

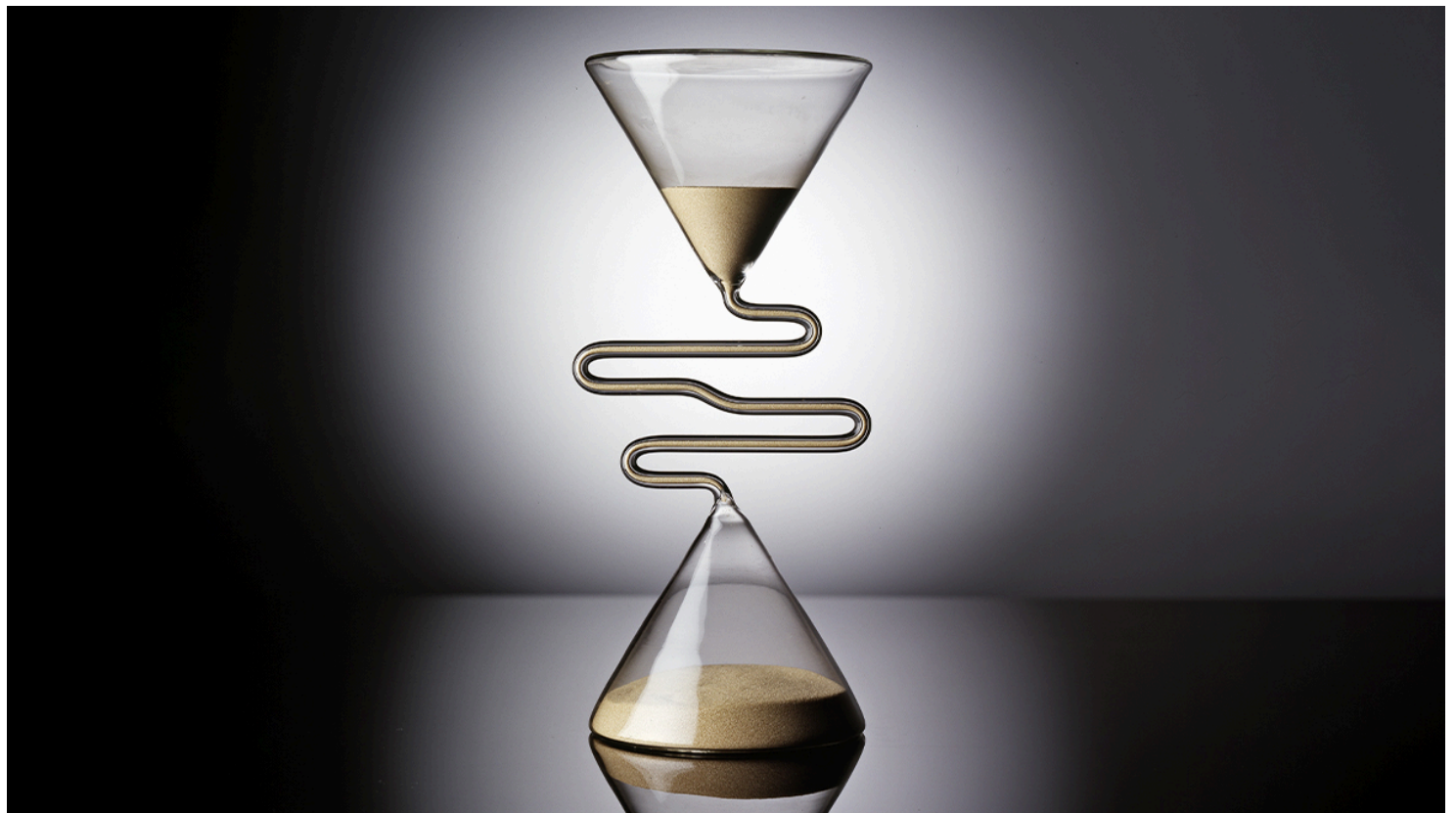
**Harvard
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Time Management

Time Management Is About More Than Life Hacks

by Erich C. Dierdorff

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Summary. There is certainly no shortage of advice — books and blogs, hacks and apps — all created to boost time management with a bevy of ready-to-apply tools. Yet, the frustrating reality for individuals trying to improve their time management is that tools alone won't work. You have to develop your time management skills in three key areas: awareness, arrangement, and adaptation. The author offers evidence-based tactics to improve in all three areas. [close](#)

Project creep, slipping deadlines, and a to-do list that seems to get longer each day — these experiences are all too common in both life and work. With the New Year's resolution season upon us, many people are boldly trying to fulfill goals to “manage time better,” “be more productive,” and “focus on what matters.” Development goals like these are indeed important to career success. Look no further than large-scale surveys that routinely find time management skills among the most desired workforce skills, but at the same time among the rarest skills to find.

