

Meet Deadlines

MEETING DEADLINES is essential to your career and your credibility. It is a learned skill that can increase your productivity, and it demonstrates your commitment to completing tasks in a timely manner. When you meet deadlines, you are viewed as reliable. A positive perception of your contribution can help you gain recognition and prestige.



Objective:



Describe how to organize work to meet deadlines.

Key Terms:



deadline
prioritizing

Meeting Deadlines

Prioritizing is assigning a degree of importance to each task that needs to be accomplished and arranging the tasks from most important to least important. It is about the following question: “What will produce the quickest reward for accomplishing a task?” When you feel a sense of accomplishment, you are rewarding yourself with pride or something tangible.

BENEFITS

Many benefits emerge when prioritizing assignments and meeting deadlines. These benefits can take the process from chaotic to organized and



FIGURE 1. Prioritizing is assigning importance.

help you focus. As a result, you are more productive. Prioritizing can help organize the work to be completed. When the task is important, you tend to pay more attention. Prioritizing creates a sense of urgency so you determine what needs to be completed and the steps required for finishing on time.

- ◆ Prioritizing can reduce the stress that often comes with tackling tasks and meeting deadlines. It is amazing how once you have started and are moving along, you begin to gain the self-assurance that allows you to de-stress.
- ◆ It provides an orderly way to meet a **deadline**—a date or time before which something must be completed. Prioritizing is problem solving; you work backwards to estimate the number of days or amount of time it will take to reach your goal.
- ◆ Prioritizing can result in increased productivity. Have you ever gotten lost in a project because you were absorbed in what you were doing? Did you notice that you kept going because you wanted to see the results? This inner drive (motivation) can result in greater productivity.
- ◆ Prioritizing helps you prevent forgetfulness. When something pops into your head, write it down to capture your thought and to remember it. Prioritizing is another way of brainstorming before you sort and prioritize a project.
- ◆ Prioritizing might prevent procrastination. When you agonize over what is to be done and do not get started, or you start and stop, you are procrastinating. Overcoming procrastination requires organizing and scheduling. You create a temporary structure to get you moving toward accomplishing your goal. Sometimes that means taking 5 to 15 minutes to see the completion of one small step at a time. Remember to reward yourself.



FIGURE 2. It is about taking charge.

FOUR STEPS TO ORGANIZING AND PRIORITIZING

Identify the Work that Must Be Completed

Identify what is to be completed, and create a task list for writing any and all related items. When you do this, you are creating a to-do list. You may not know all the tasks, so allow for unexpected additions.

To be even more effective, look at your to-do list and sort the items into projects and tasks. The project is your objective, and the task represents the actions or steps needed to complete the project. When you receive an assignment that has a deadline, the assignment becomes the project. Then it is up to you to itemize the steps that will enable you to complete the project. It

can be a prioritized list, or it can be a comprehensive schedule, including task breakdown, resources, and dates that can be outlined on a time chart.

When you have multiple projects, you can stay organized with a master project list. It is a way of making sure things are not forgotten and is a reference for various projects. You may think of it as a table of contents. When you are ready to tackle a specific project, you can organize each project with its own to-do list, thus creating a project plan.



FIGURE 3. A to-do list can be used to create a project plan.

Rank the Work

Work may be ranked by level of importance, due date, stress level, or length of time a task will take. You may want to begin with the step producing the most stress, or you might consider the shortest and easiest steps. Some people start with the most time-consuming task. You get to choose the sequence you will follow, but it needs to make sense. If you are working on a fundraiser involving donations for a foundation you support, what steps need to be taken to organize the project? How much time is allocated from start to finish? What would you do at the beginning, and what would you designate for the end?

With a master list, each project needs ABCD prioritization. “A” represents important and valuable or important and needs to be completed immediately to meet a deadline. “B” is for projects and tasks “under review.” They are less important than A, but they are likely to become important after A tasks are completed. “C” can be designated for future attention or relegated to D. “D” is not worth the effort; items are recorded in the event. They need to be elevated later to A, B, or C.

In addition to ABCD prioritization, it can be helpful to sequence projects. For example, if you have five “A” projects, you will find it helpful to create an order of importance, with A1, A2, A3, etc. You can do this with all tasks. This sequencing can enable you to organize projects and control multiple activities, which is the process employed with project management.

Determine Time Requirements

Determining the time requirements for each task begins by estimating a time for each task. Start with a rough outline of time estimates, and then gauge how comprehensive the project might become. Also, check with others who may be involved or who can contribute to your planning. Plan for delays and/or distractions. Methods for estimating time include bottom-up estimating, top-down estimating, comparative estimating, parametric estimating, and three-point estimating.

Bottom-Up Estimating

Bottom-up estimating allows you to estimate the project as a whole by breaking larger tasks into smaller increments and then estimating the time needed for completing each task. Then add up the total amount of time for completing the whole project.

Top-Down Estimating

Top-down estimating allows you to develop an overview using past experience as a guide.

