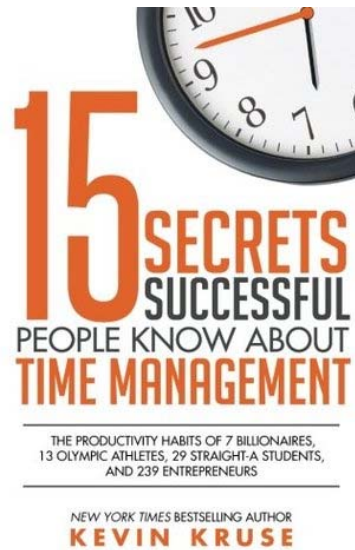


15 Secrets Successful People Know About Time Management

By Kevin Kruse



Secret #1 – Time is your most valuable and scarcest resource

Time is the great equaliser as we all have exactly the same number of hours in a day. Highly productive people focus on minutes, not hours. They know that there are only 1,440 minutes in the day and once the time has passed, you can't get it back.

Elon Musk famously schedules his day into five minute blocks. Musk is a CEO of two billion-dollar companies (Tesla and SpaceX), a father of seven and still wants time for hobbies such as gaming, so being hyper scheduled is the only way he can get everything done.

We would never let people steal money out of our wallets, yet we repeatedly let people steal our time. If you want to save money, don't spend it on things you don't need. If you want to save time, don't waste it on things you don't need to be doing and don't let others waste it for you.

When people ask for a minute of your time, hold them to their request. Don't let "a minute" become half an hour.

You can lose money and make it back again. You can lose your health and gain it back again. You can lose a friend and either earn the friendship back or make a new friend. Once you've lost time, it's gone forever.

Secret #2 – Identify your Most Important Task (MIT) and work on it each day before doing anything else

If you aren't working on your own goals, you'll be working to achieve somebody else's goals.

Highly productive people focus on a task until it is complete. They know *what* to focus on and *how* to get it done. They know what their Most Important Task (MIT) is for each day and they get on and do it.

If the task you are working on isn't moving you closer to your goal, it isn't your MIT. If you're not working on your MIT, you're never going to achieve it.

Your MIT at work and your MIT at home are likely going to be different tasks.

People are generally most productive in the first two hours of their day. This is the time that should be dedicated to your MIT, not to busywork or administrivia such as replying to emails. Block out this time each day and work on your MIT without interruption. Identify your MIT the day before so you can jump right into it.

Schedule blocks of time in your calendar to do “real work”. Save meetings and other less important tasks for later in the day.

Secret #3 – Work from your calendar, not a to-do list

To-do lists are nagging wish lists. Most to-do lists never get completed and tasks can sit on the list for weeks, months (and even years). They end up being nothing more than a reminder of how much stuff we have to do which may overwhelm us and cause anxiety and insomnia.

To-do lists don't identify how much time a task will take to complete. They also make it easy to work on the urgent, not the important. (See Stephen Covey's time management matrix.)

If a task is really that important, then you need to schedule time in your calendar for it. People who get a lot of stuff done schedule it into their calendar. They schedule everything from gym work outs to being home for family meals.

Start practising “time blocking” or “time boxing” where you schedule time in your calendar to work on the tasks that are important to you. Schedule these blocks as early in the day as possible. Align your time block tasks with the things that are most important to you and your goals.

Don't cancel a goal time block, reschedule it. If you have to replace your lunch time exercise with a truly important meeting, move your exercise time block to earlier in the day.

Treat your time blocks as though they are an appointment with your doctor. It may be easy to delay leaving the office in the evening by 30 minutes if you're “only” going home to your family. Yet if you had to leave the office to get to a doctor's appointment, you'd be leaving on time – you wouldn't keep the doctor waiting.

Schedule in buffer blocks into your calendar so you don't constantly end up in days of back-to-back meetings. This gives you time to prepare, take a break, follow up quickly on other tasks, etc. This tip is a favourite of LinkedIn Executive Chairman Jeff Weiner. Your time belongs to you, not other people.

Secret #4 – Procrastination can be overcome when you figure out how to beat your future self, who cannot be trusted to do the right thing

Procrastination is the habit of avoiding important, less pleasurable tasks by doing easier, more pleasurable tasks. People procrastinate not because they're lazy but because they either lack enough motivation or they've underestimated the power of present emotions vs future emotions when setting their goals or making their task list.

Procrastination Buster #1: Time Travel

We are time-inconsistent. We think we're going to get more done than we actually do. We over commit to something (e.g. we'll buy a fridge full of salad) and then not do it (and we throw the mushy, rotting greens out several weeks later).

