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**The 7 Deadliest Time Management Mistakes *that Business Owners, Executives, Salespeople and Professionals Frequently Make.***

**By Susan Martin**

The national SCORE Association is a nonprofit organization dedicated to entrepreneur education and the formation, growth and success of small business nationwide. SCORE Portland is one of 389 chapters throughout the United States, with over 11,000 volunteers nationwide. SCORE is a resource partner of the U.S. Small Business Administration.

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## **The 7 Deadliest Time Management Mistakes** *that Business Owners, Executives, Salespeople and Professionals Frequently Make.*

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### **Time management is critical to business success.**

If you run a business or work for yourself, you've got a lot on your plate. Your daily responsibilities may range from handling the details to making crucial, big picture decisions. The demands on your time and energy are enormous...so you need to be both creative and practical. You must switch between right brain and left brain activities quickly and easily. And because you live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, you have to filter out innumerable distractions that make it easy to get off track. In a world where phone calls, faxes, and emails constantly intrude, it's hard to concentrate. You'll have to remain calm and focused so you can run your business without driving yourself insane. But whether or not you learn and master this crucial skill can mean the difference between success or failure.

Take a look at the seven **deadliest** time management mistakes – which ones have you been guilty of?

- 1. Lacking commitment**
- 2. Holding on to old habits and beliefs**
- 3. Letting time wasters distract you**
- 4. Trying to do everything yourself (and thereby undervaluing your time)**
- 5. Underestimating how long things really take**
- 6. Procrastinating**
- 7. Giving up too soon**

### **1. LACKING COMMITMENT**

The first deadly time management mistake occurs when you fail to make a commitment to change the way you do things. Of course, there is always an adjustment period along with change. Transformation often doesn't happen as smoothly as we'd like. But it's almost impossible to manage your time if you're not fully committed to doing so. Take dieting or giving up smoking -- many people just give up too easily because they're not committed to the process.

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James ran an advertising agency in which his responsibilities ranged from managing clients to supervising the creative end. He was late for appointments and frantic about deadlines. He knew his time management was poor, but he was too busy to do anything about it. James tried to modify some of his work habits, but gave up when they didn't seem to bear fruit right away. Suddenly disaster struck. He had missed one deadline too many and one of his biggest customers cancelled his contract. It was a mistake that cost his company over \$75,000 that year. It took losing a client to make James realize that he had to do more than just try.

James called me just after this happened and we talked about the situation. I asked him if he was ready to make a commitment to changing the way he dealt with time. Still suffering from the loss of this client, he agreed. We laid out a plan, looked at different strategies, and came up with creative solutions. James experimented, he tweaked, and he finally got a sense of what worked for him and what didn't. It took some effort, and yes, some time. But it paid off. James was able to devise a way of managing his time that really worked for him.

Are you committed to improving your time management? If so, you're ready to read about the next deadly mistake...

## **2. HOLDING ONTO OLD HABITS AND BELIEFS**

If you refuse to let go of old habits and beliefs, it's almost impossible to master time management. You'll need to change habits that aren't working. And, you will have to believe that you CAN do it.

Let me tell you about a client of mine whose time management habits were holding her back:

Julia had always run her business and her time by the seat of her pants. She never wrote things down but instead kept everything in her head. Because she didn't have a schedule, each day was an adventure. That was fun for a while, but it just wasn't working anymore. Julia was too stubborn to admit it, and believed that she couldn't change. This belief, as well as the old habits, were preventing her from being able to control her time. As a result, she missed appointments, rarely completed her paperwork, and spent so much time dealing with emergencies that she was caught in the cycle of crisis management.

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When Julia called me, she was stressed out and frustrated, and felt she couldn't get anything done.

We looked at her work habits and discussed her thoughts about *how* she organized her time. She realized that she was sabotaging her own time management and causing herself a great deal of stress. Working by the seat of her pants and keeping everything in her head may have been her approach to work, but this style was no longer serving her needs. After we examined these issues, Julia agreed to try some new strategies. She started writing things down and she instituted regular meetings with her staff to check up on production and deadlines. As a result, she was able to manage projects and situations so that they didn't get out of control and she was able to catch up with things, resulting in fewer crises. Julia budgeted time in her schedule to do paperwork and other seemingly less urgent but still important tasks. She found that when she scheduled regular time to do it, it wasn't really that hard. As a result, Julia's time is very much under control and she's now getting things done on a consistent basis.

What old habits or patterns do you fall into that support a poor use of time? Identify them, and be aware of when you're doing them. You can learn to replace them with new ways of doing things that will help you use your time efficiently.

## **2. LETTING TIME WASTERS DISTRACT YOU**

One of the biggest mistakes you can make in your business – or in your life -- is to let time wasters creep in and steal it.

This is what was happening to Thomas, when he first came to see me last winter:

Thomas runs an interior design business. He has a small staff of six, and lots of demanding customers. His office phone and his cell phone were always ringing off the hook at the same time. He had emails, faxes, and packages arriving all day long. And sometimes his customers would just show up at his office to run their latest "great idea" by him. He would set out to accomplish certain things each day, but rarely got them done. Thomas found himself starting a million things that weren't being completed, customers were disappointed, and he was under a huge amount of stress.

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We looked at what he was spending his time on. It seemed that he was so busy with interruptions that he wasn't ever getting his own work done.

We focused on the things he needed to be doing with his time instead. And finally, Thomas made a commitment to set some boundaries and eliminated many of his distractions.

Now, Thomas is in control. He doesn't run to answer the phone every time it rings. He no longer checks his email a million times a day. Clients know that they need an appointment and no longer drop by, but they still feel valued. Best of all, his new methods resulted in his company running much more efficiently.

