

Getting Your Team to Do More Than Meet Deadlines

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It's 9:00am on a Monday and you just arrived at work. Your to-do list for the week is long: answering emails, making client calls, attending meetings, researching a client's needs, writing a proposal, updating a project plan, reading about new developments in your field ... the list doesn't seem to end.

Which tasks should you focus on first?

The approach that many of us too often default to is checking off tasks that are easiest to complete or are due first, regardless of importance – a phenomenon that scholars describe as the “mere urgency” effect.

In 2018 researchers [documented](#) this effect across five experiments in which they asked participants to make trade-off decisions between tasks that varied in urgency and importance. Urgent tasks expired faster, whereas important tasks paid more. They found that people favored urgent tasks over important ones — even when these tasks paid less. It seems

that we pay [more attention to time](#) when we feel like we have less of it. So when we feel busy, we are more likely to favor urgent, unimportant tasks.

This tendency becomes stronger the busier we are. When we have a lot of tasks to do and not enough time to do them (what researchers call “[time poverty](#)”), we don’t have the bandwidth to determine the relative importance of each of our tasks. So, we revert to heuristics or cues in our environment, such as task length or task deadline, to decide how to prioritize, and we focus on what we can quickly cross off our list to feel more in control over our busy schedules.

But constantly prioritizing urgent tasks means that important tasks that have no urgent deadline (such as updating your resume or doing creative work) get pushed aside for later and later. Some just never get done. When we fail to do what’s important, often what matters most to us, we feel stressed, overwhelmed, and unmotivated — and firms are less productive.

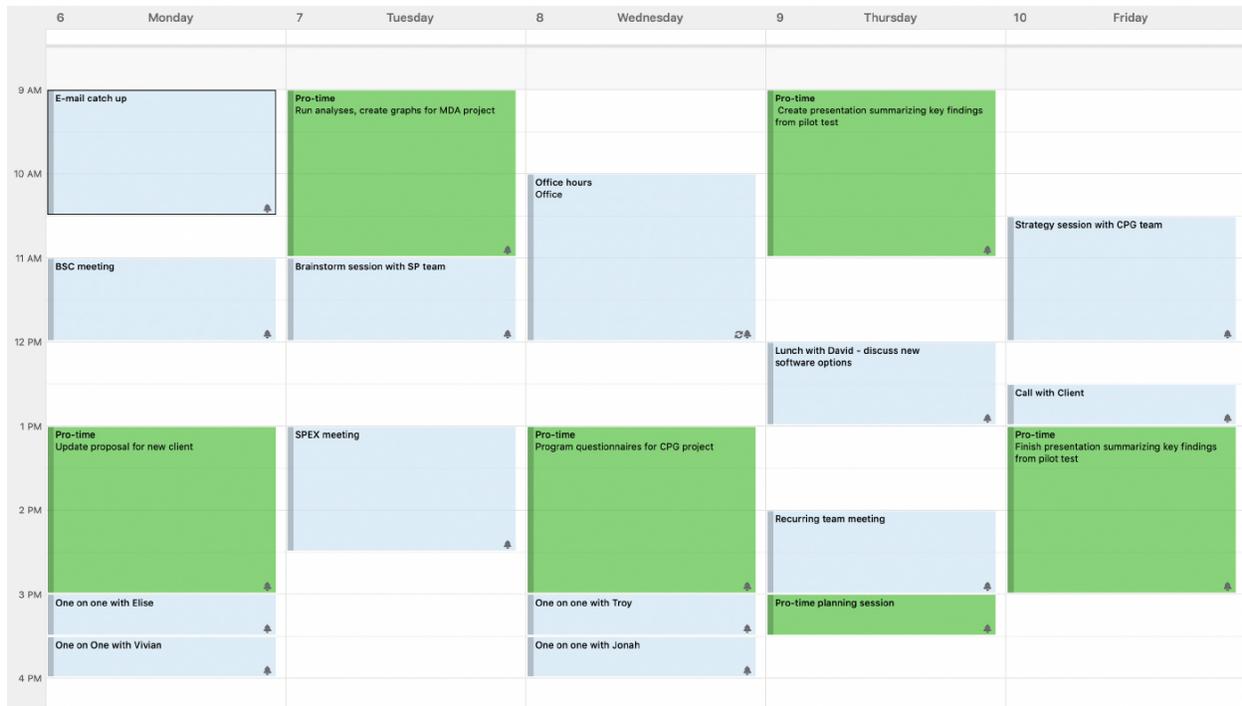
What can managers do to help employees combat the very natural tendency to put off for tomorrow what isn’t due today? Our latest [research](#) suggests a simple solution: have employees set aside time for work that is important but not urgent. We call this *proactive time* or *pro-time*.

