

Make the Most of Your Minutes

Time-Management Tips for Stressed-Out Professionals

Don't be ruled by the clock at work or at home. Time management expert Jackie Gaines shares tips to help you make the most of your time and increase your productivity — without losing your mind in the process!

Ask any working professional what they could use more of, and you'll probably keep getting the same answer. *Time*. In the frantic pace of the digital age, time is something everyone seems to be short on now. (It's almost laughable that we once thought technology would help create more leisure time!) But according to author, speaker, and time management expert Jackie Gaines, if workers could figure out how to make the most of their waking moments, they could be far more productive and happy regardless of their time constraints.

"Success at work and in life often comes down to one thing: developing better time management skills," says Gaines, author of *Wait a Hot Minute! How to Manage Your Life with the Minutes You Have* (Fire Starter Publishing, 2016, ISBN: 978-1-6221805-4-7, \$28.00). "Our minutes have become *hot* since time is so scarce these days, and we toss them away without a second thought. The truth is, we are always going to have obligations, deadlines, and responsibilities, but if you learn how to handle your hot minutes, you can work with the clock instead of against it."

Gaines offers a number of recommendations for achieving a healthier and happier work-life balance.

❖ **Prioritize sleep so you can function when you're awake.** "If you do nothing else [on this list], prioritize your sleep needs," insists Gaines. "You will be more productive and feel more ambitious when you get the rest your body requires."

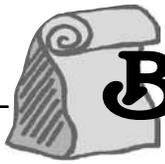
Gaines suggests scheduling sleep like any other daily activity on your to-do list. Pencil in a stopping point in your day and stick to it without fail. Then wind down with a book or another relaxing bedtime ritual to help you drift off to sleep.

❖ **Establish what the "workday" means to you and your boss.** It's common for employers to call or e-mail you after hours, but it is up to you to decide whether or not you're available after hours. If you choose to be off-duty on nights and weekends, that is your choice (and your right!). Just make sure you respectfully address your "workday" limits to your boss upfront, so everyone is clear on the boundaries.

❖ **Don't stay on your email all day.** Constantly checking your inbox is distracting and slows you down. Designate a few times in your workday to check email so that you remain in control of your schedule and aren't being reactive to new messages as they appear.

❖ **Choose human connection over technology.** Although technology has improved our lives, it comes with its own set of problems. Emails and texts are convenient, but they create room for





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confusion and miscommunication. Whenever possible, talk in person in order to get your message across clearly.

❖ **Learn to say no and mean it.** It's okay to turn down invitations, cancel plans, or disconnect from the outside world every now and then. Saying no is a skill that will benefit you throughout life, so allow yourself to politely start bowing out of unnecessary commitments right now.

❖ **Set achievable goals each day.** "Even the most thoughtfully constructed to-do list will be useless if it is too ambitious," insists Gaines. "What's the point of writing down unachievable tasks? We're not superheroes and shouldn't try to be. Make your daily goals small enough that you can actually get them done. Remember that you can always do more if you have the time."

❖ **Give multi-tasking the ax.** According to Gaines, multi-tasking is ineffective and counter-productive. "People work best when they give focused attention to the task at hand," she says. "So aim to work on only one project at a time and give yourself permission to forget about other priorities until you are done."

❖ **Listen up!** Active listening consists of being present and engaged when communicating with another person, but it's not as easy as it sounds. It's very common to forget to listen after you speak your thoughts in a conversation, and you often lose important info as a result.

When you are talking with a co-worker, manager, or anyone else, be sure that you turn off that pesky inner monologue and focus when it is the other person's turn to speak.

❖ **Don't be a sheep.** While maintaining the status quo is often a good thing (especially at work), there may come a time when it is advisable to stop following the herd and innovate in the name of productivity. If you can envision a way to work smarter and better, you may just create new best practices for your place of work that will save time and increase quality.

❖ **Stop shuffling papers.** Most of us waste a lot of time shuffling papers from one pile to another. Chances are that your desk is full of paper you don't know what to do with. Gaines says to stop this maddening cycle by touching each sheet of paper just once and figure out the appropriate action.

Either put it in a to-do pile so you can deal with it immediately, a file (for documents you must keep), or the trash. This keeps the papers moving and keeps *you* sane!

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❖ **Step away from the Internet.** Surfing the web is a huge time waster for most people. An innocent little break often turns into an hour (or more) of wasted time that you can't get back — especially when you should be working or headed to bed to get some rest.

Gaines advises shutting off access to the Internet at a certain time each day to avoid getting lost in cyberspace. She also recommends breaks from recreational Internet use — about once a month — to focus on other aspects of your life that may need attention.

❖ **Have some fun along the way.** It's important to remember that stressed-out people aren't all that productive. You have to relax and



schedule “recharge time” into your life to avoid burnout — especially if you have an intense work environment.

Be sure to build in time for fun on the weekends and on some evenings but try to make work fun, too. If appropriate at your office, find ways to infuse a little lighthearted play into your workday.

