



Time Management

It's critically important for news managers to be good *time* managers so they can not only perform the daily duties required of any boss but also deal with relationships and develop and communicate their vision for the newsroom.

Even though good time management skills are essential to a news director's success, many often feel swamped by everything they must accomplish in a day. "I need to know how to keep control over that stack of papers dumped on my desk," said one news director at an RTNDF brainstorming meeting, as well as "how to make sure each staffer gets enough time from me."

Paperwork, people, projects, problems — it's no wonder that many news managers feel overwhelmed. They may need help in becoming more organized so they can find what they're looking for quickly and avoid feeling out of control. They also may need to break some bad habits that cause them to fritter away the time they desperately need to get the job done.

Take Inventory

To track where the time goes, it may be helpful to take inventory of the following:

- **Tasks** Responding to email, memo writing, redoing routine work
- **People** Taking phone calls, interruptions, repeated conversations
- **Meetings** Long discussions where little is accomplished
- **Information** Looking for stuff you can't find quickly

One reason managers feel overwhelmed by the demands on their time, experts say, is because they're always fighting fires. "They assume that the business will come to a crashing halt without them," writes Sumantra Ghoshal and Heike Bruch in the *Harvard Business Review* (March 2004). "[They] allow real or imagined day-to-day work demands to subsume their own judgment."

It takes discipline to become a better time manager. Being busy all the time is a habit, born out of a desire to be indispensable. Breaking that habit can save you both time and frustration — and help you become a better leader in the newsroom.

ORGANIZE YOURSELF
Use a planner
Eliminate clutter
Set priorities
Schedule time

or next to your desk. Put everything else away. Otherwise, it's the opposite of "out-of-sight, out-of-mind." If you can see it, it will be on your mind, even if there's no good reason. By keeping only immediate priorities in view, you can focus on them and get them done.

Get Organization Down to a System

Most people benefit from using an organizer or planner. It can be a date book, a personal data assistant like a Palm Pilot, or a computer program like Microsoft Outlook. Choose whatever system works for you, but make sure it's portable and easy to update. One advantage of an electronic system is that you can back it up. Just be sure you do, and often, because losing an organizer is tantamount to losing your brain.

Organizers have three basic components: contacts, calendar and tasks. Make time every day to add contact information. Enter meeting dates and times as soon as you know them. Write down your daily "to do" lists. Carry the organizer with you so you can add to your task list whenever you think of something that needs to be done. Use the system not just for work but also for the rest of your life —home, family and community. As a busy news director, the only way to be sure you *have* a life may be to schedule it.

If you use an electronic system, learn all of its capabilities. Know how to use email folders; how to set rules to direct incoming messages to the appropriate folders; and how to search for messages, contacts and other information. Kevin Benz, news director at News 8 Austin, created a folder just for messages from his general manager so he can easily tell whether anything new has come in from the boss without scrolling through his entire in-box.

Studies have shown that the person who works with a messy desk spends, on average, one and a half hours per day looking for things or being distracted by the things in view. Keep working files in plain view—in a standing file on

Prioritize

"When news directors say they don't have time, it's often because they don't have a clear focus on priorities," says Jay Elggren, a senior consultant for the consulting firm FranklinCovey, who worked with managers at KLAS-TV in Las Vegas to prepare for an RTNDF newsroom time management workshop. "Getting a handle on priorities is the key to successful time management" he says. To set priorities, FranklinCovey advocates sorting each task into one of four quadrants:

Urgent Important	Not Urgent Important
Urgent Not Important	Not Urgent Not Important

Author Stephen Covey says that most people spend far too much time on urgent tasks that are not important and neglect important tasks that are not urgent. By setting priorities, a busy manager can budget time for strategic thinking and planning—important tasks that are not driven by deadlines.

Consultant and writer Ken Blanchard uses slightly different quadrants:

Have to do Want to do	Don't have to do Want to do
Have to do Don't want to do	Don't have to do Don't want to do



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In both models, the lower-left quadrant seems to be the biggest problem area. Deadline-driven news managers tend to focus on what is most urgent (what they have to do) at the expense of what they really need or want to do (like working on next year's budget) that may be less urgent. Setting priorities helps you make time for those important but less urgent tasks.

