

6 ways to help employees make the most of their workdays

So much to do and so little time ... what worker wouldn't like to "find" precious extra minutes? While a manager cannot magically pull time out of thin air, she can assist employees with making the most out of work hours.

Here's how:

1. Tracking

Start by tracking. Just as someone keeps a record of spending to see where her money goes, scrutinizing time usage provides insight.

"Install a time-tracking app like Toggl and track every single task you do throughout your day, from getting coffee to writing emails to working on a major project," says James Pollard, founder of TheAdvisorCoach.com. "The reason you want to do this is because it gives you a baseline and an accurate view of where your time is really going."

Watch for patterns of spending too many hours on low-value tasks. Workers also should pay attention to what's going on during their most alert times of the day. An early bird using peak morning hours on mundane work may benefit from moving it to later when energy wanes.

2. To-do lists

A to-do list keeps tasks organized and prioritized, but making one shouldn't be the first activity of the day. Rather, encourage employees to construct it at the end of the previous day when information is top of mind. Not only does this method save recall time, it allows jumping right into business upon arriving at the office.

When a worker seems particularly frazzled, go over the list together. The person really may have too much on his plate, and you can find ways to ease the situation through delegating or postponing certain items.

3. Do-not-disturb periods

Disruptions foil good intentions, so look for ways to stop them.

"As a manager, set time blocks on the calendar that are dedicated to focused work. This time block is intended for everyone on your team and can be used as an opportunity to have intentional, uninterrupted work time.

When everyone participates, that hour or two of time can make major headway in productivity," says Jared Weitz, CEO and founder of United Capital Source Inc.

Many employees feel that they concentrate better away from the office bustle. Consider offering remote options whenever possible for people who have proven they can turn in quality work and make deadlines. As an added bonus, skipping the commute opens up more time.

4. Limiting meetings

Ask workers what they feel usurps too much of their time and “meetings” likely will top the list. As a leader, think carefully before gathering people together. Questions to consider include:

- Is the meeting for updates or for actual problem-solving, brainstorming and collaboration? If the former, an email might suffice.
- Who really needs to be at the meeting? A one-hour meeting with five participants takes five hours away from the collective time your staff has for that day’s productivity.
- Can the meeting be arranged in such a way that some workers can leave after a certain point when issues no longer pertain to them?

5. Smarter email practices

A wonderful communication tool when used properly, email also has the potential to zap time. Instead of keeping it on in the background and jumping to check it anytime a new message arrives, encourage workers to set aside certain times of the day to deal with their inbox. (Let them know you’ll contact by phone or in-person if something critical arises.)

Also, agree as a staff on effective measures. A clear subject line helps the reader judge urgency. A policy on confirming receipt eliminates the sender needing to ask. Instead of defaulting to email, consider a quick conversation on issues that might require substantial back and forth or input from numerous people (even if that’s just trying to decide where to order pizza from on Friday).

6. Organizing

Finally, consider blocking out regular time for everyone on staff to devote to upkeep such as cleaning, restocking and filing (both physical and electronic). Such chores often get pushed to the side in favor of more “meaningful” activities. However, organization pays off in the long run, as anyone who has spent a half hour searching for paperwork that wasn’t in its proper location can attest.