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5 tips to boost execs' efficiency Tina Traster
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Taking phone calls from prospective clients used to drain hours of Kathrine Gregory's day. About 18 months ago, the owner of Mi Kitchen es su Kitchen, an outfit that rents professional kitchens to aspiring chefs, put a plug in that leak. She did it by simply asking anyone interested in learning more to read an online brochure about the company and then to call back if they were interested.

"By freeing up more of my time, I have been able to focus on growing the business," says Ms. Gregory.

A business owner's most precious asset is her time. Preserving enough hours to do what really needs to be done is a constant struggle. That is why most successful entrepreneurs are not only experts in their fields, they are terrific at maximizing their time.

Consider these tips for making the business day more productive.

TIP 1 **Plan ahead.**

At the end of each workday, make a to-do list for the next day in order of priority, but remember to be realistic about what can be accomplished. Differentiate between what is important and what is vital. Put high priorities on income-generating tasks. Keep track of tasks throughout the day, and cross each off after it is done.

TIP 2 **Stay focused.**

Don't let a dreaded or stressful responsibility linger. Cut big, onerous projects down to size by breaking them into manageable bites.

Remember, there are limits to what any firm can do. Set limits and learn to say no. "We never take more than 30 cases because that would overstretch our resources and make us less efficient with our time," points out Bruce Frankel, chief executive of law firm Frankel Golodner & Associates.

Allocate blocks of time for tasks and try to put similar tasks in batches. Similarly, it may be possible to check and respond to e-mail three or four times a day rather than in dribs and drabs all day long.

TIP 3 **Maximize minutes.**

Everybody falls prey to time bandits, whether it is time stolen surfing the Net, getting tied up with personal calls, or socializing. All those idle minutes add up to hours by the end of a week.

Keep a detailed time log for several days to see how time is spent. Reclaim some of those lost minutes by sticking to a schedule that includes a finite block of time for personal matters. If surfing the Net is a good stress reliever, build it into a lunchtime break.

On the other hand, an executive's most productive thoughts often can come in the midst of leisure time or during the weekend. Don't waste them. Jot down ideas on a notepad or in a PDA as they occur.

TIP 4 **Give others a chance.**

Don't micromanage. It not only wastes time, but can also kill morale and staff productivity. Independent employees tend to work harder and better, freeing up the boss to spend more time growing the business. Pick the right people, and give clear directions and due dates.

Stick to core strengths, and outsource tasks like bookkeeping and Web design to the pros, who can do it more efficiently.

TIP 5
Straighten up.

Don't let clutter, physical or electronic, bog down performance. Keep your desk and office clean and well-organized. Same goes for the briefcase, computer bag and vehicle. Looking for documents or phone numbers is a big time-waster.

Keep important contacts on a computer, PDA or cell for easy access and sorting. Get a spam filter for junk e-mail. Create an efficient filing system, or better yet, rely on electronic filing.

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