We always underestimate how hard it is to be our best self in the present moment. To counter our future self changing our plan to achieve our goals, we need to overcome those obstacles in the present. If you know you can't open a pack of Tim Tams without eating them all, don't buy the Tim Tams in the first place. If you don't want to keep eating all the fries on your plate at a restaurant, drown the fries you don't want to eat with salt so you can't change your mind. Don't give your future self the opportunity to sabotage the plans made by your present self.

Procrastination Buster #2: Pain and Pleasure

Motivation comes down to pain and pleasure. How much pleasure will you get from doing a task? How much pain will you feel if you don't do the task?

Visualise what life will be like if you deviate from your plan. Don't want to exercise? Visualise your flabby, couch potato belly. Don't want to put the effort in to study? Visualise failing the exam.

Procrastination Buster #3: Accountability Partner

Find an accountability partner to keep your future self honest. Accountability partners can be friends or colleagues but are often in the form of a paid professional, such as a personal trainer to make sure you hit your exercise goals.

We are typically happier to break promises to ourselves than we are to break promises to other people, especially if we're paying that person money!

Procrastination Buster #4: Reward and Punishment

Bribe yourself to achieve goals. If you really want a new pair of shoes, tie that purchase into the achievement of another goal, such as only buying the shoes when you pay off your credit card. Want to have a glass of prosecco or some of your favourite chocolate? Fine, but only after you've cleaned your house or mowed the lawn.

Alternatively, you can use the "stick" approach rather than the carrot. Don't achieve your weight loss goal by a certain date? Now you have to donate \$100 to charity. Didn't manage to go an entire hour without touching your phone? That's 20 push ups, please.

(Warning – if you always bribe yourself with food rewards this could have unintended waistline consequences!)

Procrastination Buster #5: Act As If...

Fake it 'til you make it. Talk to yourself as though you've already achieved the goal. Want to be a best-selling author? Talk about it in the present tense: *I am a best-selling author. I am a runner. I am the #1 sales rep in my company.*

Using affirmative talk helps you anchor your values. If you tell yourself you are something and then your behaviour and actions don't align with that value, then the guilt and the disconnect will make you feel uncomfortable. Hopefully, you feel uncomfortable enough to actually do the task you didn't want to do in the first place.

Procrastination Buster #6: Settle For Good Enough

Perfection is the enemy of progress. Great is the enemy of the good.

Sometimes starting a task is easy but finishing it is hard. Instead of getting caught up in achieving a perfect ten, just get something done. Revision is always easier than filling up a blank sheet of paper.

Don't feel like going for a five mile run? Put your shoes on anyway and head out the door. Tell yourself you'll do three miles instead. You might find that after three miles the cobwebs have gone and you continue for the original five miles. You might find that three miles is enough. Hell, you may even walk most of the way. As long as you made it out the door you did better than staying inside and sitting on the couch.

Secret #5 – Accept the fact that there will always be more to do and more that can be done.

The most successful people in the world know that they will never get everything done each day so they don't sweat it. This is why it's so important to get your MIT done early in the day so that when it's time to leave the office to be home in time for dinner the tasks you are leaving behind are low level and relatively unimportant.

Don't let your to-do list be your master or you'll burn yourself out.

You don't need to be everything for everyone. This is something that women in particular struggle with. Don't confuse the "disease to please" with a demonstration of love. More often than not, people who try to do everything just don't want to disappoint someone (or anyone). Don't base your self-worth on what other people think of you.

You are never too busy to make time for who and what you love. There will always be more work to do.

Secret #6 – Always carry a notebook

Richard Branson's most prized possession is a little notebook he carries with him at all times. If you don't capture an idea in the moment it may be gone forever.

Aristotle Onassis use to write down everything: ideas, people he met, interesting things he heard. That way he could figure out how much time the people or the ideas were worth.

Jim Rohn also extols the virtues of journaling. Journal writing is an indication that you are a serious student of life.

Any type of notebook will do. Some people like Moleskine notebooks, others are happy with waiter's pads. Whatever you're happy to carry with you everywhere and write on will do. Except for loose sheets of paper – they'll get damaged or lost.

Studies show that taking notes by hand increases retention over typing notes straight into a laptop or other device. There is an argument for digital notes being searchable. There are also

a lot of people who think better through a pen than a keyboard. However you take your notes, use margin markings to identify actions, questions to ask, key themes, etc.

Secret #7 – Email is a great way for other people to put their priorities into your life: control your inbox

Email frequently masquerades as important work. If you use your inbox as a to-do list you are letting other people dictate how you spend your time. Don't be seduced by feeling productive just because you've addressed or filed fifty emails by lunch time.

Turn off notifications. Use the 321-Zero system where you only process your email three times a day, in 21 minute blocks and you try to get to inbox zero in that time. Make a game out of it.

