



The ultimate guide to  
**Time Management**

Time management. It seems like it should be so simple, yet we're struggling with it across all industries and workplaces. But in this fast-paced world, with the many demands on our time, not to mention all the distractions we have at our fingertips (yes, that's you, social media), is it really no wonder we can't get anything done?

But it's not just that. It's the bad habits we have around time management too, as well as the tools we use (or don't use). It's trying to do too much, rather than looking at ways of simplifying our approach. It's also the new dimensions that remote working has brought – always feeling we have to be available and respond to Slack or Teams messages instantly.

But whatever the reasons, we are well aware of the impact that poor time management can have. It impacts our mental health, by increasing our stress and anxiety levels, as well as affecting our sleep, and all this can lead to burnout. In fact, in 2020/21 [the HSE reported](#) that stress, depression or anxiety accounted for 50% of all work-related ill health cases. Now, we're not saying that time management is the sole cause, but it will be a factor.

If any of this sounds familiar, then this guide is for you. We've filled it with constructive advice to help you change your time management habits, allowing you to focus on and complete the jobs you need to get done. You'll also find some advice on increasing your productivity too, as we believe time management and productivity go hand in hand.

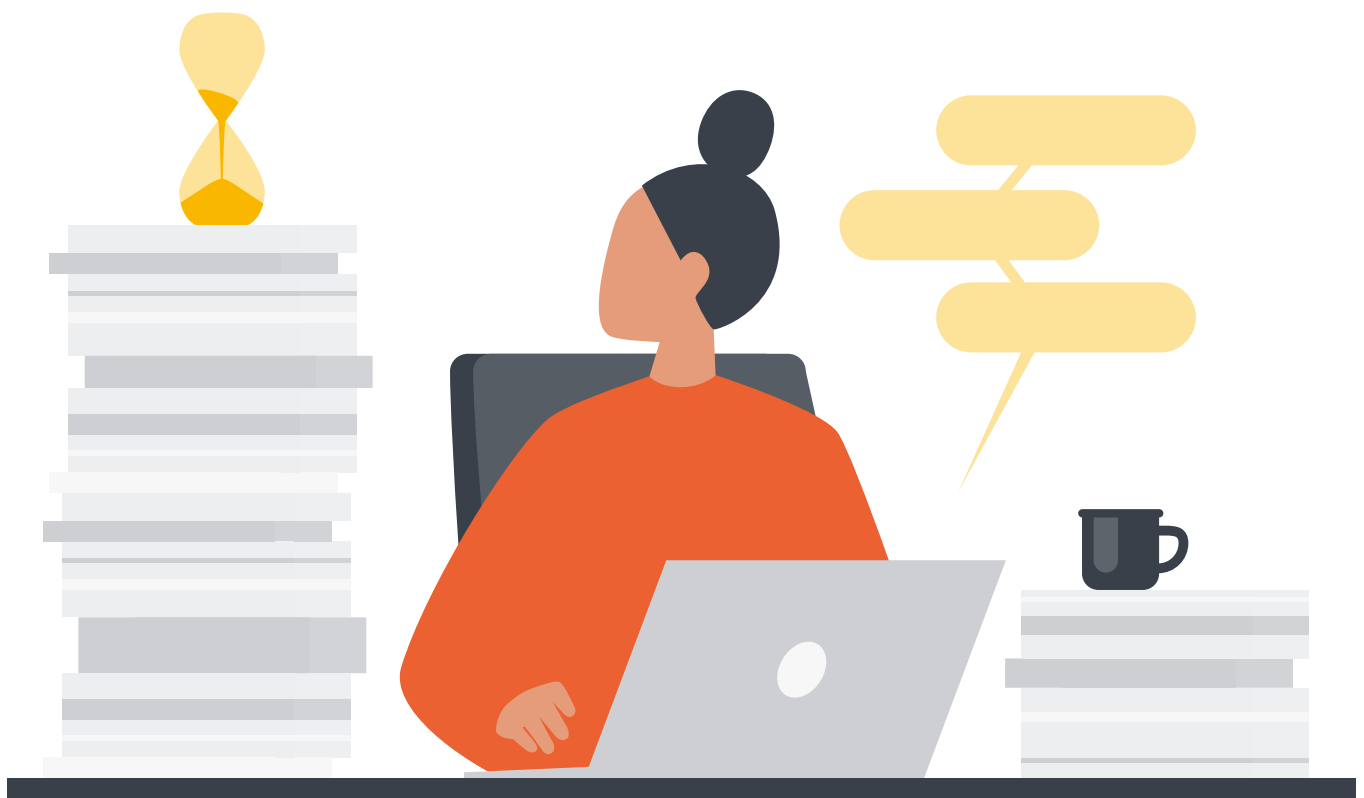
All in all, excellent time management can be a game changer. Go on, what are you waiting for?