Elggren's formula for success is simple: Think it. Write it. See it. Whenever you think of something that needs to be done, write it down, and do it in such a way that you can see the timeline for accomplishing the task. Doing tasks "as they come up" may keep you from finishing more important projects first. Scott Libin of The Poynter Institute, former news director at KSTP-TV in St. Paul, MN, says that one of the most important things he ever learned was Covey's notion of "first things first." "Little things will fill up your day, leaving big things undone," he says. "Decide what really matters and start there."

Angie Kucharski, station manager and vice president of news at KCNC-TV in Denver, uses both a planner and a big desk calendar that she carries around the building. "I may look strange," she says, "but it really helps me keep a focus on plans and events." Kucharski also color-codes tasks in her planner and her project folders so she can see priorities at a glance.

Paul Dughi, general manager of KNDO-TV in Yakima, WA, and KNDU-TV in Kennewick, WA, is an inveterate list-maker. "I start the day by printing my calendar and task list. Then I review the list and cross off those I won't deal with today," Dughi says. That makes the daily list

manageable, and the remaining tasks just carry forward in his computer planner. "It feels great when I can mark a task as done."

The Four D's

When issues arise during the day—and they will—the "Four D's" approach can help:

- Do it
- Dump it
- Divert it
- Delegate it

If a task will take only a couple of minutes, just do it, says Eric Hulnick, managing editor at KLAS-TV in Las Vegas. Hulnick fine-tuned his time management skills by meeting with a FranklinCovey consultant to prepare for an RTNDF workshop. One lesson he learned was how to deal with the email that filled his in-box. "I could never get through the whole list," says Hulnick. Even though he sorted his messages into subfolders, "to do" items always remained in the in-box. "I created a new folder and called it 'to be done.' Before I do today's email, I go back and deal with everything from yesterday." Hulnick says his goal is to have an empty in-box when he leaves work.

Dughi not only dumps email from his in-box during the day, he does it again from home both at night and before going in to work. "I get rid of the junk and I know what the crises are so I can think about them on the way in," he says. "It keeps me from feeling overwhelmed at the start of the day."

Tasks that will take longer should be diverted from the daily list to a time when you will commit to getting the work done. "Scheduled time drives out unscheduled time," says Paul Lewis,



"What causes me the most personal stress with my job in the newsroom is the amount of time I spend away from my children and wife. I am terribly troubled by that . . . especially where my children are concerned."

NEWS DIRECTOR AT RTNDF BRAINSTORMING SESSION

news director at WTIC-TV in Hartford, CT. To make sure something actually happens, he says, you have to put it on your calendar.

One of the hardest time management lessons for some news directors to learn is to stop doing everything themselves and to delegate tasks to others. If you tend to be a perfectionist, it's hard let someone else do a job you think you could do better. Part of being a leader, however, is letting the staff do what they've been hired to do. As Dughi puts it, "Find good people and trust them."

Guard Your Time

News directors also need to guard their own time so they can focus on big projects like the budget. People who keep an open-door policy may find themselves overwhelmed by "drive-by" conversations—those "knock, knock, got a minute?" requests that can turn into hour-long discussions. Lane Michaelsen at WTSP-TV in Tampa, FL, had to train his staff to work within his schedule. "When people ask me if I have a minute, I'll say, no, I have five," he says. "It became a joke. Now people ask for 2 1/2 minutes or 10."

Benz of News 8 Austin also keeps his door open unless he's involved in a major project. In that case, he lets others know why the door is closed. "I want the other news managers to know when I'm working on the budget or interviewing a potential hire, so they won't interrupt," he says.

Establishing patterns can protect your time as well. Set aside a specific time of day for planning or other things you have to do and stick to it. Let your staff know your new schedule, and don't let people divert you unless it's a crisis. Some people like to set a block of time for certain tasks. Stay focused on that task and only that task. If you fear getting so involved that you forget to come up for air, set an alarm to remind you to put the task aside after a set period of time.

