

How to Get Yourself Organized and Keep Yourself Organized

(Many of the examples in this piece come from *Getting Things Done* by Edwin C. Bliss)

Successful active citizens are diverse in their background, race, sex, appearance, major, and outside interests. One thing they have in common is that they know how to get things done.

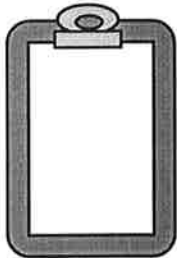
Studies of successful people in politics, law, business, health care, etc. indicate that there are remarkable similarities in their operating style. A well-known management consultant reports that he was struck with the similarities in the work habits of the more successful federal politicians:

"Faced with urgent and conflicting demands on their time - for committee work, floor votes, rolls calls, speeches, ceremonies, interviews, briefings, correspondence, investigations, constituents' problems, and above all, the need to be informed on a wide range of unrelated subjects - they developed techniques for getting maximum benefit from minimum investments of time. They learned to set priorities in relation to their own goals rather than to someone else's; they learned to screen themselves from unwarranted interruptions; they learned to delegate, to plan, to concentrate on important things and to disregard trivia. If they don't learn, they don't return."

Fortunately, priority-setting, planning, concentration, and other techniques for getting things done can be learned. In addition, they are effective in combatting such distressing things as procrastination, the paralysis of feeling swamped with work, the feeling that one has lost what interest and enjoyment one had in tackling a concern or problem.

There is a particular reason why people involved in social change projects should want to improve their ability to get things done. You are not just writing papers that only a professor will read, and your work is not like all too many jobs in society where sloppiness, inefficiency, and low morale are common. When you are successful there is a direct benefit in people's lives. And there often is no one else to pick up the pieces of an unsuccessful project.

There is no magic potion to take in order to improve your ability to be effective, to get things done, and to enjoy doing so. Here are some tips that lots of active citizens have found helpful, as follows:



1. Clarify and become more aware of your goals

Almost everyone works more effectively when they know why they are doing something and that it is important. Yet many people have never really sat down and thought out their goals. It can make a big, big difference. Try it. Take a blank sheet of paper or a page in a notebook you use a lot. Write down your goals as you think of them. Then number them according to your priorities. Write them out again in order of priority.



2. Become aware of the different types of tasks and activities that fill your day

a) **Important and urgent** - the paper that is due tomorrow, the scholarship application that must be turned in by Friday, the phone call to a staff person who won't be in the office tomorrow, the labour pains that are three minutes apart. Because of their urgency and importance, these things take precedence over everything else. Procrastination is not possible in these cases.



b) **Important but not urgent** - library time to figure out a topic for a paper due in a month so that you can work on an issue you really care about, writing a rough draft of a letter today for your project so that you can look it over and revise it before you send it, taking a half-hour to revise your list of goals. Most of the really important things in life are not urgent. In many cases they can be postponed forever, and all too often they are. More than anything else, being able to deal with the activities and tasks in this category is what separates effective people from ineffective ones.

c) **Urgent but not important** - these are the things that clamour for immediate attention, but that would get low priority if we thought about them, such as being asked to help with something right in the middle of the time you had allotted for study in the evening, going out with a friend for the third night in a row and s/he is standing at the door right now, or spending prime time working on an easy assignment instead of focussing on a more important paper while you are in the library. For many people, most of their problems with getting things done can be connected to allowing "urgent but not important" activities to crowd out and fill up the time needed to complete "important but not urgent" tasks".

d) **Busy Work** and (e) **Wasted Time** - sharpening pencils, organizing your desk, much television and magazine time, some daydreaming, spending extra time polishing up routine assignments, etc. Many of these things need to be done but we allow them to take too much time or do them when we had planned to do "a" and "b" priorities. People often look at "e" when they feel overburdened or worried that they won't have enough time to finish things they need to. More often, the problem is in the "urgent but not important" and "busy work" getting out of hand.

The 15 major timewasters, according to a survey of leaders in 14 countries (published in R. Alex MacKenzie's workbook *New Time Management Methods --For you and Your Staff*) are as follows:

1. Telephone interruptions
2. Drop-in visitors
3. Meetings (Both unscheduled and scheduled)
4. Crises



6. Cluttered desk and personal disorganization
7. Ineffective delegation and involvement in routine and detail
8. Attempting too much at once and unrealistic time estimates
9. Lack of or unclear communication or instruction
10. Inadequate, inaccurate and delayed information
11. Indecision, and Procrastination
12. Confused responsibility and authority
13. Inability to say "no"
14. Leaving tasks unfinished
15. Lack of self-discipline

In the same way that it is useful to be aware of the *types of tasks* before you, it is very helpful to be aware of the *times* you can get the best work done, as follows:

4. Get to know your "prime times"

Some people work best in the early morning, early afternoon, or late at night. Find out when your most productive times are and try to block out interruptions and distractions during those times, and plan to tackle your most important work during those times.



Family members are often willing to respect a "do not disturb" sign on your door if you explain that you want to concentrate on your most important school work between 7 and 10 pm every night. Similarly, it's very easy to fall into the habit of lengthy lunch hours with friends after a morning of classes when if you thought about it, the early afternoon might be the time when you can accomplish much more than late at night. Find out your "prime times" and guard them jealously, save them for the activities that will bring you the biggest payoff toward reaching the goals you've set for yourself.

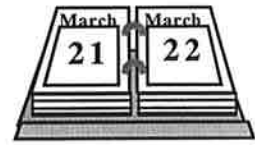
5. Concentration

The amount of time spent in an assignment or project is not what counts; it's the amount of uninterrupted time. Few problems can resist an all-out attack; few can be solved when half your mind is thinking about all the other things you have to do or worrying about the nasty comment a friend made earlier in the day. Sometimes it is necessary to clean out your mind of distractions in order to focus enough attention on the task at hand to get anything done. Relax, put your attention on something pleasant, and spend a few minutes noticing the various thoughts and issues that are competing for your attention, and one-by-one lay them aside until you can focus on just one thing.

6. Build good work habits

Week-by-week, look for ways to use your time more effectively to move toward achieving your goals. Here are a few examples: Use "wasted time" such as time spent on subways, buses,

and waiting in lines to think about your goals, plan your time, read short assignments, etc. If you have a big assignment coming up, don't leave it all for that 3-hour block of time tomorrow evening. Twenty minutes spent today becoming familiar with the assignment and breaking off some of the first tasks that need to be done can make it a lot easier to get started tomorrow and really use the three hours effectively. Reward yourself for concentrated work. Some people find it very effective to make deals with themselves like "I'll watch the TV show I enjoy if I can finish the next 30 pages of this assignment."



7. Don't give in to procrastination

What makes procrastination so hard for many people is that it seems to take away the energy you need to stop procrastinating. Several methods for fighting procrastination are based on making the job you have to do more manageable.

For example, there is the "*salami technique*" whereby you cut an unwieldy and hard to finish job into thin slices that "you can get your teeth into." When you realize you are procrastinating on a major task, slice it into many small, manageable "instant tasks" as possible. The key is to make each "slice" so simple and quick to do that by itself it doesn't amount to much. That way, you don't have to put off the project until you have a large amount of time but can knock off one of your "slices" whenever you have a few minutes. The first slice is always to list in writing the small steps in getting the job done.

8. Don't lose sight of your goals

Stop periodically to think about your goals and how your day-to-day assignments and jobs and activities fit in with your longer range goals.

