

Beat the clock:

Time management for non-dummies

by Garry L. Menendez

"If only I had more time!" Excuse me, but we all operate by the same rotation of the Earth, so more time is not an option. It's what you accomplish with what you have that's the key to productivity and sanity.

For many in the landscape industry, time management skills ebb and flow with the seasons. In the spring and fall, when temperatures often dictate our workloads, we either suck it in and get things done, or we wind up lying on some therapist's couch blabbering about how too much is being asked of us.

Here are some time management techniques that may help you stay focused and break away from that dreaded society of paper-shufflers.

1) Write it down

I'm a list person. I've tried bulky, expensive day-planners and found that they just weren't my style. Each day, I reach for yesterday's "Gary Larson Far Side" cartoon calendar and proceed to list, on the back of the cartoon, the things that are on my mind for the day.

Two things happen here. One, when the tasks for the day (or week, depending on your personal preference) are organized on a tiny slip of paper, they're out of my head. This frees up valuable brain space for other things, like "what's for lunch." Secondly, I get a great deal of satisfaction knowing that, upon crumpling that little slip of paper, I've accomplished all that was on it, or at least transferred the remnants to tomorrow's list.

2) Prioritize

If you're like me, odds are slim that *everything* you write down will get done that day. I always believe I can do more than I can. You must prioritize!

Some folks use the box matrix, such as "important and urgent" (your company will soon perish if

this is not done); "important but not urgent" (long-term planning); "urgent but not important" (the office is out of toilet paper; delegate this to someone else if you can). I highlight *the* most urgent and important task on my list in one color and do the same with the next couple of items in a different color. Each time I yank that little piece of paper from my pocket, that item in pink screams to get done—and it always does.

3) Do it now!

Procrastination will destroy your business. If you have to make an important phone call, do it *now*. When you need to keep that all-important cash flow flowing, send out those invoices *now*. If you must hire someone to get the job done to avoid working your present employees to death, hire someone *now*. You get the point.

If there is something on your list that you are dreading but must be



done, do it now. Your stride may be unbroken the rest of the day, once you've cleared the first and highest hurdle.

4) Handle paper once

When I look at my mail, anything that has "bulk rate" gets once quick glance, then pitched into the "recycling bin."

Many people love stacks. It's their (and maybe your) way of organizing. I do not like stacks. Call me a neat freak, but in my life, a clean desk represents a clear mind. Sure, there are some pieces of paper you can't act upon immediately, and there are also several items that should be filed for future reference. Do it now. File them.

Old magazines give people fits. "Should I throw it away, or maybe I'll read this article one day?" The result is stacks of ancient magazines that may bring a pretty penny in a garage sale in, oh, about 50 years. I person-

ally can't wait that long. I'm a landscape architect and therefore a visual person. Any magazine I received before my two-year-old was born gets looked at one last time. Then relevant pictures and articles get sliced out with an Exacto knife and either read then or filed. The rest of the magazine goes into the recycling bin (I recycle a lot) or passed on to someone who may be interested.

5) Work backward

For appointments or meetings at your office, this isn't as relevant, but when you set up a meeting across town for 2:30 next Tuesday, you had better be there at 2:25 next Tuesday. Remember: if you're too early, you're wasting your own time; if you're too late, you're wasting your client's time.

Anybody who makes any portion of his or her living on the road knows about how long it will take to get from Point A to Point B, the best route to take, and expected traffic congestion at that time of day. For that 2:30 meeting, you may be allowing 30 minutes' travel time (unless you're in Atlanta), 45 minutes to check on a crew or job site, and 30 minutes to stop and get some supplies you desperately need. Therefore, plan to leave your office no later than 12:45 (working backward from 2:30).

6) Control your schedule

Another key to good time management is to stay in control of your schedule. I realize that, in this world, some people lead and some people follow. Be a leader. When setting up a time to meet with a client, be the first to suggest a day and time. If that doesn't suit them, have a back-up slot or two ready. The last thing you want to do is say, "Mr. Jacobs, I'm eager to show this proposal to you. When would be a convenient time for me to

come by?" At that point, you're dead meat. Mr. Jacobs replies that he would like you there at 7:30 p.m. on Friday.

7) Fill the gaps

Everyone has little chunks of his or her day into which no large task will fit. "I don't have another meeting until 4 o'clock and it's already 3:15. What should I do until then?" As tempting as it may be to roam the office searching for someone to chat with, consider first glancing at your list and seeing if there isn't something there with which to fill this void.

Hand-written thank-you notes can be cranked out in no time, and do wonders for your reputation. Go through some of those magazines and extract that which is important to you. Open up some bulging file folders and get rid of anything you haven't touched in the past couple of years. Clean out your vehicle; meditate; read some Whitman. Do anything except waste time reshuffling stacks of papers.

8) Whatever works

Technology is amazing. Over the years, thousands of machines, gadgets, and gizmos have been invented to improve our lives and present us with more leisure time. Do you have any more leisure time than you did 10 years ago? Neither do I. The important

thing is to keep your life in perspective. Just as you block out time for meetings, management and production, you must also set aside parts of your days, weeks and months for pure fun. Play golf, go hiking, visit friends, and spend time with family.

Time is finite. More can't be ordered, faxed, or purchased over the Internet. That's why it's so important that you sue what you've got wisely. And remember, if asked at the end of your time on Earth if you had to do it all over again, what would you change? The answer should *not* be, "I wish I had worked more."

—The author is an assistant professor of ornamental horticulture and landscape design at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He is also a registered landscape architect.

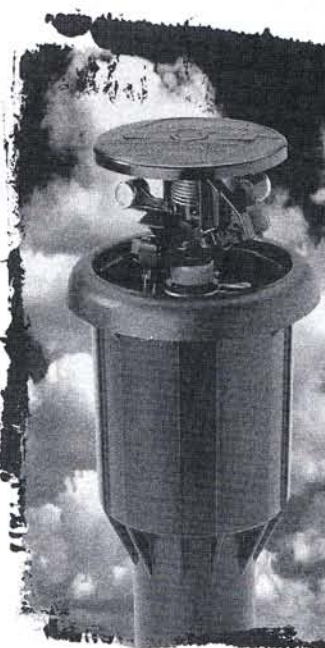
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