Obstacles to Managing Priorities

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

• Identify common obstacles to managing priorities successfully.
• State several benefits of learning to manage your workload.

As we move toward the twenty-first century, we must all be able to accomplish more with less time and fewer resources. As organizations become more streamlined, jobs are expanding to encompass new responsibilities. The new technologies that help us communicate more quickly also require that we work more quickly. Our long-term projects and day-to-day tasks compete for attention, and there is mounting pressure to keep quality high while increasing productivity.

In this course, you'll learn practical strategies and techniques for managing your priorities more successfully. In this chapter, we'll begin by examining the common reasons people find it difficult to keep up with their work. Then we will consider the advantages of learning to manage priorities.

HAVING TROUBLE KEEPING UP? FIND OUT WHY

Sometimes it seems impossible to get everything done. There are too many deadlines, interruptions, and last-minute requests. Priorities change overnight. Things happen unexpectedly. No matter how hard you work, your To Do list gets longer and longer.
At such times, it may seem futile even to try keeping up. Don't despair, however; it can be done. There are a variety of actions that can help you control your workload, even at the busiest times. The first step is to recognize why you're having trouble.

Case in Point

It's May 1, and Julia is exhausted. She has worked nonstop since the beginning of April, trying to finish the annual report and the marketing package for a new product, without neglecting her routine work. Now she's about to miss the deadlines for both projects, and her To Do list is longer than it was when the month began.

Here's what has happened during the month:

- Julia expected her assistant Francie to do the page layout for the annual report. But Francie never bothered to sign up for the April desktop publishing class. "I had too much to do," Francie said. "Besides, I didn't know the class was important." Julia had to do the page layout herself.
- After Julia had almost finished the page layout, the CEO returned her review copy of the draft with a note saying that information was missing and that she wanted three sections reorganized.
- Julia's department moved to another building. Although they'd known about the move for months, no one did anything until moving day, when the staff quickly stuffed everything into boxes. Two days later, Julia spent an entire morning searching for the artwork for the marketing package. It never showed up so she had to work with the graphic artist to get it redone.
- Julia's manager had a family emergency. He called Julia at home on a Sunday night to ask Julia to take his place at a two-day off-site meeting that began the next morning.

An examination of what happened during the month provides clues about why Julia has fallen behind. Why is Julia having trouble keeping up? Here are some of the reasons Julia is having trouble managing her workload:

- Francie didn't understand that Julia expected her to take the desktop publishing class so she'd be prepared to do the page layout. Because Julia failed to communicate her expectations clearly—and clarify to make sure she was understood—she ended up doing work she'd planned to delegate.
- Julia and the CEO never came to an understanding about what content the annual report would include and how it would be organized. As a result, the project took Julia twice as long as she'd planned.
- No one had thought of organizing the move. This lack of planning caused Julia to waste valuable time searching for the artwork and then working with the graphic artist to get it redone.
- When Julia's manager had a family emergency, Julia had to drop everything to attend a two-day meeting her manager was scheduled to attend. This new task conflicted with Julia's existing priorities.
Does Julia's situation seem familiar? Most of us face similar obstacles when we try to keep up with our many tasks and projects. Exhibit 1-1 describes the most common obstacles to managing priorities successfully. The following is a brief discussion of each obstacle.

**Poor Communication**

Working effectively with others requires ongoing communication; yet the busier we are, the more likely we are to rush through our communications. In our rush, we assume we understand what another person means. We assume we have been given all the necessary information and that it's accurate. We assume others have heard and understood us.

But assumptions are just that—assumptions. By acting on them before checking them out, we risk doing the wrong work or doing it in the wrong way, and we risk misleading others about what we expect from them. As a result, we create problems that take longer to solve than it would have taken to do an entire job right in the first place.