Comparative Estimating

Comparative estimating enables you to look at similar tasks on other projects. Parametric estimating is based on estimating the time for one deliverable and then multiplying it by the number of deliverables required. For example, if you take an hour to write one page of an essay and five pages are required, you would multiply one times five to equal five hours as the estimated time to complete the essay.

Three-Point Estimating

Three-point estimating is for adding a cushion of time for uncertainty. This is done by estimating best case, worst case, and a most likely case for completing a project or task. This gives you a range of time with which to work.

Develop a Schedule for Completing the Work

A calendar will help you picture the time needed to complete all of the steps or tasks involved in a project. Take note of your deadline, and plot the time from start to finish. Think about how much time you can allocate each day or during certain days before arriving at the deadline. Remember that life events can get in the way, so imposing a false deadline a day or days before the actual deadline is another way to make sure you complete the task on time.



FIGURE 4. Estimating time accurately makes it easier to meet a deadline.



FIGURE 5. Creating a schedule provides a visual guide.

PROBLEM-SOLVING TECHNIQUES

When you have a deadline, use a five-step problem-solving technique to tackle problems.

Define the Conflict

There can be many reasons for conflicts. Is the goal of the project understood? Are the tasks unclear? Do you lack information? Are you short on time? Are you working with people who are not responding? Do you have two projects with the same deadline? Stop and think about the causes. Getting to the root cause rather than looking at the obvious can correct or eliminate what is causing the conflict.

Establish the Facts

Review your project. For instance, maybe you are working on a volunteer project and want to include this experience in a letter accompanying your scholarship application. The deadline for the scholarship application is approaching, so you send a draft of the letter to your mentor for review. Your mentor is not responding. You could become upset and blame the mentor for any delay, or you could be unbiased and consider your next step. Make sure your view of the situation is not clouded so you can move to a decision.

Clarify the Objective

For a project to be successful, the project goals need to be clear, specific, and measurable.

TABLE 1. Using “SMART” Goals

<u>S</u> is for specific.	Be very specific about your goal, but keep it simple to understand, which helps with clarity. Create a goal that defines your desired outcome.
<u>M</u> is for measurable.	This includes exact amounts, dates, timeframes, and deadlines. Quantity can signal that you have reached your goal.
<u>A</u> is for attainable.	Itemize the steps for completing your goals. Make sure the steps are manageable and sufficiently challenging to keep your interest.
<u>R</u> is for realistic.	If the goal is too big or too broad, you could get frustrated and give up. Ask yourself: “Is this something I can complete?” If not, re-evaluate. You may need to divide the tasks into smaller bits to make them easier to handle.
<u>I</u> is for time.	Set timeframes (e.g., an hour, a day, a week, or a month). Then sort into long-term and short-term goals, with dates for completion.

Source: http://www.ehow.com/how_3390979_achieve-smart-goals.html

Identify Possible Solutions

In addition to the first solution that comes to mind, it is a good idea to brainstorm other possibilities. Spontaneously, generate a list of all the ideas that come to mind. Get creative so you do not limit your thinking. Also, the unexpected happens, so you may need to adjust the plans for your project. What if your schedule becomes overloaded and time slips away? What if you get bogged down and spend extra time on a particular task? Is there something you can do to address a time delay?

Select the Best Solution

Sifting through all of the facts and evaluating possible solutions will give you a basis for comparing the components of the solutions. Sometimes it is an easy choice, and other times it is a best guess or a new solution based on various components from each of the original solutions. Just remember to evaluate objectively.

Summary:



Meeting deadlines involves a commitment to organize your thinking and then adapt the steps that enable you to manage projects successfully. This involves brainstorming, prioritizing, problem solving, and evaluating.

Creating written documents (e.g., a to-do list or a master list) for planning projects and identifying tasks paves the way for prioritizing and estimating the time required. These steps can enhance productivity and help you capture the unexpected as you work to complete an assignment. When you create a habit for meeting deadlines, you can overcome procrastination and reduce any stress that may be related to completing a project.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. What are benefits of meeting deadlines?
2. What is the word for assigning a degree of importance to each task that needs to be accomplished?
3. What are the steps for organizing and prioritizing?
4. What are the five problem-solving steps?
5. When prioritizing, how can you rank competing projects and tasks?

Expanding Your Knowledge:



You can be distracted dozens of times during the course of a day. When you are distracted, it can take you quite a few minutes to get refocused. If you are distracted multiple times during the day, you can actually calculate the loss. Suppose you are distracted 10 times in a day for 15 minutes. This would total 150 minutes or two and a half hours. If that happens every day during a five-day work week, you are looking at a loss of $12\frac{1}{2}$ hours. Conduct additional research, and then create a list of how to minimize distractions and maximize concentration.

Web Links:



Brainstorming

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brainstorming>

Golden Rules of Goal Setting

http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_90.htm

How to Estimate Time for a Project

<http://www.sitepoint.com/how-to-estimate-time-for-a-project>

Goal-Setting Theory

http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_87.htm

Root Cause Analysis

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Root-cause-analysis>

Time Chart

<http://www.timethoughts.com/timemanagement/time-charts.htm>

Time Management

<http://michellemariefox.com/2011/03/03/the-key-to-time-management-accurate-time-estimation-skills/>