RT, LLC Westlake Village, CA

Ten Logical Steps for reducing Wasted Time at Work & Traps to Avoid

These days, no one can afford to waste time at work. Thanks to widespread downsizing, workloads are piling up. Unfortunately, extra hours in the day are not.

Maximizing your time at work can mean the difference between leaving at a reasonable hour (i.e. holding onto your sanity) and staying late unnecessarily. You've got a life outside work. Don't you want to live it?

There are countless ways you waste time on the job. Sometimes, it's unavoidable. Other times, it can be overcome with a minor shift in your approach. Either way, the first step to addressing time wasters is to identify them.

Instant Messaging

While instant messaging *can* be a useful intra-office tool, its generally informal (and instant!) I/M can bet productivity's *worst* enemy. How many times has a discussion about

something work related quickly degenerated into a half-hour gossip session? And there's always someone with a lot less to do who will tempt you. If you can't disconnect completely, at least set your status to "Busy" for a good portion of the day. This will help deter frivolous chatter. If someone insists on bothering you with non-work related chit-chat, tell them (politely) that you are in the middle of something and ask if you can pick up the conversation another time (maybe during your lunch break?). Don't feel bad about it – no one will fault you for your silence if you've got work to do. If they do, you probably don't want to be chatting with them anyway.

Culprit #2: Over-Reliance on Email

We've all become addicted to email as a form of communication. It's convenient. It's also a great way to keep an electronic trail of your correspondence (helpful if you're ever challenged on a decision or occurrence). But a lot of time is wasted on back and forth emails that would be more easily resolved as a verbal conversation. Don't even get me started on the oh-so-common "reply-to-all" debacle.

The solution: If there's something that needs to be *discussed*, opt for a face-to-face conversation. Is the person you need to speak to on the other coast? Call them. And if you still want a written record, write up a quick email after the conversation outlining where things left off and send to all relevant parties. On the surface it seems like more steps, but it can mean the difference between an hour of work and a two-day back and forth email discussion.

Culprit #3: Meandering Meetings

"Meetings about meetings." You know the kind –- you get together for an hour and all you end up with is a list of what should be discussed in yet *another* meeting. Sure, meetings are an essential part of the workplace. But if run poorly, they can be a colossal waste of time.

The solution: Meetings should have a purpose; a set of tangible goals you want to accomplish. This should be realized by tackling a set agenda, which should be distributed to attendees before the meeting starts. Stay focused on the task at hand. If there are visual aides, have them set up and ready to go before the group enters the room. Finally, make sure you *really need* a meeting: if what you have to say can be just as easily shared in an email to the group, why get people up and away from their work?

Culprit #4: Short Gaps *Between* Meetings

Speaking of meetings, what about those 15-30 minute gaps between them? What do you ever really accomplish in that time? Usually, very little. Sure, it gives you a bit of time to decompress, but it also takes you in and out of meeting mode for no apparent reason. If you have several meetings a day, that limbo time can amount to a couple hours of waste.

The solution: Schedule your meetings back-to-back if you can; you'll knock them out more efficiently. The time in between is better clumped together at some point in the day so it can be used for productive endeavors.
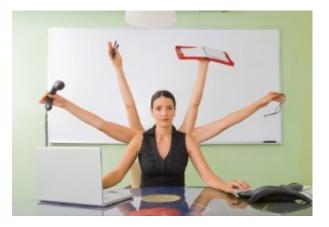
Culprit #5: Reacting to Interruptions

You're in the middle of something when you get an "urgent" email. You reply, only to be accosted by a phone call shortly after. You hang up, only to be faced with yet another email that demands your response. And on and on. Before you know it, it's 4pm and you still haven't made a dent in what you'd started first thing this morning. Sound familiar? The average employee works for just 11 minutes before being distracted. No wonder we're struggling to get things done.

The solution: It's unavoidable – the hyper-connected workplace will throw constant interruptions at you. The trick is to learn how to react to them without taking away from the task at hand. If you're busy, let your phone go to voicemail. Set aside three times a day where you manage your inbox. Of course, there are instances where an email demands an urgent reply. But more often than not, it doesn't. Know the difference

Culprit #6: Ineffective Multi-Tasking

Everyone likes to think they're great at multi-tasking. And maybe you are. But there's a limit to how many things you can do at once without taking away from the quality of your work and, ultimately, slowing down the process. Shifting between five different projects at once? You're probably wasting your time.

The solution: Prioritize and then break up your day accordingly. It's the key to successfully completing any project. Write down everything you hope to achieve and assign a set time to do so based on importance. Don't move on to the next task until you've really completed the previous one. Not only will you do a better job when you're focused, you'll also force yourself to finish something within the time allotted.

Culprit #7: Disorganized Workspace

Your primary workspace might be the top of your desk, your desktop computer or most likely, a combination of the two. Either way, if it's messy, you'll end up wasting a lot of time looking for things.

The solution: A scattered workspace makes for a scattered mind. De-clutter, and you'll manage your work more efficiently. Before you leave the office, clear your desk of cans, cups, food and paperwork. Use that file cabinet for something other than your box of saltines. Recycle paperwork you're never going to use. And don't add unnecessary items to your files – if you don't *need* to print something out, don't. Your company's shared drive is perfectly capable of storing documents tidily.

Culprit #8: Personal Communications

In the olden days, it was a little harder to get in the way with personal correspondence at work. Today, you can be constantly connected to friends and family without anyone really noticing. It's no longer a question of "Will I get caught?" so much as "How much time am I wasting?" If you're checking Facebook religiously, G-Chatting with friends or responding to personal emails the same way you do professional ones, the answer is: a   lot.

The solution: These days, employers understand that you may spend some time at work doing personal things (after all, you spend so much time there). Leave your personal correspondence for your lunch break. You can check your various accounts all at once, guilt-free. Be firm with your friends and family about

contacting you during work hours –- if they're not reaching out to you between nine and five, you'll be a lot less tempted to check in. You'll also have a better time overcoming Culprit #5.

Culprit #9: Web Surfing "Breaks"

You need to step away from what you're working on so you search for reviews of that movie you've been dying to see. Before you know it, you've got six tabs open in your browser. You're looking up concert tickets, shoes, today's news and the etymology of a words. No need to ask where your afternoon went. Your browser history says it all.

The solution: Know your limits. If you're tempted to look something up, wait until you've at least finished what you're working on. Preferably, leave this type of search for your lunch break or the end of the work day. It's just too easy to get sucked in when there's endless information at your fingertips.

Culprit #10: Cigarette/Coffee Breaks

Everyone needs to step away from their desk every once in a while. In fact, it's been said that taking breaks can often make you more productive. But if you're going out for a smoke or a coffee run every half hour (sounds extreme, but not totally unrealistic), you're reducing your productivity to the bare minimum by never really getting into the groove of your work.

The solution: It's a good idea to look away from your computer every fifteen minutes or so. But when it comes to breaks outside the office, reserve them to three a day: one mid-morning, one at lunch time, and one in the afternoon. Taking your full lunch break is key. If you're out of the office for a solid hour mid-day, you'll feel less of a need to step out for smaller breaks. And you'll be able to get into the work groove – and stay there! – more often.