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# How Did It Get So Late So Soon?

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*“How did it get so late so soon? It’s night before it’s afternoon. December is here before it’s June. My goodness how the time has flown.” (Dr. Seuss)*

Recently I went to visit my grandmother, who would soon celebrate her 98th birthday. As you can imagine, she is at a point in life where her conversations fade in and out of lucidity. Commenting on her upcoming birthday, I said, “Ninety-eight! Can you believe it?” She looked at me, paused, and in a moment of complete clarity, responded, “Frankly ... no.” We both laughed, but as I was driving home our conversation resonated in my mind and got me thinking more about the passage of time.

This inspired me to write about how we can make the most of our time, both professionally and personally, through prioritizing and simplifying.

## PRIORITIZE

*“The key is not to prioritize what’s on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities.”*

—Author, speaker and businessman Steven Covey

We all have competing priorities, and it is challenging to balance them all. Individuals should typically try to balance only two to three priorities at any one time. For most of us, work and family comprise two priorities and, of course, there are the myriad sub-priorities under each of these! The third priority may be keeping up with a hobby, working out, or perhaps volunteering in the community. Below are three tactics that may help with priority management both at work and at home.

1. *Pretend you have less time than you actually have.* Approach each day with the attitude, “If I only had two hours to work today, what would I get done?” This will force you to focus in on what truly matters. Also, it puts you in a better position to accomplish the work tasks you have identified, as you start your day tackling those specific priority items. Even if they end up taking longer than you expect, or if you get

sidetracked with an unexpected last-minute request, you are still more likely to be able to cross them off your list.

2. *Ask for help.* Help can come in various forms—for example, via delegation or input from others. Consider if it makes sense to delegate any of your tasks to others in your department or across disciplines. If you are struggling to determine which of your top priorities is actually the highest, ask your manager to discern which is most timely or hold a team meeting to coordinate across your department.
3. *Use technology.* Technology has come so far in recent years, with more tools available to help with time maximization, prioritization and overall time management. It may be worthwhile to invest time in researching which technology could work best for you. Perhaps upgrading your operating system, updating or getting access to a particular computer program, or making use of voice recognition technology will help you save on time. Employing calendar reminders, downloading specific apps (e.g., RescueTime, Remember the Milk), and syncing up your various devices are essential to keeping on task. With respect to the volumes of email received, you can create filters to automatically direct email to appropriate folders or set up distribution lists or autoforward rules for regular emails that you redistribute to co-workers.

## SIMPLIFY

*“Our life is frittered away by detail ... simplify, simplify.”* —Author, poet, philosopher Henry David Thoreau

In 1990, Elaine St. James was a real estate investor and also had a successful seminar business on real estate investing. She was working 10-12 hours a day, and despite her professional success, she was not happy. She considered her beautiful but sprawling home to be burdensome, due to the many hours of upkeep and her husband’s

considerable commute to and from work each day.

St. James attended a retreat and subsequently began to develop a different perspective on life. She began to focus in on what really mattered to her, vowed to work one hour less a day, and began a process to declutter her life. Slowly but surely, after a number of small steps, St. James got to a point where she was able to downsize her home and relocate closer to her husband's office. She calculates that she created an extra 30 hours per week of time and concluded, "It's hard to put a price tag on that much time." St. James now practices her passion—simplicity—and is the author of books such as *Simplify Your Life: 100 Ways to Slow Down and Enjoy the Things That Really Matter*<sup>1</sup> and its sequels.

St. James initiated her path to simplifying via decluttering. While perhaps easier said than done, decluttering involves identifying what is essential to you and eliminating the unnecessary.

At work:

- Take the time out to declutter your desk as well as your schedule. Working off of a clean, organized desk and computer desktop is mentally uplifting and motivating as well as a timesaver.
- Declutter your work calendar. You may not need to attend every single meeting you are invited to, nor return every phone call or email instantaneously.
- Learn how to just say "no"—to extra meetings or requests—without compromising your professional reputation.
- Block off time on your calendar dedicated to your work. So many of us spend the bulk of our days in meetings that it leaves little time to get actual work done.

In the words of St. James, "There are often many things we feel we should do that, in fact, we don't really have to do. Getting to the point where we can tell the difference is a major milestone in the simplification process."

The same decluttering approach works for your home. For example, start with cleaning out your

closets—one rule of thumb is that items you have not worn in more than a year can be donated. Then, designate a specific outfit or two as your "go-to" attire for the days you unexpectedly need to change because toothpaste somehow found itself smeared all over the front of your shirt or the dog affectionately jumped up and planted his muddy paws on your pants. Having a readily available costume change will simplify the morning routine, be a time-saver, and minimize the stress of getting out the door on time.

By employing the above tools to prioritize and simplify, you will reclaim time. While what you end up doing with your newfound time is up to you, remember that grandmothers always appreciate an unexpected visit. ●

#### ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> St. James, Elaine, *Simplify Your Life, 100 Ways to Slow Down and Enjoy the Things that Really Matter*, MJF Books, March 19, 2004.

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