

Balancing Workload



“Most of us spend too much time on what is urgent and not enough time on what is important.”

- Stephen Covey, author, educator and keynote speaker

“You will never find time for anything. If you want time, you must make it.”

– Charles Buxton, Writer, and politician

“Either you run the day, or the day runs you.”

– Jim Rohn, Motivational Speaker

The one thing most of us would like more of is time. Being effective at work whilst adhering to deadlines, targets, staying on top of a steady stream of emails and phone calls whilst also hoping for some personal job satisfaction is tricky to balance. When we are in control of our workload our stress levels are lower and we feel happier. When things spiral into chaos and we feel pressured to deal with everything that is thrown our way it can feel like drowning. We become overwhelmed and lose our capacity to think clearly and the quality of our work and our productivity suffers. Finding a way to balance our workload is essential to our success and wellbeing at work.

It is important to recognise when pressure is becoming too great. Signs that you are struggling are irritability, disrupted sleep, poor concentration and decreased libido, a greater susceptibility to colds and other minor infections, heart palpitations or panic attacks. These are signs that it is time to take stock of things.

If you would like to talk further about anything raised in this helpsheet, contact our 24 hour Adviceline and speak to one of our advisors.

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Practical time management tools: the to do list

There is nothing like a lengthy 'to do list' to instill fear and panic in even the most level headed worker. Many of us keep a 'to do list' but there are degrees to how effective they can be. Some of us keep them and then do not refer to them, others simply see them as an overwhelming list of all the daunting things they have been putting off doing. We may have learned to prioritise them using the A,B, C method but at times it can be hard to decide exactly what to do next when everything seems urgent.

Bestselling Author David Allen offers a new approach to the 'to do list'. He argues that we need a reliable system that can capture all of the things we need to get done, so it creates a horizontal view of all the tasks that are competing for our attention, from the magazines that are lying around waiting to be read all the way through to the presentation we need to write or the appraisal we are giving. Anything that is not captured by a reliable system is perceived as unfinished in our brain and will continue to distract our thinking until we do something about it, often at times when we cannot do anything about it. In other words in order to approach a task with a clear head we need to empty it first of all the other things that keep popping up and diverting our attention. There are various ways of gathering all of the things that feel incomplete, you could use a physical in-basket, paper based notes, electronic notes or voice recording devices. Find the system that works best for you.

Once all the nagging tasks, all the things with an 'ought', 'should' or 'need' to are captured you can then approach them in a more thoughtful way. What you are aiming for is

more than a list; it is a process of defining what the problems are and seeing a way forward. 'To do lists' often seem overwhelming as they tend to focus on the most urgent items, and list major tasks without breaking them down into their component parts. For example instead of writing Presentation on your to do list it might be broken down into research, find case studies, get information from x person and drafting a structure. After identifying the component tasks you can feel clearer about what needs to be done. You begin to see that you can do one thing at a time rather feeling the burden of having to take on everything at once. It becomes more like a road map than a maze of hidden twists and turns.



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Processing your tasks - is it actionable?

Once you have gathered all of the things competing for your attention you need to decide what to do with it. The first question to ask about each item is whether you can act on it. For those that are not the answer might be

- ▶ No, not actionable – delete
- ▶ No, not actionable until later – save them in a deferred file
- ▶ No, not actionable but useful for reference – save in a clearly marked file

Of the items that are actionable decide what you need to commit to and the next steps to be taken. These may fall into the categories of

- ▶ Do it – Apply the two minute rule which is based on the principle that if something takes less than two minutes to complete it is quicker to act on it than to file it away

and retrieve it and act on it later. This is often the case with emails or text messages.

- ▶ Defer it – if they take longer than two minutes plan them into your diary so that you have reminders to do them. Think about how much time they will require and identify when you can focus on them.
- ▶ Delegate it – ask if you are the right person to do this task, there may be somebody more suitable that you can delegate to.

As part of your system you will need to have safe places to store all the things you have gathered. Create as many files as you need to make it work. Ensure that they are clearly labelled and accessible so that you can find things easily when you need them.

Doing your tasks

The benefit of planning is that you have a clear direction and can place your full focus on what you have chosen to do next. It is a myth that multi tasking is an effective way of working. For some minor tasks it can be helpful but what it really means is that you are unable to devote your full attention to what you are doing. It is easy to recognise when somebody we are dealing with is distracted, and that when we ourselves are distracted we are more likely to make mistakes and produce poorer quality work. The key to working effectively and producing quality work is to be fully present when we do it.

Work with your energy levels

Although most of us work within the timings and boundaries set by our employers and market conditions there are times when we are able to be more productive than others. Many of us feel at our freshest in the mornings and more tired and sluggish after lunch, although this can be different for each individual. It makes sense to do work that requires more concentrated focus at the times when our personal resources and energy are at their peak and save the simpler tasks for times like after lunch.

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Procrastination

If you find you are procrastinating decide to do something for just 10 minutes. Often getting started is the biggest psychological hurdle and once you make a start the rest will flow more easily.

Managing Distractions

Distractions prevent us from being in flow, from being able to fully focus and engage with what we are doing. This can be very challenging if you work in an environment where you are expected to take phone calls, answer emails or people suddenly appear demanding your attention.

Do what you can to minimise these. You can turn off emails and instant messaging at certain times of the day so that you can concentrate and set aside times when you will respond to messages. This can be communicated by your 'out of office' messages so that you are managing the expectations of others who might be trying to reach you. You may also be able to divert non-essential emails like newsletters and marketing messages to other inboxes so that you can read them at times when there are fewer demands on you.

Taking breaks

In the midst of a hectic workload it is easy to assume that taking a break is wasting time. However, our brains need time to rest and recharge. Einstein once reported that he never had one of his 'eureka' moments whilst thinking, they always happened when he was gazing aimlessly out of the window. Unless we stop once in a

while our brains do not have the chance to process all that has been going on. If you find it difficult to take breaks set yourself alarms to remind yourself, perhaps 5–10 minutes every hour. Although you may feel guilty about stopping for a short break it is likely to improve your ability to work well. It is also important to eat a healthy lunch so that your body and brain have the energy needed to function optimally.

Delegating

Delegating is a necessary part of managing your workload but for some it is easier said than done. It may be that we feel we can do something better ourselves, perhaps you dread the idea of having to spend time training someone or you feel as though you are offloading and should be able to manage on your own. Always be clear about what the objectives are so that you allow the person to find their own way of approaching something whilst adhering to the key objectives. You might even learn something valuable from them. It may take time and patience to train someone else but the pay off is often worth it.

Review

The key to staying in control is to regularly review all the things that are competing for your attention. Set aside some time once a week, or do it as often as needed until you feel in control again. Remember that there are always more things to do but by knowing what they are and using careful thought and planning we do not need to be governed by them. This leaves us feeling freer to enjoy being in the moment and have a richer experience of what we are doing now.