Only touch email once. Immediately apply the four Ds: Do it, Delegate it, Defer it, Delete it (or File it).

Use the subject line to indicate if there is an action required, e.g. ACTION REQUIRED: [Email title].

Include in your email "No Response Needed" if the recipient doesn't need to waste their time writing an acknowledgement or your time reading an acknowledgement.

Keep emails as short as possible without being rude and abrupt. Respect your time and the recipients' time.

If Inbox Zero is not realistic with your current inbox, deal with anything that arrived in the last 48 hours and then move everything else out of your inbox into a folder named "Old Emails". You still have the old emails if you need them and anything that's actually important will be followed up on by the sender. This is great to do at the beginning of each year as a sort of fresh start ritual.

Secret #8 – Schedule and attend meetings as a last resort, when all other forms of communication won't work

Meetings often suck for the following reasons: they start late, the wrong people are in the meeting, they break the day up in an inefficient manner, the wrong people dominate meetings.

Parkinson's law of triviality is where the meeting is hijacked by people discussing trivial detail at length because they don't fully understand the bigger, more important concepts of the meeting. This means that the most influential decisions and details often get the least attention.

Billionaire Mark Cuban has a rule where he doesn't accept a meeting unless someone is writing a cheque.

"No meeting" days in the office can be beneficial. Pick one day a week where no-one schedules meetings and everyone can get on with their important tasks.

Create effective agendas for your meeting if you have to have one:

- State the purpose of the meeting.
- Identify the facilitator.

- Identify the participants and keep the meeting as short as possible.
- List agenda topics and assign time periods for discussion

Some of the world's most successful people use gimmicks such as countdown timers or stand up meetings to keep things brief and on track. Not all meetings need to be multiples of 30 minutes just because that's the Outlook default. Try a 10 or 15 minute meeting if that's all you need.

Don't use your phone in meetings. It is disrespectful to the other people in the room.

An organisation can only move as fast as the leadership team. Therefore it is imperative to establish a cadence of meetings with a daily huddle, pre-start meeting, toolbox meeting, etc, being the most important meeting of the day. It gets everyone up to speed at a team level and ensures the direction of the team is aligned.

Secret #9 – Say no to everything that doesn't support your immediate goals

"No" is the one word that will free up your calendar. If the request for your time isn't going to get you closer to your goal, seriously consider saying no.

There is an opportunity cost for everything you say "yes" to because that is time you could have spent doing something else. Be aware of "yes" creep where a small "yes" in the beginning turns into a lot more "yesses" down the track.

We are raised to be polite so saying "no" often feels bad or we're worried we're going to upset someone. Don't let other people guilt you into wasting your time. If someone wants your time but you're not convinced of the value add to you, put an obstacle in the path, such as "sure, I can spare 15 minutes for a phone call but only at [insert crazy time] here". If you say to someone you can chat at 2am they will generally say no worries, I'll pass. If they call your bluff and accept the 2am meeting you know they must be serious so you can then work out a more realistic time with them as something "opens up" in your calendar.

Some people don't like saying no to friends. If they're really your friend and you honestly don't have the time right now, they'll understand.

Secret #10 – Eighty percent of outcomes are generated by twenty percent of activities

In the 1800s, the Italian philosopher and economist Pareto observed that 80% of the peas in his garden came from 20% of the plants. This (approximate) ratio can be applied to things the world over. 80% of the profit comes from 20% of the customers. 80% of the sales come from 20% of the sales reps. 20% of patients account for 80% of healthcare spending. 80% of your socialising is done with 20% of your friends.

Apply the 80/20 rule to your life. Know what your most important tasks are. Focus 80% of your time and effort on the 20% of your tasks that are going to get you closer to your goals.

Secret #11 – Focus your time only on things that utilize your unique strengths and passions

Three ways to achieve massive time savings is to analyse each task within the following parameters:

- Drop: What items are completely unnecessary and can be stopped entirely?
- Delegate: What items can I give to someone else to do, either internally or externally?
- Redesign: How can I do this task in a more efficient way?

There are a lot of tasks in your own life that can be outsourced to someone else, such as cleaning, yard maintenance, bookkeeping, administrative tasks, etc. If you're not good at a task or you hate it then find someone else to do it.

Don't outsource a task if the cost of someone else doing it is higher than the value of the time it frees up or it's a task that you actually like doing. Mark Cuban outsources just about everything except his own laundry. The author outsources all his admin and cleaning but likes to do his own grocery shopping.