❖ **Practice breathing and mindfulness.**

Imagine how productive you could be if you could focus, calm all anxious thoughts, and truly be present. You can find out by practicing mindfulness. (**Editor’s note:** Mindfulness was covered in detail in the September 2016 *Brown Bagger*.)

“Breathing is a tool for achieving a relaxed, clear state of mind,” asserts Gaines. “There are

multiple methods for achieving this state, including tai chi, meditation, yoga, or simple breathing exercises. Find one that resonates for you and practice it daily.”

❖ **Stop owning other people’s stuff.** How often do you hear yourself saying, “Never mind, I’ll do it myself”? asks Gaines. Probably more often than you’d like, and this habit takes up your precious minutes in no time.

The solution, according to Gaines, is to hold others accountable for their responsibilities. This includes your children, your spouse, and your colleagues. Let “never mind...” be the exception instead of the rule.

❖ **Let go and delegate.** Learn to know when to let someone else handle a task. It can be hard to relinquish control, but it is also necessary to delegate, especially if you’re in a leadership position.

Remember that delegating is not admitting you can’t handle your responsibilities — not at all. Rather, it’s about maximizing the potential of your entire workforce.

Summary

“Remember that you have two choices when trying to manage your time,” concludes Gaines. “You can either let your priorities and obligations run your life, or you can take charge of your minutes and let them work for you to achieve your goals in a timely manner. While you won’t ever succeed long term by racing the clock, you can drop your bad habits, improve ineffective practices, and kick stress to the curb so that your whole life improves.”

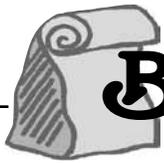
Jackie Gaines is a senior executive with more than 38 years’ experience in leadership and accomplishments with major health systems and organizations. She lectures all over the country and has received numerous awards along the way. She has written four books: “Wait a Hot Minute! How to Manage Your Life with the Minutes You Have,” “Believing You Can Fly,” “The Yellow Suit: A Guide for Women in Leadership,” and “Destination Infinity: Reflections and Career Lessons from a Road Warrior.”

More Time Management Tips

❖ **Accept that there is never enough time for everything.** If you have too much to do, by definition, you will not have enough time for everything. If you’re trying to get A, B, C, and D done each day, when only A and B are realistic, you’re asking yourself for major stress issues. There’s nothing wrong with setting goals, but focus on A and B, and if the other items have to wait, they have to wait.

❖ **While there’s never enough time for everything, there’s always enough time for the important things.** There always seems to be time for the most important things in life: “*Necessity is the mother of invention.*” But you don’t have to wait until circumstances force you to attend to the most important things in your life. You can do it now. Identify the most important things you want to get done in your day. Place a high priority of those items and leave undone the less important things.

Source: *The Productivity Institute*, www.balancetime.com.



Answering the Dreaded 'Got a Minute?'



By Edward G. Brown

Got a minute? The fact is, unless you are a great rarity today, *no* you don't have a minute! Yet when almost anybody asks, "*Got a minute?*" you automatically answer, "*Sure, how can I help?*" How do you stop doing that? I offer the following suggestions.

❖ **Name the problem.** First, recognize it's not a minute, it's an *interruption*. A minute freely chosen and freely given is innocuous, but interruptions are thieving little intrusions. There's the interruption that throws you off task. There's loss of momentum due to the work stoppage. There's also the time wasted in reassembling your thoughts.

❖ **Recognize the cause.** Why do you say yes when inside you're thinking, "*God grant me patience, how will I get everything done?*" Because you're afraid – not shaking in your boots afraid, but you have fears. If it's your boss, you're afraid he or she will think you're not responsive to any needs but your own or you can't handle your workload. If it's a customer, you're afraid they'll take their business elsewhere. If it's your colleagues, you're afraid you won't sound like a team player.

❖ **Don't say "no."** The opposite of "yes" doesn't have to be "no." "*I would like to give you my full attention. May I let you know when I can do that?*" Some version of those words needs to be custom-tailored to every got-a-minute interrupter, or "Time Bandit" on your list. They let your interrupter know that his or her best interests aren't served any better than yours by this interruption. Most of all, they keep you from sounding like that selfish jerk you dread. Scripting your negotiation and rehearsing its delivery, tailored for each of your main "Time Bandits," will banish any remaining fear.

❖ **Make time a gift.** In this day and age, when it seems like *everyone* is distracted, it's no small thing to offer your would-be Time Bandit your full attention to his or her needs. When you say, "*I want to take care of that for you, and when I do, I want to be focused so that the outcome will have the quality both of us expect,*" the Time Bandit will not only be mollified about your current unavailability – he or she will be gratified, which is what you want. And you get to keep your "minute," too.

Edward G. Brown is the author of The Time Bandit Solution: Recovering Stolen Time You Never Knew You Had and co-founder of the Cohen Brown Management Group. For more information, visit, www.timebanditsolution.com.