**Unclear Expectations and Objectives**

We often begin even complicated projects without a clear idea of what outcome is actually needed or expected. We might put in weeks of work, only to discover that the outcome isn't satisfactory. The resulting problems and delays can create a domino effect, toppling deadlines for weeks and months into the future.

**Lack of Planning**

It's easy to get so caught up in moment-to-moment tasks and crises that we neglect to plan ahead. We work haphazardly instead of purposefully. As a result, we sometimes do things that didn't need to be done in the first place. When we don't plan, we also take the long way around and waste time re-inventing perfectly good wheels.
When we neglect planning, we often set deadlines without considering what it will take to meet them. We ignore the "what-ifs" that can make or break any project. We often also forget to think about what resources we need and where those resources will come from.

Conflicting and/or Unexpected Needs and Demands

Managing priorities would be a snap if others were not involved. However, others are involved. Everyone we work with has his or her own needs, concerns, and priorities—all of which also involve others.

Sorting through the often conflicting needs and demands is a job in itself. Instead of sorting through them, however, we often respond to new needs and requests by moving them to the head of our priorities list without stopping to think about where on the list they actually belong.

Failure to Recognize and Respond to Change

The only thing any of us can be sure of is that things change. Nevertheless, we continue to behave as if once a decision is made or a plan developed, it's fixed in stone. We march ahead, our eyes fixed firmly on the road, not noticing or acknowledging that the bridge is out or the destination has been changed.

As a result, we labor to complete projects that no longer need to be completed. We struggle to follow action plans that are proving unworkable. Moreover, we're surprised and disappointed when our hard work ends up being ignored or discarded.

Insufficient Resources, Especially Time

We tend to assume that resources will be available when we need them, and that's not always true. The best intentions and the most careful planning won't make it possible to complete a task or project successfully if essential resources are unavailable.

The resource we underestimate most often is time. There is no adequate substitute for time. The reality is that if something requires 16 hours to accomplish, it can't be done in 12. But we ignore reality; we set deadlines as if the time we need is going to be there somehow; and then we're upset when it's not.

Striving for Perfection Instead of Results

We all want our work to be perceived as professional. It feels good when people say, "That's a great job!" However, our concern with quality often leads us far beyond what's required. Instead of stopping when we achieve the results that are needed and expected, we keep on going, seeking an unnecessary level of perfection—and often neglecting other work in the process.
Key Learning Point . . .

People often have difficulty managing multiple priorities because of these obstacles:

- Unclear communication, including neglecting to make sure messages have been understood
- Unclear expectations and objectives, including no clear sense of what results are needed and expected
- Lack of planning, including not considering necessary resources and “what-ifs”
- Conflicting or unexpected needs and demands, including moving tasks and projects to the head of the priorities list without considering where they actually belong
- Failure to recognize and respond to change, including continuing with projects that no longer need to be completed
- Insufficient resources, especially time, and unrealistic deadlines
- Striving for perfection, instead of stopping when the necessary results have been achieved

Think About It . . .

Think of a time when you had difficulty managing your priorities. (It might be sometime in the past, or it might be happening right now.) Briefly describe the situation.

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Check the obstacles below that might be contributing (or might have contributed) to the difficulty:

- Communication with others was unclear or incomplete.
- Expectations or objectives were not clear.
- I did not plan carefully enough or set realistic deadlines.
- I ran into conflicting needs and demands.
- I did not recognize or respond to changes in the situation that affected my tasks/projects.
- I did not have all the resources I needed to complete my tasks/projects in the most efficient way.
- I continued working on my tasks/projects even after I’d achieved the results that were needed and expected.
- Other: ____________________________________________________________
THE BENEFITS OF MANAGING PRIORITIES

It takes careful thought and attention to stay on top of our workloads. It also takes the resource we never seem to have enough of—Time. However, investing one’s thought and attention can produce a substantial return.

Case in Point
We looked at Julia's situation during May, when she was falling behind. Now let's see what happened next.

- In June, Julia gave Francie a "Needs Improvement" on her first performance appraisal, citing three times when Francie didn't do something Julia had expected her to do. Francie complained to Human Resources that Julia "just drops things on my desk."

• The following week, the CEO sent Julia an E-mail reminding her that she expected the Annual Report to be in the mail no later than June 23 and attaching a revised biographical statement.

• Because the artwork for the Marketing Package had to be redone (at an additional cost), the product rollout was delayed for six weeks. The Sales Manager and the New Products Manager were furious and complained to the CEO.

• Before leaving for the meeting to fill in for her manager, Julia had left a voice-mail message asking a staff member, John, to take care of her routine tasks. John did the work but missed an important deadline of his own. In June, he told Julia he was resigning because "the working conditions here are terrible."

• Six months later, Julia learned that she was not being considered for a promotion she'd wanted.

Julia's difficulty handling her workload had several serious outcomes. Her working relationships were affected; she and her staff experienced increased stress; sales may have been lost and costs increased; she lost a valuable employee; and she may have lost an opportunity for promotion.

Suppose you were asked to coach Julia about ways to manage her workload more successfully. What benefits would you tell her she could expect? You might tell Julia that learning to manage her priorities would benefit her in these ways:

1. It is easier to maintain good working relationships when we manage our own workloads. Poor working relationships can create serious problems and make it difficult for people to do good work.

2. Learning to manage your workload is bound to increase both productivity and work quality. Julia's productivity and work quality have suffered because she's lost control of her priorities.
Apply What You’ve Learned

List the tasks and projects (in addition to your routine work) you need to accomplish during the next month. Use the worksheet in Exhibit 1-3 to identify existing or potential obstacles to accomplishing those priorities.
### Exhibit 1–3
#### Worksheet: Obstacles to Accomplishing Multiple Priorities

Key tasks and projects I need to accomplish during the month of: __________

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**EXISTING OR POTENTIAL OBSTACLES**

- **Poor Communication**
  - Notes: 
  
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- **Unclear Expectations and Objectives**
  - Notes: 
  
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- **Lack of Planning**
  - Notes: 
  
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- **Conflicting and/or Unexpected Needs and Demands**
  - Notes: 
  
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- **Failure to Recognize and Respond to Change**
  - Notes: 
  
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Continued on next page.
In today’s highly competitive and increasingly streamlined organizations, we all need to be able to accomplish more with less time and fewer resources. First, we need to recognize the obstacles to managing our multiple priorities successfully: poor communication, unclear expectations and objectives, lack of planning, conflicting and/or unexpected needs and demands, insufficient resources; and striving for perfection instead of results. Recognizing the obstacles is the first step toward reaping the benefits that come from keeping up with our workloads. Our working relationships, productivity, and work quality will improve; we’ll have a better chance of achieving our career goals; and we’ll reduce our stress levels, an important factor in maintaining our health.
1. Which of the following is one of the most common obstacles to managing multiple priorities?
   (a) Lack of money
   (b) Other people's unreasonable demands
   (c) Unclear communication
   (d) Unwillingness to work hard

2. The only thing we can count on is that:
   (a) someone will make a mistake.
   (b) things change.
   (c) no one is ever satisfied.
   (d) hard work gets the right results.

3. Which statement is accurate?
   (a) Professional and perfection are almost synonymous.
   (b) The best way to know that you've achieved the necessary results is when someone says, "Great job!"
   (c) Striving for perfection means doing the best job you can.
   (d) What's important is to achieve the results that are wanted and needed.

4. Which is a benefit of managing multiple priorities successfully?
   (a) Less work
   (b) Higher productivity
   (c) More stress
   (d) Poor working relationships
5. Which statement is accurate?
   (a) Personal life and work have nothing to do with one another.
   (b) Stress is necessary to motivation.
   (c) Stress can impair personal health.
   (d) Successful professionals always put work ahead of their personal lives.

5. (c)