



Reprinted from *Future of Work Agenda*
April 2009

Notes from the Field: Seven Ways to Manage Yourself

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Like all professionals you are struggling to cope with today's massive workload. You are being asked to provide increased and more diversified service to either or both internal and external customers with less staff. How can you accomplish the seemingly impossible? How can you and your team (if any, these days) focus on service and quality when you're overwhelmed with all there is to do?

The answer: by learning Information Age survival skills to manage your workload. Too often companies that trim staff fail to focus on the need to improve the work habits and work systems of the remaining personnel; yet doing so improves productivity and lowers stress.

Cultivate effectiveness. The following are several skills you and your staff *must* have to achieve the effectiveness that will allow you to truly improve productivity and sustain superior customer service.

1. **Screen non-essential information.** Learn to identify information that you don't need and eliminate it at the source. Remove yourself from all distribution lists that stuff your mailbox with useless catalogs, newsletters, and data that have no value to you. Allow only those items which you need to do your job or address issues of high importance to you to get through your filters. Open your mail, both "e" and "snail," only when you are ready to deal with it and make your "delete" key and trash bin your best friends. If you learn to ruthlessly screen/filter low-value information, you will find that the volume of data you work with will dramatically decrease.
2. **Don't procrastinate.** When you put off tasks, you only build stress and make your workload seem heavier than it really is. If you tackle your worst jobs first and work on those tasks/projects a little at a time, you'll find that they're not as unmanageable as you imagined. Deal with incoming paper and electronic information (e.g., emails) as soon as you come across them. Don't set them down or close them without adding value to them, or the result will be a waste of precious time. Finally, you'll find that doing it now will keep both of your "in" boxes emptier and keep you from losing important documents.
3. **Reduce interruptions.** Try batching communications with those people you work with most frequently to remove annoying and distracting interruptions. Keep a file, either paper or electronic, for each person containing documents you need to discuss, or your notes on subjects you need to ask about. Meet with these people frequently, on a scheduled basis, if necessary, and answer all your questions at once instead of dealing with five or ten interruptions. If you establish this practice with all your co-workers, you could perhaps eliminate 50% of the

interruptions in your day. You'll find that by practicing this batching technique that you will improve your concentration and increase your knowledge and work output — to say nothing about improving relations with your colleagues.

4. **Get your papers organized.** It's important to be able to find everything you need to do your work all the time. The average worker in the United States is spending 1.6 hours per week looking for information they cannot find. Stop wasting time looking for lost documents on your desk or office floor. Define a place for everything that comes into your office by grouping related papers, labeling them, and containing them. Organize materials on an as-used basis.

- Place frequently used files and materials where they can be reached without getting up from your chair.
- Place files that are used occasionally (that is, once or twice a month) in a nearby filing cabinet.
- Archive files that are used no more than once a year.
- Keep your papers organized; work with only one file or project at a time. This will make it easier for you to concentrate and also keep papers from becoming misplaced or misfiled.

5. **Establish good email and electronic document storage habits and organizational systems.** Handle your electronic information as ruthlessly and efficiently as you handle your paper documents. Act on and delete as many messages as possible as soon as you read them. When email messages must be saved, use the hierarchal subject file procedure that migrates from macro to micro subject naming conventions. Under no circumstances should you file documents by "type," such as Word, PowerPoint, or Excel. You may try search engines but that process has often been found to be more time-consuming than an effective organizational system.

6. **Use your calendar proactively.** This is perhaps the most important step toward gaining control of your workload. You schedule meetings with others all the time, but you probably don't do the same for your own work.

Schedule appointments with yourself, on your electronic calendar, with reminders set, to most effectively concentrate on your priority projects. Doing so will allow you to focus on your goals and improve your concentration.

7. **Develop an effective Task/To Do follow-up system for yourself.** Keeping a follow-up system for yourself electronically is the best way to remind yourself of important deadlines and tasks to help you keep your goals in sight and make big projects more manageable. Make sure that you use the power of electronics and that your reminders come to you automatically when you want them.

What happens when you implement all these ideas? If you have strong work methods, you will provide an excellent role model for your staff. You'll also find that communication turn-around time will improve significantly. Best of all, customer service can be greatly improved, and you will have more energy for your projects.

Bary C. Sherman is CEO of PEP Productivity Solutions, Inc. Founded in 1990, The firm is a training and consulting organization focused on helping people do more of the right work with less stress from wherever they are. You can [send Barry an email](#) if you want to contact him directly, or visit the firm's website at www.PEPproductivitysolutions.com.

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