Checking email every time the "new mail" sounder goes off is a sure way to get interrupted

STOP PROCRASTINATING

Plan tasks for peak time

Break the work down

Set interim deadlines

Reward yourself

dozens of times a day. Consider turning the sounder off if you're trying to get a project done, and check and respond to email on your own schedule. To regain control over the email monster, one news director decreed that email could be used only for group messages, not one-to-one communication.

Word is that it cut the newsroom's email traffic by 30 percent.

Hulnick sometimes sets an out-of-office message on his email for a day or a few hours, even when he's in, if he's working on a task that requires total concentration. He doesn't do the same with voice mail, however. He always picks up the phone when it rings. "I live in fear of missing a story," he says. "But I don't always talk right then. I may take a number and call back." Scheduling a time to talk can keep phone tag to a minimum.

Learn to Plan

Planning is not a skill that comes naturally to people who live by daily deadlines. "We're good at crisis management. We don't plan," says Susana Schuler, vice president and corporate news director of Nexstar Broadcasting Group. "Build time for preparation into your schedule."

Everyone has a time of day when they're sharpest. Plan to tackle the most demanding tasks when you are fresh and focused. Having a plan can help control procrastination—the tendency to put off difficult or disliked tasks.

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time, the adage goes. Get an early start on long-term projects and they'll seem less overwhelming. Hulnick begins work on the budget process six months before the final budget is due. He sets aside an hour or so every so often to make slow but steady progress on the budget. He keeps a schedule for getting evaluations done, too, with interim deadlines for getting materials from others. "It takes the same amount of time to do if you do it early," he says.



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“The fewer things you do on deadline, the better you’re going to feel.”

Dughi of KNDU-TV and KNDO-TV also believes that planning has helped him find a balance between life and work. “Some days I have to force myself to leave,” he says. “But I now take time for a son’s soccer game because I know I’ll be answering viewer emails at 11 at night.”

Some people find that planning a reward for a job well done adds to the satisfaction of crossing an item off the daily task list. Treat yourself to a little something, and then get back to work.

Effective Meetings

Meetings are an inevitable fact of life in every newsroom, and they’re sometimes painful. Libin of The Poynter Institute says it’s tough to strike the right balance between helping people feel heard and managing the clock. A meeting that is too open can run on seemingly forever. But failing to let people finish their thoughts can quash their desire to contribute ideas the next time. NPR managing editor Bill Marimow has three basic meeting rules: Be polite, be efficient, and get done on time, no matter what. To stay on track, he always has an agenda and sticks to it.

Dughi’s meeting rules are similar: Don’t meet without a purpose and a stated goal. He’s been known to run a stopwatch during meetings, limiting department heads’ comments to

BETTER MEETINGS

Start on time

Have an agenda

Avoid tangents

Focus on decisions

Spell out next steps

End on time

just two minutes and saving the rest of the time for group brainstorming. At one station, he recalls, the news director shortened the daily editorial meetings by holding them standing up around the assignment desk.

Pre-meeting assignments are another way to keep the meeting focused. Instead of starting with the assignment manager’s

recitation of the daybook, Dughi suggests giving others a role to report on the news of the day based on what they’ve seen in newspapers, on websites, or heard on morning talk radio.

Former news director Tom Dolan, now president of Dolan Media Management, says producing the meeting like a newscast can help keep it from losing focus. Begin with the best potential stories instead of a list of events by timeline, he suggests. Among other things, reviewing the big stories first will help provide an early game plan for promotions.

Editorial meetings can get bogged down in details such as which newscast will get which stories. In this case, WHBQ-TV’s Ken Jobe suggests holding a separate meeting among the producers for newscast story selection. “There’s no need for reporters to know at 10 a.m. that they’re a package at 5,” he says. Dughi suggests pre-assigning the obvious stories of the day so reporters and photographers can get on their way instead of being stuck in the newsroom until the meeting ends. However you do it, make sure everyone is clear about what they need to do next before the meeting concludes.



“Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time, for that’s the stuff life is made of.”

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN