Eight ways to increase efficiency—master your time, get more done and reduce stress at work

By W. Russell Merck

Increasing efficiency is the key to becoming the master of your time. Increased efficiency allows you to complete tasks more easily and in less time. Efficiency also results in less stress generated while doing the task.

There are an infinite number of "efficiency principles" that streamline work and reduce stress. What follows are eight of these principles. I have chosen these eight as the subject of this resource kit, because they have the largest impact for the broadest range of work situations and job types.

Principle 1: The rule of once
The "rule of once" simply states that you will be more efficient if you focus on one task at a time. That is what famed management consultant Peter Drucker calls being a "monomaniac with a mission." It means when you start work on the monthly report, you resist the temptation to jump to another task—even in the face of interruptions, fatigue, or boredom. It takes time and effort to re-orient yourself to a task after you leave it. I call this "mental inertia." It takes much more fuel to start and stop a huge locomotive than it does to keep it moving down the track. Transitions between tasks are highly inefficient. Time management expert Alec MacKenzie calls this the principle of "single handling," and said that by practicing it you can increase your efficiency by as much as 50 percent in one day.

Principal 2: Fire fighting
The rule of once is all well and good, you say, "but I live in the real world. There are always things that come up in the middle of the day that pull me away from the task at hand." This is what's known as fire fighting.

The need for fire fighting can be reduced by advanced planning, but there will always be fires that erupt at the worst possible moment. When fires do erupt do the following:

1. **Stop and think before you act.** When fires erupt, there is a tendency to jump in without thinking. Make sure you get all the facts before you begin.

2. **Delegate when possible.** Resist the temptation to be the hero. It's probably true that someone else is well equipped to handle this fire. If so, let them.

3. **Write new tasks on your to-do list.** This allows you to see the importance of the current fire in relation to the other things you could do. Sometimes fires are not as important as they first appear.
**4. Train a firefighter.** If you see the same types of fires erupting over and over, train a subordinate to handle it. You will be enhancing this person's job skills and improving their own efficiency.

Remember that your best weapon against unexpected fires is advanced planning. By spending a few minutes planning your day, you will greatly reduce the number of fires you have to fight. Learn to be a fire marshal (a person responsible for preventing fires) rather than a firefighter. If you don't take action to reduce the number of fires you have to fight, no one else will.

**Principle 3: Workstation management**

Workstation management involves having a work space that is neat, organized, and structured for efficient workflow. People often leave uncompleted paperwork on their desks either because they don't know where to file it or because they are afraid that if they file it, they will forget about it. However, having uncompleted projects in your work space is distracting. You might be working on one project, see the uncompleted proposal on the corner of your desk, and your mind begins to wander, thinking about the proposal for the next five minutes. These subtle transitions from thinking about one task and then moving back to the task at hand wreak havoc on your efficiency. If you want to avoid these problems, adhere to the fundamental rule of workstation management.

But how can you do this and still make sure you don't forget an importance task, or forget where you've filed it? These problems can be answered with two words: task files. Task files are temporary files for holding pending work. They are kept in a convenient drawer, and you place in them all the things that normally would have been piled on your desk. Rather than having names, items are filed by number: Task 1, Task 2, Task 3 and so on. How do you keep from forgetting where you've filed something? Or forgetting about it all together? In order to make task files work, you have to use a to-do list. However, this should not be a problem, because almost every business professional uses a to-do list in some form. To utilize task files, clean off your desk by placing individual tasks in different files; then record on your to-do list the location of the materials for that task. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To-do list: 2/27/05</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smith proposal (Task 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone report (Task 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call Chuck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirm travel plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly numbers (Task 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre for staff mtg. (Task 6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fundamental rule of workstation management is to have only one thing in your work space at a time. Placing pending work in temporary task files will greatly help you achieve this very importance efficiency principle.

**Principle 4: Streamline meetings**

Meetings consume a significant amount of the workweek for almost any working professional. Whether they are staff meetings, work group meetings, or one-on-one meetings, the same questions apply. Before your next meeting, ask yourself the following questions:

1. **Is this meeting necessary? Do I need to attend?** The most efficient meeting of all is the one you don't have. If you are calling the meeting, ask yourself if the same objectives can be accomplished
through a memo or e-mail. If you are invited, consider declining to attend if you believe your presence will not add value.

2. Does the meeting have a purpose and an agenda? If you are hosting the meeting, make sure you publish an agenda and a statement of purpose (two to three sentences describing the desired outcome) and distribute it to all attendees several days before the meeting. If you are invited to a meeting, ask the host for an agenda and purpose statement.

3. Have all discussion items been brought to closure? Ensuring that someone walks away from the meeting with specific responsibility for any action items is a seemingly simple process, but one that is often neglected.

Principle 5: Telephone skills
Most of us began to use the phone when we were teenagers. As such we learned to use the phone as a social tool. Today, in the world of work, we need to re-learn to use the phone as a business tool. There are two primary reasons for much of the inefficiency of telephone time:

1. the individual you are speaking with is not being directed and task-oriented; and
2. you are not being direct and task-oriented.

There are times when we allow conversations to drag, because we are avoiding some other, less pleasant task. The following are four techniques to increase your efficiency on the phone:

1. Batch calls. This means making all your calls at one time rather than interspersing them throughout the day. There is a small learning curve we go through each time we begin making calls before we get into the flow of efficient telephone usage. You will be more efficient if you make all your calls together.