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# Time management **HABITS**

Let's start with habits – the bedrock of good time management. Develop some good habits and you'll be well on your way. Here are some examples that are sure to help you transform your approach.

## Set your principles

A lot of our time can be wasted making decisions about how to spend our time. So, a good place to start is to set some principles that automatically help you structure your time and reduce the decisions you have to make. This may be planning to only have meetings in the afternoon so you can work uninterrupted in the morning, or telling your team that your 'office hours' are between 3-4pm and they can ask you any questions during that time. Or setting yourself admin blocks during the day, so you don't have to decide when you're going to get to your emails. They can be anything really, whatever suits your role and tasks.

## Get rid of those distractions

We have numerous distractions – social media, colleagues, text messages, phone calls, the internet – and they are hard to ignore and a huge drain on our time.

A key part of time management is managing these distractions and being able to shut the door to them. Identify what distractions you have and which you spend most time on, and then you can work towards managing them. Focus on a couple to begin with, and once you feel you've mastered those, take on another two and so on until you have them under control.

Find out more...

A time audit can help you here. You can find more about this in our Planning Your Day section.



## Engage in deep work, not half-work

Some of the distractions above cause us to engage in what **James Clear** calls 'half-work', which is a fragmented and unfocused way of working. Typical ones are:

- Suddenly looking up that film/video/football score you were curious about whilst working on a detailed report
- Keeping half an eye on your inbox when you're on a call
- Checking your phone suddenly for no reason when you're in the middle of a task
- Trying to do too many tasks at once

'Half-work' means that we aren't fully engaged in, or focused on, the task at hand and it prevents us from accomplishing what we need, in the time we have, and it affects the quality too. It results in us taking twice as long to do half a job.

What we need to do is engage in **deep work** instead. This involves making the time to focus on one project completely and eliminating all distractions, whether that means locking your phone away, using headphones to block out noise, asking your colleagues not to disturb you, or using a browser blocker. Not only will this mean your jobs will be completed quicker, the work will be of a better quality too, and overall it makes you more productive.



## Set people's expectations

Don't be afraid to set people's expectations and fight for your time. Whenever you are asked to do something, take the time to openly discuss what your availability is and by when you can realistically achieve the task. This is way you'll minimise the risk of disappointing them, as you'll be more likely to meet the deadline, and you'll also reduce your stress too, as you'll know you'll have the time required to do the job properly.

## Learn to say no

Our stress levels rise when we take too much on, and it's a common feeling to wish we had said no to helping someone out. Therefore, learn to say no. But that's easier said than done, right? It's sometimes hard to realise when we have too much on our plate. But worry not, our next section is all about planning our day effectively, and a big part of that is understanding how long tasks take. Understanding this will help you say no with conviction, an invaluable skill.



# PLANNING your day

Planning your day effectively is the most important habit you can develop when it comes to time management. We often think that's just 'making a to-do list', but it's so much more than that. Here are some tips to make sure you get the most out of your day and time.

## Carry out a time audit

Before you can truly manage your time, you need to figure out how you're spending it. Yes, this may sound off-putting and a lot of work to do, but, trust us, it will be well worth the effort (and don't worry – it isn't something you have to do daily!)

Essentially, a time audit involves monitoring what tasks you are doing and how much time you are spending on them, how many meetings and how long they take, and even how much time you are chatting to colleagues, or browsing the internet – basically, monitoring everything you do. This level of detail is required in order to get an effective picture. There are apps you can use to help, such as [RescueTime](#), or you can monitor your work yourself.

Overall, it will help determine how much you can accomplish in a day, when you are your most productive, and identify those unproductive tasks that drain your time. It will also handily feed into other steps in this list. You'll find it eye opening, believe us!



## Take up time blocking

Time-blocking is when you essentially break your working day down into 30 minute chunks and allocate a task to every minute. It brings with it so many benefits. It helps you structure your day; it helps prevent you from overstretching yourself, which reduces stress, and it also helps reduce distraction and procrastination – no bad thing!

But, most importantly, it helps you stay focused and allows you to work with intention. It isn't about sticking to the structure, but about making the time to work on what needs to be done. So, it's fine if it becomes clear that your day isn't going according to your plan, you just rejig it, and decide what needs to be prioritised in your remaining time.

As you can imagine, it works hand in hand with the time audit. You can use your audit to gauge how long tasks take, and then go about assigning the time you need.

Find out more...

There are specific tools you can use to help you time block. Check out our Tools section to discover more!





## Build in time for interruptions

As much as we try and plan how much time things will take, life happens and there are likely to be interruptions. Whether it is an email that just cannot be ignored, or a colleague who has to talk to you – these things take time and that time adds up. Try and take these into account when you are planning your day.

## Plan for breaks

No one can work effectively without a break. Successful time management will always factor breaks in, and they don't have to be long. Breaks are important as they allow you to recharge, refresh and give your brain a chance to have a rest, meaning you will be raring to go when it comes to the next task.

## Allow for time after meetings

Plan in time after meetings where you can spend 10 to 15 minutes digesting the meeting's actions and outcomes. This will allow your mind to catch up and process what was covered, which is vital if you want to achieve those new actions effectively.

## Protect your deep work time

To protect the time you need for deep work (or any task you need to focus on), don't be afraid to let your colleagues know you don't want to be disturbed. This can now easily be done through tools such as Teams, or you can put a 'Do Not Disturb' sign up on your desk. Either that or hide away in a meeting room. Any way to ensure uninterrupted time.



Find out more...

Heard of a 'deep break'?  
Find out more in our Remote Working section.

## Get the worst out of the way first

Often referred to as 'eat the frog', a classic time management tip is to get the worst task out of the way in the morning before you do anything else. Not only do you tend to have the most energy in the morning, but it also sets you up for the day – it will free up headspace to concentrate fully on other things, and you will have a huge sense of achievement, which will help carry you through the rest of the day.

