your Prime Times (see above) and choose to keep your most productive times as your planning or Salami eating time.
- **Stop saying 'Yes', if you want to say 'No'** – It's tough, but the more you give, the more people will try and take.



Step 5

Protect yourself from un-planned distractions:

- **People interruptions** – If your 'door is always open' currently, help people to understand that sometimes it needs to be 'closed'! Find ways to advertise that you do not want to be disturbed. Book 'planning time' in your diary; channel interruptions towards your low energy times and use 'chat to' lists (below) to keep in touch with key reports.
- **Use 'Chat to' lists** – Encourage people to save the things they need to talk with you about for one hit and save your interruptions for them until the same meeting. This will mean less frequent interruptions from both of you and will inevitably encourage the devolution of responsibility.
- **Use technology to your advantage** – Turn off the 'ping' that accompanies incoming email. Think about having set times in the day when you will proactively check your inbox and process mails. Make use of Out of Office Messages (OOM's). Doing this will give you undisturbed space for tackling important tasks (whether you are in the office or not) – you can then reward and re-energise yourself by clearing mails in between.

Step 6

Be proactive – If you have something that you know that you need to do, but you always seem to convince yourself that something else needs to be done first, then stop procrastinating!

- **Go public** – Declaring your intention in public will gain you support and approval from others. It will make them revise their expectations of you, making it more likely that you will feel obliged to 'grasp the nettle'.
- **Write reminders** – Leave yourself notes where you will rediscover them, so that the things you need to do are constantly brought back to mind. (Wax on the mirror, yellow stickies on the front door or on your PC screen...)
- **Reward yourself** – Promise yourself that when you have done 'X' you will allow yourself to do 'Y' – but not until!
- **Best idea of all** – Don't bother with any of the ideas above... take advice from Nike and "Just do it!"

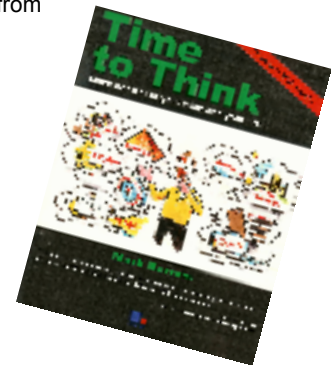
This extract is taken from a series of more than 30 Hints & Tips produced by Mark Barnes of Step System International Limited.

Step System creates and supplies coaching and training interventions, supported by blended learning and focused publications, delivering success in the areas of personal, team and organisational development.

If you would like more ideas to help you or your team get organised and find clarity amidst confusion, why not take a look at Mark's book:

Time to Think – Seize Control of Your Time and Your Life

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