2. Give and get call-back times. It's amazing the amount of time and effort that are wasted playing telephone tag. Reduce some of this wasted effort by saying, "Could you have Sue call me back? I'll be in the office today between 3 and 4 p.m." Or, "What's the best time to call John?"

3. Stand up. If you make your calls standing up, it will be just uncomfortable enough to remind you to stay task-oriented and efficient in your conversation. Also, slight changes in your tonality and pace will communicate to the other person that you want to keep things moving along.

4. Sum up. The best way to close out a phone conversation that is beginning to drag is to summarize what's been said. For example, "So Bob, what we've agreed to is (blank), and you are going to do (blank) while I do (blank)."

Principle 6: Better, faster reading
According to Evelyn Wood, there are three reasons we read slowly:

- reading one word at a time;
- regression; and
- sub-vocalization.

Most people read approximately 240 words per minute. This is because we were taught in grade school to read one word at a time. Since it takes the human eye approximately a quarter of a second to stop and focus on a single word, the maximum number of words that can be read in one minute, reading one word at a time, is 240.
However, we often read more slowly because of a phenomenon called "regression." Regression is the conscious or subconscious habit of going back and looking at a word after we have already read it. This may happen to reinforce what we've read, or simply because we are unsure of the meaning of the word.

Sub-vocalization means that we pronounce each word in our minds as we are reading it. Again, this is a habit we learned in grade school when the teacher told us to "sound it out." Sub-vocalization greatly hampers our ability to read quickly because we can never read faster than we can speak—about 250 words per minute. If you are currently reading at a rate higher than 240 words per minute, congratulations, you have naturally overcome some of these impediments to faster reading.

In order to read faster, begin by realizing that we read different things for different reasons. At work, we may read a technical report or a memo looking for important pieces of data or time that require action on our part. At home, we might read a magazine article purely for pleasure. These items should not be read at the same speed. If you want to read faster, make sure you are clear on your "purpose" before you begin. Whether your purpose is to gain important facts or simply for pleasure, you can adjust your reading style and speed if you have clearly defined your purpose.

Also consider doing a "preview" and "postview." Rather than just diving into a book or article, take a few minutes up front to preview what you are about to read. Look over the organization, subtitles and the front and back cover if it is a book. Try to make a few intelligent guesses about what you will be reading before your start. When you finishing reading, enhance your retention by doing a postview—doing the preview process after having read the work.

**Principle 7: Healthy vitality**

Have you ever had days where you weren't at your absolute peak? Where you managed to make it through the day, but your productivity left much to be desired? And have you ever had days where you were at your peak, where you exuded energy, your mind was clear and sharp and you produced megadoses of work in a mere day? Would you like to have more of the latter?

Most people shout an impassioned Yes! to the last question. Energy and vitality are attractive qualifies in our society, and they are essential for maximizing efficiency.

There are three fundamental ingredients for maximum energy: exercise, diet, and relaxation. A minimal exercise program should include aerobic exercise (walking, swimming, running, etc.) three days per week for at least 30 minutes per day. Though there is a great controversy over what humans should eat, a balanced approach seems best. Author Covert Bailey recommends, "Reduce sugar, reduce fat, increase fiber, and eat a variety of foods." Five minutes of structured relaxation—sitting quietly, eyes closed, breathing deeply—can be as beneficial as an hour of sleep. Read "The Relaxation Response," by Herbert Bensen, for an excellent treatment of this facet of energy management.

**Principle 8: Overcoming procrastination**

Dr. Albert Ellis, author of "Overcoming Procrastination," defines procrastination as, "when we decide to do something and then we don't do it." Probably none of us need to be convinced of the ills of procrastination. Here are three techniques to reduce it:

1. **Break big tasks down.** Time management experts tell us that if a task will take longer than 45 minutes, it should be broken into several smaller tasks.
2. Use "creative scheduling." Creative scheduling means that you schedule your most difficult tasks in the highest-energy part of your day. If you hate making phone calls and you're a morning person, schedule the calls for the morning.

3. Utilize a "leading task." A leading task is an exceedingly small and simple task used to get you started on a project. Rather than saying to yourself, "I need to sit down at the computer and write the Smith proposal," say, "I will sit down and turn on the computer." If you don't want to do anymore, you don't have to. But most people find that once they get started, staying with the task is not too difficult.

Merck is a professional speaker who specializes in communication, motivation and personal effectiveness. He is founder and president of the Center for Personal Effectiveness and author of the book, "How to Succeed in Activity Based Selling." He can be reached at (860) 635-6102 or by fax at (860) 635-6106.

PIA—your best source of information

With respect to all information found in this communication, PIA of Florida and its directors, officers, members, or employees make no warranty, express or implied, or assume any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information contained therein. PIA of Florida does not warrant that the information or services will meet any specific requirements; nor will it be error-free or uninterrupted; nor shall PIA of Florida be liable for any indirect, incidental, or consequential damages sustained or incurred in connection with the use of information in this communication. Under no circumstances will PIA of Florida be liable for any loss or damage caused by anyone's reliance on information contained in this communication. 6/03 1-05