

Need work-life balance? 7 tips

By [Jeff Wuorio](#)

Lisa McGonagle has a husband, three kids and a public relations business.

Her hectic life speaks volumes about what time management means to her. As she puts it: "I'm running all the time."

The same may apply to you. And that makes time management central to the health and growth of your life, profession and business. Truth be known: Not everyone has a genuine handle on the effective use of time. So you're not alone.

If you can relate, here are seven suggestions that may, to paraphrase rocker Mick Jagger, help you get time on your side:

1. **Don't overbook.**

This may seem unusual to people who try to cram as much as possible into every workday. The problem is: Things rarely go according to a prearranged agenda. That means a lot of time falling through the cracks chasing down appointments, unreturned phone calls and other items that simply aren't going to happen. "Don't try to plan on doing too many things," says McGonagle. "Assume that only 50% of the things you plan on doing today will actually get done. If you don't, you'll just waste valuable time trying to find out why things didn't happen."

2. **Prioritize ruthlessly.**

The secret to booking your time effectively boils down to knowing what's important and what can wait. But it's critical to use the sharpest knife possible in trimming the essential from the secondary. "Learn to ask questions that help you determine the level of urgency," says Krista Kurth, co-author of "Running on Plenty at Work." "Negotiate longer lead times whenever you can and don't give into the "instant-and-immediate answer" syndrome. Treating everything as top priority is draining and depleting."

3. **Learn how to say no.**

One of the biggest land mines to effective time management is recognizing you don't have to agree to everything and with everyone. Use your priority criteria to identify requests that simply aren't worth your time. "I've learned that saying no to one thing opens the door to saying yes to something else," says Kurth. "That can mean anything from cleaning my desk to getting a good night's sleep."

4. **Organize.**

Bringing your time into line isn't just a matter of scheduling. The mechanics of how you operate can be every bit as important. That means organizing most every element to allow as smooth a workflow as possible. "Everything in your business should be set up using logical systems so anyone needing anything can find it when they need it," says Peggy Duncan, an Atlanta-based personal productivity authority. "Eliminating clutter and the chaos it causes will give you a gift of 240 to 288 hours every year."

Here are a few specific organizational ideas:

- **Use color coding.** In McGonagle's office, white folders mean client information — blue, internal issues. "Visually, you identify things faster," she says.
- **Streamline processes.** Look at everything you do and determine whether it's as efficient as it can be. For instance, rather than passing documents back and forth for editing in your business, [Microsoft Windows Sharepoint Services Technology](#) lets you distribute materials for quick and efficient feedback using a central server.
- **Don't isolate tasks.** One huge time drain occurs when one person has to take on something with which he's completely unfamiliar. Keep others up to date on what you're doing and make sure they reciprocate.
- **Do things when the time is right.** It's not likely you'll be calling people at 10 p.m. for work. Use conventional work hours for tasks that can only be done then. Earmark off-hours for less time-specific responsibilities such as filing, accounting and other jobs.
- **Delegate.** Many businesspeople take too many things onto their own shoulders. Think about what you do best and what can best be done by others. Then, split the work accordingly.

5. **Use technology.**

Although personal habits and practices can do wonders for time management, don't overlook technology as yet another weapon to make the most effective use of your workday. For instance, [Microsoft Business Contact Manager](#) lets you organize a wide array of customer and product particulars, allowing quick and easy access. "Sticky notes are one of the worst things in the world," says McGonagle. "You should live by your database. That way, nothing is ever forgotten."

6. . . . **but don't overdo it.**

Many businesspeople are gun shy about using technology out of fear that they'll remain too much in touch — that their time will be consumed by intrusive e-mails and cell phone calls. Fair enough. Part of effective time management is knowing when to shut things down. Turning off a cell phone or other wireless means of communication establishes boundaries. In short, it helps you balance your personal and professional time.

7. **Know it won't always be perfect.**

Try as we all may, time management isn't an exact science. Don't stress out — and waste time in the process — by obsessing over every second of time. Do what you can and enjoy whatever time you spend more pleasantly or productively. "Be grateful for what goes right and learn from your mistakes," says Kurth. "Act as if they were scenes in a movie that you get to retake."