So how do we become better time managers? There is certainly no shortage of advice — books and blogs, hacks and apps, all created to boost time management with a bevy of ready-to-apply tools. Yet, the most frustrating reality for individuals trying to improve their time management is that no matter how effectively designed these tools might be, they are unlikely to work. Simply put, these tools presume a person's underlying skill set, but the skills comprising time management *precede* the effectiveness of any tool or app. For example, would anyone seriously expect that purchasing a good set of knives, high-end kitchen equipment, and fresh ingredients would instantly make someone a five-star chef?

Certainly not. Similarly, using a scheduling app without the prerequisite time management skills is unlikely to produce positive time management outcomes.

Fortunately, there is a wealth of research that delves into the skills that undergird time management. Here, time management is defined as the decision-making process that structures, protects, and adjusts a person's time to changing environmental conditions. Three particular skills separate time management success from failure:

- **Awareness:** thinking realistically about your time by understanding it is a limited resource
- **Arrangement:** designing and organizing your goals, plans, schedules, and tasks to effectively use time
- **Adaptation:** monitoring your use of time while performing activities, including adjusting to interruptions or changing priorities

Of these three skills, arrangement is probably the most familiar, especially considering that the majority of apps and hacks deal with scheduling and planning. However, there isn't the same widespread recognition of awareness and adaptation skills. This raises key questions about how these skills play out from a

developmental perspective: Are they equally important? Are some more difficult for people to master? And, are some rarer than others?

Measuring Time Management Skills

To answer these questions, I examined the results from more than 1,200 people who participated in a 30-minute microsimulation designed to objectively assess time management skills.

Participants were given the role of a freelance designer, and they had to manage tasks and relationships with clients and colleagues within a communication platform complete with emails, instant messages, cloud drive files, and so forth. Problems they had to confront included dealing with scheduling conflicts, prioritizing client demands, and deciding how to use (or not use) their time.

The evidence revealed several compelling findings.

First, all three skills mattered equally to overall time management performance. Therefore, only improving one's scheduling and planning (for example, arrangement skills) ignores two-thirds of the competence needed to effectively manage time. This might explain why it's so disappointing to try a new tool and then feel like we've never really moved the needle toward being great overall time managers.

Second, people struggled the most with awareness and adaptation skills, where assessment scores were on average 24% lower than for arrangement skills. This evidence suggests that awareness and adaptation are not only rarer skills but more difficult to develop naturally without direct interventions. In addition, awareness skills were the primary driver of how well people avoided procrastination, and adaptation skills were the primary driver of how well they prioritized activities.

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Third, the results ran counter to popular admonitions of either the virtues or the detriments of multitasking. A survey after the simulation asked how respondents felt about multitasking. The evidence revealed that their preferences for multitasking (what academics call “polychronicity”) were actually unrelated to time management skills. How well or poorly people managed their time had nothing to do with their preferences to multitask. Thus, the extensive attention so often given to multitasking by those offering time management tricks is unlikely to yield any real success.

Fourth, the evidence was crystal clear that people are not at all accurate in self-evaluating their time management proficiency. For example, less than 1% of people’s self-ratings overlapped with their objective skill scores. Moreover, self-ratings accounted for

only about 2% of differences in actual time management skills. These results echo previous work on people's lack of accurate self-awareness regarding their competencies and how this impedes change and leadership development.

How to Improve Your Time Management Skills

So how might people best prepare themselves to become better time managers? Doing so first requires figuring out *where* to focus. Taking a deeper dive into your current skill levels is the only genuine way to answer this question. There are three steps you can take to prime your improvement efforts.

Build accurate self-awareness of your time management skills.

This can be accomplished by using objective assessments like a microsimulation, seeking feedback from others like one's peers or boss, or establishing a baseline of behaviors against which to gauge improvements.

