

1,440 Minutes: Five Tips to Make the Most Out of Your Minutes

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There are 1,440 minutes a day. That is 1,440 minutes we spend in clinical shifts, doing charts, answering emails, and spending time with loved ones. How do you use your 1,440 minutes? As my family grows I've begun really thinking about time and how to best use it as the items on my "to-do" list also grows. As I began to educate myself on the art of time management, common themes began to emerge.

1. Avoid checking your email constantly. It lets other people dictate how you spend your time.

I fully understand the desire to check your email. The unpredictability of getting a new email is definitely addictive. What does that EM conference entail? When is our department's holiday party? But every time you check your email it is interrupting your focus and takes up time. What about all those junk emails and newsletters you somehow got subscribed to? Unsubscribe from all email lists that you don't use or want. Each one of these is taking up your time. Check your email three times a day and schedule it on your time. Take off the automatic email alerts (both on your phone and computer). Don't let others dictate how you spend your day. Be proactive with your time instead of reactive to your emails.



2. Have a MIT (most important task) each day.

What is your most important task to complete today? Essential to time management is prioritizing your "to-do" list. Tackle your MIT first thing in your day. So often we procrastinate and do the more enjoyable tasks first. Tackle it early when you're the most productive. Are you putting off writing that grant, preparing that lecture, writing that article? Figure out the most important task you need to focus on every day and make a plan for how to get it done.

3. Meetings, Meetings, Meetings.

I know a lot of my week is taken up with meetings. There are department meetings, hospital meetings, not to mention committee meetings. Meetings can be inefficient and can break up your day's focus. We also often make meetings for a standard 30 or 60 minutes. Who made that rule? Schedule meetings in increments of 5-10 minutes. Not all meetings need a standard 30 or 60 minutes so don't just fill up the slotted time, change it. If you need to have a meeting it should start and end on time. Be professional and considerate of other people's minutes. It should have an agenda and those in attendance should only be the people that have to be there.

Also be on the lookout for colleagues popping into your office saying, "Got a minute?" Remember it's important to stick to your daily schedule and every one of those "pop-ins" are using your valuable minutes.



4. Use the Pomodoro method to be more productive.

Studies have shown that most people are more productive in the beginning of the day with cognitive capacity declining as the day wears on. To be more productive it's important to build in mental breaks within your day. When you purposely take a break you can increase your productivity. The Pomodoro method is one way to do just that. You set a timer for 25 minutes (there are apps that do this, one is called Focus Keeper). In that 25 minutes you work on a task giving it 100% of your focus. Then once the timer goes off you take a five minute break (stretch your legs, meditate, etc.). You can try this out and see what timing works for you. I know it has made me more productive in finishing charting after a shift or reading through residency applications before interview days. You may benefit from a longer focus time or longer break time. The take home point is scheduling breaks while working on a task can actually make you more productive.

5. If a task takes less than five minutes to complete, complete it now instead of putting it off.

I think this tip comes in most handy when checking emails. So many times we see an email, read through it a bit, only to put off answering it until later. Well later we are going to have to re-familiarize ourselves with the content to respond to it, which wastes time. Use "touch it once" mentality. You can use this tactic when checking email, doing dishes (and not just leaving them in the sink), or calendaring an event your Chair just told you about. By getting the job done the first time, you waste less time going back to it later.

I hope these five tips help you make the most of your 1,440 minutes. I know by using these techniques I feel like I'm being the most productive I can be during my "work" time so I am more available during my family time. Remember time will always be your most valuable asset. ●