## Group similar tasks together

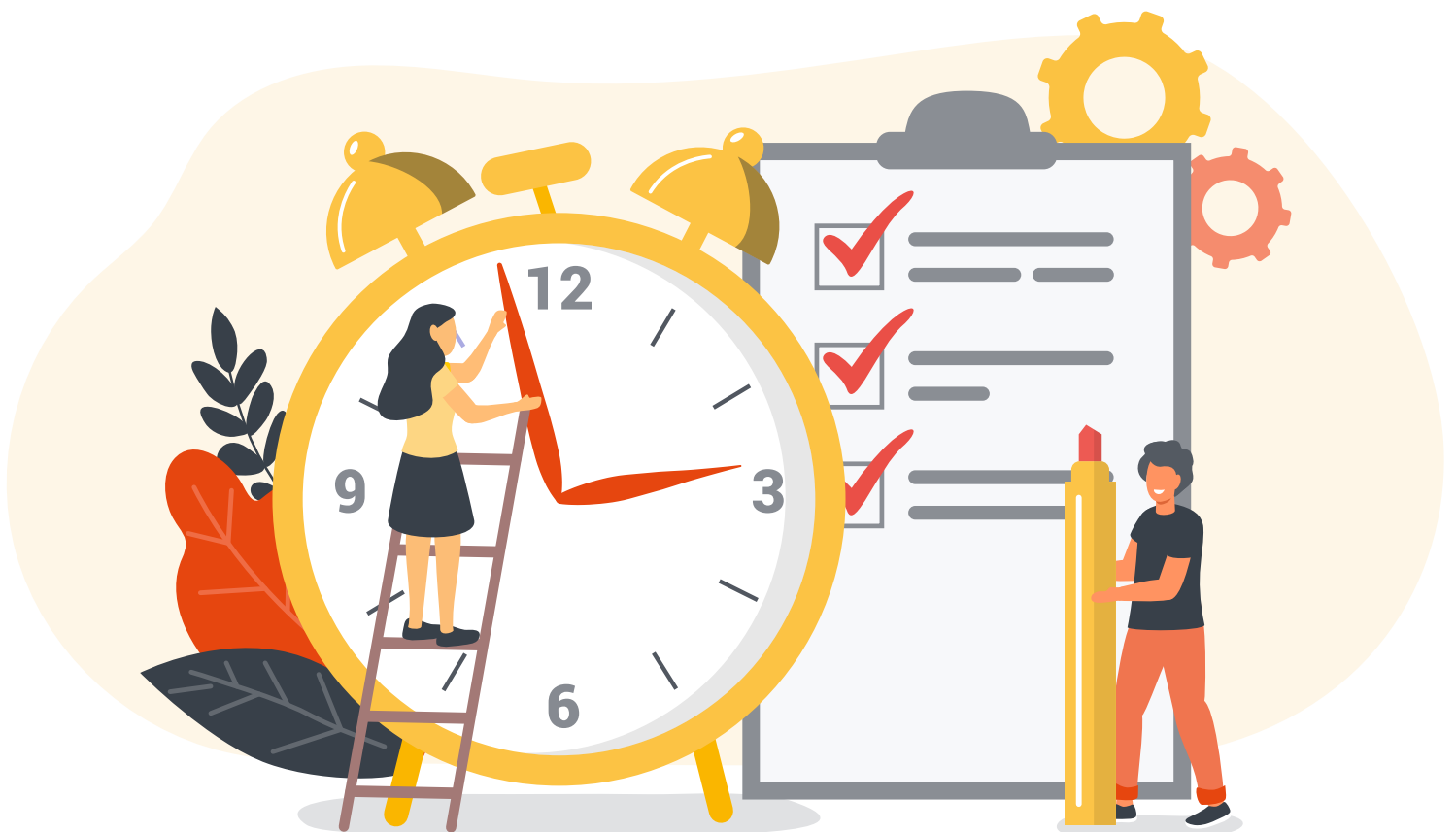
Tasks such as responding to emails or making phone calls can easily be grouped together. Carrying them out in an adhoc style is interruptive and can slow things down. But if you set aside part of your day to respond to them, it will be a much more effective use of your time. And knowing that you have allocated time to deal with them properly will reduce stress, as you won't spend a lot of the day worrying about when you'll be able to get to them.

## Be aware of how you're feeling

Some days you may not feel like you can carry out an intense day filled with deep work, yet you know you've got to get some done. This naturally causes stress which gets in the way of your ability to concentrate, which naturally results in low-quality, scrappy work.

So, what can you do? Be kind to yourself. Don't ask yourself to concentrate for an hour at a time – as you won't. You'll spend most of that time stressing and worrying. Instead, set a time for a smaller chunk – half hour, maybe even 20 or 15 minutes – do your work, and then give yourself a short break. Knowing you only have to work for a shorter amount of time will allow you to focus better, which will result in better work.

And, importantly, know that this is ok. We have our good days and bad days – maybe we had an awful night, or maybe we're coming down with something – we're only human after all.





## Time management **TOOLS**

Once you've got your habits sorted out, what can you do to help your time management even further? Find the tools that work for you. These will vary from person to person, and to help, we've turned to some time management gurus at Virtual College to share what tools they used. Believe us, they are all excellent tools to help you plan your day. You may end up using all of them!



### Rachel's choice: To-do lists

I love a good list, where I can see everything that I need to do, in detail, and most importantly all in one place.