To test of this idea, we conducted a study with a group of 46 full-time employees from Maritz, a U.S. marketing services and customer experience research company (where two of us work). We randomly assigned half of the employees to a pro-time condition, where they were instructed to set up a recurring 30-minute weekly planning session on their calendars. During this session, employees were asked to make a list of their most important and urgent work tasks, to block out two hours in their calendars each day for the next 2-3 weeks, and to fill out these “pro-time” calendar blocks with important, but non-urgent, tasks. This way, when employees’ pro-time period began, they were already ready to focus on activities that involved more of a heavy lift.

The other employees were assigned to our control group — they were not asked to engage in the pro-time procedure and continued doing what they normally do at work.

Before the pro-time period began, we asked both groups of employees to respond to a 25-item survey capturing how they felt about their stress, productivity, time management, workload, and responsiveness to clients. Six weeks later, when the pro-time period ended, we asked them to complete the same 25 items.

Below is an example of how our employees “pro-time” weeks looked on a calendar.



After six weeks of the pro-time procedure, employees in our “pro-time” condition reported being 14% more effective with their time. They also reported being 9% less overwhelmed by workload and 12% more likely to accomplish more, meet important deadlines, and get important tasks done faster. By contrast, employees in the control condition reported being 6% less effective with their time, 10% more overwhelmed by workload, and 4% less productive. We also found that the employees who benefitted the most from “pro-time” were those who seemed to be the most pressed for time.

Most relevant for organizations, employees in both groups were equally responsive to clients’ requests. Pro-time did not come at the cost of good customer service. Employees in the pro-time group also felt happier about their work overall. (This is important given that recent [research](#) provides causal evidence that happier employees are more productive.) Among those in the pro-time group, 84% recommended that the method be used across their organization.

Additional studies are needed to understand how employees use their time during pro-time periods, how long-lasting these effects are, and whether there are benefits outside work. But overall, our findings suggest that helping employees be intentional and disciplined with their time can increase well-being, happiness, and even productivity.

How to use pro-time effectively

One participant told us, “The main take away for me after these six weeks is to stop multitasking and focus on start-finish-next instead. I also really liked switching off my mobile phone and IM for two hours each day, will definitely continue to do that. The whole concept took about a week to get used to, but it was easy to follow the process after that.”

For pro-time to be effective, it must be distraction-free: no email, no Slack, no text messages. While it might be tempting to check email and answer a 1-minute urgent request from a client, [research](#) suggests that this sense of being always on affects our productivity; we need time to stop thinking of one task before we can fully shift our attention to the next. For that reason, employers must ensure that employees are able to turn off all distractions where possible, block the pro-time in their calendar, and be allowed to focus on the tasks they scheduled for each pro-time period.

Employers also need to be mindful that some employees like to [schedule their time](#) based on the clock (i.e., clock-time types), while others like to schedule their time based on events (event-time types). The pro-time procedure might work best for clock-time employees who are most productive and energized when their days are scheduled by the hour. In contrast, event-time employees might benefit from having a more flexible period to complete a task fully such as blocking out an entire morning every Monday or an afternoon every Friday.

Managers will want to consider additional questions like, should we block pro-time on employees' calendars to make the process even easier? Are pro-time periods necessary each workday to see positive results? Is two hours too much or too little? Managers can start simple by surveying their team to gauge interest or, as Maritz did, managers can experiment with the pro-time procedure to see the impact it can have on their employees (and on their clients). We recommend experimenting for at least six weeks so that employees get accustomed with the procedure and learn what tasks to schedule and in which days.

More research is needed to understand how the procedure works in different contexts, who benefits most from it, and what are the pro-time best practices. But in the meantime, try blocking time for important non-urgent tasks for yourself and let us know how it goes.

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