**Here are some tips to help you do this:**

- a. Identify and list common time wasters and interruptions.
- b. Post your list in a prominent spot to continually remind yourself about what you don't want to be doing.
- c. Set clear boundaries for yourself and your co-workers, clients and employees.

**4. TRYING TO DO EVERYTHING YOURSELF, (AND THEREFORE UNDERVALUING YOUR OWN TIME)**

Shelly was an independent engineer who managed an overwhelming number of jobs. She not only managed the engineering projects, but also took care of sales, customer relations, invoicing and collections, accounts payable, bookkeeping, and so on.

In the week leading up to a project deadline, she found herself in a predicament. She had forgotten that her tax extension was up that week, and spent most of her time doing the bookkeeping instead of concentrating on the more crucial work. After talking with her for a while, we both realized that she had spent much more time doing this than a qualified bookkeeper would have, and it cost her plenty more when she was fired from the project. She was spending her time doing things that she really didn't understand, didn't like, and wasn't good at. In other words, she was ignoring her strengths, undervaluing her own time – and worst of all, trying to do it all on her own.

We worked together to identify all of the functions that were required to run her business. Although she knew that she couldn't hire someone to handle everything; she took a sharp look at her capabilities, her interests, and her aversions. She decided to take on the engineering and the sales.

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She hired a part-time bookkeeper and delegated filing, invoicing, collections, and bookkeeping so that her records and finances were in order.

She couldn't afford more than one part time person, but needed extra help with drawings. Shelly found a freelance graduate engineering student and hired him periodically to pick up the slack. And, she even found an intern to do some of the running around, for free.

It isn't practical for business owners to do it all themselves, and often makes it impossible to manage your time. It also makes it harder to make money. Now for all you control freaks out there, this step involves letting go of the feeling that you are the only one who can do things right...

It may feel a bit scary to do this at first. You may not want to give over the responsibility to others; perhaps you're afraid that the other person or company won't do it as well as you can. Or, perhaps you feel that you don't have the money to spend...but remember that *you* are the business owner and you need to delegate to survive, and you must always keep in mind what your own time is worth, so that you don't spend it doing things that others can do better, faster, and more economically.

## **5. UNDERESTIMATING HOW LONG THINGS REALLY TAKE**

Okay, you've come this far – don't fall prey to this common pitfall now! Probably the biggest time management trap is underestimating how much time things really take. So I'm going to ask you to start thinking and acting differently here, right now.

So far you've analyzed which things you have to do yourself, and hopefully delegated or outsourced the rest. Now, you have to be painfully honest about how many hours it takes to complete certain jobs and projects.

To do this, you may have to start doubling or even tripling the amount of time you estimate for each task. You may also need to start keeping track of how much time you're really spending doing them.

It may take some practice before you get a handle on this one, but once you do, you'll see that time becomes a lot more manageable.

## 6. PROCRASTINATING

Unfortunately, even if you follow all 10 steps above, you won't be completely in charge of your time unless you actually find a way to get things accomplished. Procrastination is one of the biggest time eaters of all. Often, procrastinators find that that actually "doing" takes much less time than the procrastinating itself. Now, procrastination can run pretty deep, and the reasons for doing it can vary. The easiest way to start to combat procrastination is to be aware when you're doing it. One method that's worked well for a number of clients is keeping track of how much time it actually eats up. Another is to process the feelings that are coming up around the actions you're putting off and try to see why you're so resistant to doing them.

Regardless of what tactics you take, you may also want to address it from a practical standpoint. One of the ways that has worked well for many of my clients is to schedule appointments with yourself to get things done, just like you would with a client. Remember, you'll also have to eliminate distractions so that you can complete them.

Here are some strategies on how to do this:

- Set aside specific times to take care of projects or tasks. I call them "**focused work periods,**" or FWP's. These can be regular weekly or daily times that you sit down to handle certain responsibilities.
- Treat these appointments like you would an appointment with a customer. Make these times sacred. Be sure you prepare everything you'll need beforehand, and p-l-e-a-s-e don't cancel them unless absolutely necessary. If you absolutely have to cancel, make sure you reschedule right away.
- During these times, make sure that your employees or colleagues know that you are not to be disturbed.
- Let voice mail pick up your cell and regular phone.
- Resist the temptation to check voice mail or emails during your focused work periods; these messages will still be there when you're finished.

## 7. GIVING UP TOO SOON

Undergoing any type of change is hard and trying to manage your time is no different. At some point, you just have to let yourself do it. It really gets easier each time you do.

Not giving up too soon may require letting go of some old habits and patterns. Devise new ways of doing things that will support positive change.

Since you can't manage your time if you're wasting it, start doing things now and stop procrastinating!

Once you've put these steps into place, please don't stop there! Like most things in life, time management is a work in progress. Once you've created an initial strategy, try it out. Refine it. Check in with yourself and see what's working and what's not. Make changes when you need to, until time management becomes as natural as brushing your teeth. Then, you can truly reap the benefits.

### **In closing...**

I hope that reading about these deadly mistakes have been helpful for you. Remember that changing from someone who is challenged by time to someone who manages time successfully may not happen overnight. Congratulate yourself on your successes. Don't judge yourself harshly when you hit a rough patch. Instead, when things don't go as well, use them as opportunities for learning what might work better the next time.

If you have tried these or other measures and still find that your time is out of control, you may want to consider working with someone who specializes in helping people master time management and productivity. I'll help you design a customized strategy to manage your time and provide the support and accountability you need to make it stick. If you're serious about getting professional time management coaching, and ready to get the help you need, I'd be happy to speak with you about your situation and see how I can help. To set-up a time to talk about your concerns, please call me directly at 718-499-2831 or visit me on the web: at [www.business-sanity.com](http://www.business-sanity.com).