People use various methods for writing their to-do lists, some structure by priority, others by length of time an activity takes, but I find what works for me is to use project headings and then list all associated tasks with that project and in the order that they need to be completed. This appeals to me as it feels methodical and helps me visualise finishing the tasks by their deadline. However, it's important that you find the way that works for you.

I am also a fan of writing a new list every morning. I feel like it helps me start a fresh that day, even if it doesn't look much different from the day before, but it enables me to see where I need to focus my time. Again,

everyone is different. You might find it helpful to keep going with the same to-do list until everything has been completed, or like me, you might need to keep adding when new tasks arise, so if it starts look a little busy, you may find it helps to just write a new one again.

I find huge satisfaction in marking tasks as done when they are complete, and it also allows me to finish the working day knowing where I am and what I need to get on with the next day. I also find that writing things down means I don't 'take work home with me' or worry about outstanding jobs, as I know I can pick them up the next day.

But, overall, the main reason I write lists... well, I have a memory like a sieve so if a task doesn't make it on my list, it's likely that it won't get completed either!







## Carol's choice: Trello Boards

I am always juggling lots of different tasks, so I need something which allows me to have an overview of the tasks that I need to do, as well as help me prioritise my tasks. For me, a **Trello Board** was the answer.

It's very simple in that it uses columns and cards to help you track your tasks, and its flexible design means that you can set it up in the way that works for you. For me, my main columns are: tasks to complete that day, tasks to complete that week and completed tasks. I then have columns for each quarter of the year, so I can see what tasks I have coming up. Once I'm given a job, I then

create a 'card', and add it to the relevant column. I then add deadlines, a checklist of the individual tasks that need to be carried out to complete the job, as well as any extra notes or details that I may want to include. It means all the details about a job are in one place, which is so helpful!

It's incredibly easy to use and you can easily move cards between columns, as and when you need to. Overall, I found its visual style really ramped up my time management and productivity as it helped me fully track (and remember!) what I needed to get done.



## Carol's choice: Time-block planners

I'm also a huge fan of time-block planning. I use an actual **Time-Block Planner** (hats off to **Cal Newport**), but if you want to test the waters first, you can easily set one up in a notebook or an Excel spreadsheet, or even your work calendar.

It's simple to do: write the hours the day down one side, broken down into 30-minute chunks, and then go through and assign your jobs to a time. It's best to start with your meetings, a lunch break, so you know how much time you have left to work with in the day and then build up from there.

How does it help? In so many ways! It helps me plan my day so I know exactly what I'm doing from the get-go, reducing the stress of trying to figure out what to do as I go along.

It works in perfect harmony with the Trello Board, as I can use that to see what my priorities are. It also helps me assess exactly how much time I have to work in each day – or how little, if my day is overrun with meetings! And it's not time-consuming at all. I just spend about 15 minutes at the end of each day planning for the next day, so I can finish work knowing that everything is set up the next day.

All in all, it's been absolute game-changer for the way I do my work. I'm more productive, focused, less stressed and so much better at meeting those deadlines.





## Sav's choice: Microsoft Planner

I've used Microsoft Planner for some time now. I find it really simple and easy to use. I am a big fan of actual paper to-do lists but when I started using Microsoft Planner, it became my digital notebook!

I have separate "buckets" where I can add tasks into and drag and drop if something changes during a project (we all know this happens a lot). My buckets usually look like this:

1. Weekly Tasks
2. Daily Tasks (named Mon, Tues, Wed, Thurs or Fri)
3. Waiting on (things I am waiting on other people for)
4. Completed

I can add as many notes onto my tasks as I want and set deadlines which turn red when they're overdue (I usually set a deadline a few days before the task is due so I'm not behind).

The feature I particularly like about planner is that you can tick off a task when you've completed it (which is why I loved an old-fashioned notebook). I like to see the list of everything I have achieved at the end of each day and anything that isn't completed I can drag and drop into the following day's bucket.

Microsoft Planner is a great tool to organise your daily and weekly tasks. I'd recommend giving it a go!