Secret #12 – Batch your work with recurring themes for different days of the week

Jack Dorsey, co-founder of Twitter and CEO of Square (at time of book writing) worked full time at both companies for years. Yes, two x 40 hour weeks every week. One of his hacks was to theme the days at both companies so that no matter where he was he knew that Monday was management meeting day, Tuesdays were products, Wednesdays were marketing, communications and growth, etc. If he was interrupted he was able to quickly refocus.

Three theme days for the rest of us can be focus days, buffer days and free days. Focus days are for the most important activities, buffer days are for the catchup stuff like emails, phone calls, meetings, etc. Free days are vacation days or other non-work days.

Secret #13 – If a task can be completed in less than five minutes, do it immediately

Develop a touch it once mentality and apply it to all aspects of your life. Don't put your dish on the bench when you could put it straight in the dishwasher. Don't put your clothes on the bed (or floor) when you could hang them back up or put them in the laundry hamper.

When processing your emails, only touch each email once. Use the 321-Zero method and the four Ds (see Secret #7). Every time you read an email and decide you'll get back to it later you're starting the task all over again. If there is an email that requires more than five minutes and you can't answer it now, assign some time to it in your calendar to properly address it.

Secret #14 – Invest the first 60 minutes of each day in rituals that strengthen your mind, body and spirit

Highly successful people are committed to empowering and energising morning routines.

There are a lot of successful people who are members of the 5am club (Robin Sharma even wrote a book about it). The majority of them also exercise in the morning as well which has

the added benefit of preventing their future self from deciding they're too tired or busy (see Secret #4).

Start your day with a big drink of water (you dehydrate overnight). Exercise. Have a decent breakfast. Catch up on news and current events. Stretch. Meditate. Be grateful.

Hal Elrod (author of *The Miracle Morning*) developed a system he calls *Life S.A.V.E.R.S.*

- **Silence** (quiet, gratitude, meditation or prayer)
- **Affirmations** (purpose, goals, priorities)
- **Visualisation** (of goals or ideal life)
- **Exercise**
- **Reading** (a self-improvement book)
- **Scribing** (journaling)

Secret #15 – Productivity is about energy and focus, not time

You can't get more time, only more energy to use the time you have more effectively. When people talk about "time management" they want to get more done with less stress.

Learn what hours you are most productive. For most people this is before lunch, but if you're a night owl who gets a second wind after dinner, use it to your advantage. What tasks will benefit most from a higher productivity level? If you're a writer and you write 1,000 words per hour before lunch and 250 words per hour after lunch, make sure you spend as many of your morning hours writing as you can.

Learn to pulse then pause. Pomodoro sprints can help with focus and staying fresh. Pick a task, go hard without distraction for 25 minutes and then take a five minute break. Move around. Have a drink. Rinse and repeat.

Take a decent break every 90 minutes to prevent fatigue. Go for a walk, eat a (healthy) snack. The most productive employees don't typically work more hours than anyone else they just use their sprint time more effectively.

Energy starts with good health. Get enough sleep, keep the alcohol down, eat proper diet, drink a lot of water, exercise.

The E-3C System – Energy, Capture, Calendar, Concentrate

No one system works for everyone. You don't have to use all 15 secrets but there will no doubt be some that you can use to improve your productivity.

Energy

Get enough sleep. Eat energising whole foods. Exercise often.

Develop a morning ritual that works for you. This will establish a foundation of energy, clarity and alertness for the rest of the day.

Pulse then pause throughout the day. You need to take breaks to ensure peak performance.

Capture

Capture everything in your notebook. This is much more effective than trying to remember it all.

Record meeting notes, new ideas, lessons learned, new people met, to-do action items; anything that might need to be referenced in the future.

Writing things in your notebook is a way of keeping your brain clear for the other heavy duty thinking it has to do.

This practise will improve your effectiveness.

Calendar

If you have an important action don't leave it on your to-do list, put it in your calendar. Things only get done when you schedule time for them.

Learn how to prioritise your work and then each day identify your Most Important Task (MIT) and block time out to work on that.

Theme the days of the week, not just at work but at home. For a lot of people Sunday is a day of rest, but for others it may be laundry and cooking day so you're prepared for the week ahead.

Protect your calendar as nothing is more important than your time and spending it on the things *you* want to spend it on. Say no to anything and anyone who doesn't align with your priorities and goals. Understand the 20% of your tasks that add 80% of the value.

Concentrate

Focus on what is booked in your calendar. Don't get distracted by email, social media or "got a minute" meetings.

Don't multitask. Focus on one thing at a time. (FOCUS = Follow One Course Until Success)

Reserve your peak performance time for your MIT. Don't waste your best hours on busywork or administrivia.

Pulse and pause throughout the day to maintain concentration and productivity. Take at least a five minute break every 30 to 60 minutes.

In Conclusion

Be mindful.

Live with intention.

There are only 1,440 minutes in the day.