

Slice through Overwhelming Workloads

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Many managers and professionals feel overwhelmed. Their workloads exceed the time available. They never get caught up.

In the wake of downsizing and flatter organizations, executives face managing others and producing a lot of work themselves. Cellular phones, pagers, and email have created instant communications and with them the expectation of instant response. No wonder so many business people feel that their lives are out of control. They are!

A very talented client found himself in exactly this bind. His personal workload was about double what he was completing. New tasks kept stacking up and added to his frustration.

The first step involved prioritizing the tasks and clarifying which ones he absolutely needed to do and which he could drop, delegate, or delay. I asked him to be like a doctor in an emergency room and triage his tasks. He gave primary attention to critical tasks that required immediate attention, stabilized other tasks until he could get to them, and left the remainder to wait.

The second step was to radically delegate projects and responsibilities to other people. These included persons reporting to him and outside resources on a contract basis. Delegation did not come naturally to this executive. Like many managers who advance because they fulfill assignments better than others do, he was reluctant to delegate tasks when he knew he could do them better. Applying an effective delegation system, he became comfortable distributing work that didn't absolutely require his active involvement.

While the first two steps reduced his workload, the critical tasks that required his attention still exceeded the time available in his day. He started each day logging onto email and responding to faxes and phone calls. Often, this absorbed his entire morning. It was late in the day before he got to key projects. Even then, he continued to take phone calls and respond to co-workers and people reporting to him. His schedule served everyone else's immediate needs, but it didn't serve him or his priorities.

The key third step in getting his work under control was attention management. Attention management applies the approach successful surgeons use to manage their work. Surgeons identify their most productive time of day to do surgeries (usually the morning) and block it out. They complete their surgeries and then handle office visits and phone consultations. It doesn't work to have office visits interrupt surgeries or vice versa.

Here's how to use attention management to slice through an overwhelming workload in your work.

1. Identify your most productive time of day.

When are you best at doing creative work or completing major projects? For most people, this is at the start of the day when they are fresh. Others may not get going until late in the day. Focus on when you are at your best, not when you have time available.

2. Block out times for key projects.

Figure out how much time you need in a week to get your high-priority tasks done. Schedule them in your productive time slots.

3. Set up a system to handle other demands.

Transfer your phone to voice mail. Set your email so that each new one doesn't distract your attention. Put your pager in a drawer. Place a sign on your door to discourage interruptions and to let people know when you will be available.

4. Train others to honor your schedule.

Tell your co-workers and assistants what you want to accomplish. Have them screen phone calls or other requests so that only critical demands interrupt your project time. Indicate that you will be available to answer all calls before the day is over or within a business day.

When my client analyzed his schedule and the people he needed to serve and support, he realized that he didn't need to be constantly on call. He could be much more in control of his time.

5. Sustain the practice for at least three weeks.

When you practice a new habit for three weeks or more, you dramatically increase your chances of long-term success. It takes time to shift from an adrenaline-driven pattern of immediate response to one of focused performance.

6. Enjoy the results.

Organizing your time and eliminating distractions can yield dramatic improvements in your results and personal satisfaction. After two weeks on his new schedule, the swamped executive caught up with his workload. Both he and his organization benefited.