## Hayley's choice: Excel

Having only recently started my first "proper" job out of university, managing my time and workload was a bit of a challenge at first and something I'd not really had to do before. I tried a few options but struggled to commit to them fully, meaning my plans were often unfinished, lacked detail and, in some cases, left untouched for weeks. After a few months of trying to organise my time effectively, I realised I hadn't tried using a software that I was familiar with and that I also used in my personal life... Excel!

It may seem a bit mundane or old school but I just love an Excel sheet, and in my working life, every new project has one. My project plans are full of every detail you could wish to know, which helps me keep on top of my progress on a weekly/monthly or even yearly basis (depending on the project!).

When making a new project ask yourself:

- What are the stages of this project? (Do I need to do research, create something, speak to someone? I write all of this down)
- What order do these stages sit? Do some need to be completed before I can continue to the next stage?
- When do these stages need to be completed by? Do I have a deadline for any individual stages?
- And how long will these stages take?

Once you have all this information create a timeline-like chart with tasks down the sides and dates on the top. As I work through the project I like to colour code them (Red: I'm held up, Orange: I'm 'on with it', and Green: Completed) which makes the plan a bit more visually appealing.

### Top tip

When creating your tasks keep them short and to the point. If you need to add more detail create a new tab; the main project plan should be to the point and straight forward to read!



# Time management and **REMOTE WORKING**

It can't be denied that time management is a slightly different kettle of fish when we're remote working, so here are some specific tips to help you manage your time effectively if you're a remote worker.



## Set a start and finish time

With different distractions than in the office, procrastination can be even more of a temptation when working remotely. One way to help fight this is to create a structure to your day, including setting a start and finish times, and stick to it.

Knowing what your hours are will help you work with more intention and focus. It'll also help you switch off at the end of the day, as you'll know exactly when your work day ends and your personal life begins.

## What tasks work best where?

Some locations are better for working than others – though this will vary from person to person and task to task. So why not consider what tasks work best where and set your location accordingly to optimise your productivity? You may keep your bigger tasks for the peace and quiet of home, but go into the office for more collaborative sessions or work that benefits from spontaneity and face-to-face interaction.

## Take your breaks

We've talked about planning breaks, but when we're working remotely this is even more important, especially as we often want to go above and beyond to prove that we're really doing the work. But missing these breaks can be detrimental to our productivity.

This is where microbreaks, or 'deep' breaks, come in useful. These are just small breaks (preferably no longer than 15 minutes) in which we completely disengage from our work, allowing ourselves to take a breather before diving back in. It may sound like it should be a disruption, but a short break can actually give us the re-charge we need.

But this isn't an excuse to quickly fire off a frantic response to an email, or get lost in a rabbit hole on social media. It needs to be stress-free, unrelated to work, and short. It can be taking a stroll around your home, reading a chapter of a book, doing some simple chores, making a cup of tea, going for a walk or even doing a quick meditation. Anything that gives your brain the break it deserves.

And talking of breaks, always plan for a lunch break. A perfect time to wind down, recharge and refuel, and is very much underrated in the working world!



## Change up your location

Though a dedicated working space can help set boundaries between work and home life, we also recommend taking advantage of the fact that you can work anywhere, as it can't be denied that a change of scenery can be beneficial. Work in a local café, or go for a productivity walk to help with brainstorming or find solutions – you might find it gives you the boost you need to stay productive.

## Work to your strengths

Structure your day around when you're more productive. Are you more productive in the morning? Then make sure to block out some time to focus on those tasks that require deep work. If you have a lull of in energy in the afternoon, maybe allocate admin time, or tasks that don't require as much brain power.

## Keep those distractions at bay

This is even harder when we're working from home. But use every hack you can think of to help here. Block the news and social media pages on your browser, or keep your phone in a separate room whilst you're doing deep work.



## FINAL WORD

### *It takes work and practice...*

Rome wasn't built in a day. It may take a while to find those habits and tools that work for you, and by 'a while' we don't mean a week, or even a month, it may take a year or so to really hone these skills and habits. But mastering time management can make a real difference - don't give up!

*Looking for more resources like this?*

**Check out our resources page**

[www.virtual-college.co.uk/resources](http://www.virtual-college.co.uk/resources)