Recognize that preferences matter, but not how you think. Self-awareness of one's preferences or personality related to time management, such as multitasking or being proactive, can deepen an understanding of where you might struggle as your change efforts go against existing habits. But remember that skills, not personality, are the most malleable personal attributes and provide the greatest ROI on self-improvement efforts.

Identify and prioritize the skill you need to improve. Although this sounds obvious, the key point here is to avoid self-improvement that is an "inch deep, but a mile wide," where

efforts are spread too thin across too many needs. It is best to prioritize your skill development, focusing on the most pressing skill need first and then moving on to the next.



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There are a number of evidence-based tactics for enhancing time management skills. Below are some examples. Again, it is critical to understand that tactics are for developing your underlying skills, which will ultimately improve your time management. Simply implementing these tactics is not the end goal.

Developing awareness skills. Effectiveness is different from efficiency, with effectiveness being about doing things well and efficiency being about doing things fast. Both are critical. Pursuing efficiency for its own sake is counterproductive.

- **Find your peak performance time.** Break your typical day into three to four time slots and, over the course of a week, rank-order these slots from your most to least productive (most productive is peak performance).

- **Treat your time like it's money.** Create a time budget that details how you spend your hours during a typical week. Categorize time into fixed time (“must dos”) and discretionary time (“want to dos”).
- **Try timing up.** Record how long you've spent on tasks with very clear deadlines, rather than how much time you have left.
- **Evaluate how realistically you assess time.** After finishing a project, evaluate how long you thought it would take and how long it actually took.
- **Take a “future time perspective.”** Think about how the tasks you are doing right now will help or hurt you in the future (for example, how do today's project tasks impact next week's tasks?).
- **Avoid “sunk cost fallacy.”** When you think you might be spending too much time on an activity, step back and evaluate its importance (for example, How valuable is the outcome? Who will be affected if it's finished or not finished? And so forth.)

Developing arrangement skills. Unfamiliar but important tasks often have steeper learning curves and more unpredictable time requirements. Developing arrangement skills is not about organizing your work to better control your life — it's about taking

control of your life, then structuring your work around it.

- **Prioritize activities and obligations.** It's not enough to simply list out your tasks, to-do lists, and meetings.
- **Avoid the “mere urgency effect.”** Urgency and importance are related but distinct concepts: Urgent tasks require immediate action, whereas important tasks have more significant and long-term consequences. Tasks that are *both* urgent and important should be done first.
- **Use a calendar app.** Record due dates for tasks and appointments — and do this immediately when they are planned or requested. Label or color-code entries (for example, work, school, life, etc.).
- **Schedule protected time.** Make calendar appointments with yourself to ensure uninterrupted time to dedicate to your most important projects.
- **Reduce underestimation errors.** When forming plans, ask a neutral party for feedback about your forecasted time requirements.
- **Try half-sized goals.** When struggling to attain a goal that seems to be too challenging, set a less-difficult version of the goal.

Developing adaptation skills. These skills are tested and developed in situations that naturally involve high pressure and sometimes even crisis — the challenge is to handle such situations without getting upset, anxious, or distracted.

- **Try “habit stacking.”** Tie your time management behaviors to habits you already exhibit (for example, track daily progress every evening when you sit down for dinner).
- **Use short bursts of effort.** When tasks seem overwhelming, put forth maximum effort for 15- to 30-minute intervals to help avoid procrastination.
- **Experiment with time-tracker or checklist apps.** Remember, benefit must exceed cost when using these tools. Gains should outweigh the time spent using the app.
- **Don’t be a “reminder miser.”** Reminders should have detailed explanations or descriptions, not one or two words that fail to describe the task’s importance, expected quality, and so forth.
- **Create contingency plans.** Think about best-case/worst-case scenarios when you outline possible outcomes of your plans.
- **Seek to reduce time wasters.** Create do-not-disturb time slots and block social media sites during critical work time.

In this season of personal introspection, why does improving time management remain such a persistent, perennial goal for so many of us? The irony is that we need to become better time managers of our own efforts to improve time management — to prioritize our developmental efforts. This path begins with turning away from the alluring quick fixes and instead toward assessing and building our underlying time management skills before another New Year's resolution reaches its dissolution.

Erich C. Dierdorff is a professor of management and entrepreneurship at the Richard H. Driehaus College of Business at DePaul University and is currently an associate editor at *Personnel Psychology*.

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