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**5 Tips for EFFECTIVE TIME MANAGEMENT
in public Safety**

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We’re taught from an early age that there are 24 hours in a day. However, in public safety, we seem to continually stretch the boundaries of time. I’m quite certain there were many times during both my military and law enforcement careers that I worked a 30-hour shift over the course of 24 hours (or at least it *felt* like I did)! But whether you work eights, tens, twelves, or something in between, time is both our friend and our adversary. At the end of a [long shift](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/to-extend-or-not-to-extend-factoring-in-the-effects-of-extended-shifts-on-law-enforcement/), time is our friend because going off-duty means a welcome rest period. But when it comes to completing required tasks, time is often our enemy. This is especially true if you’re a procrastinator or if you simply have more on your plate than one human deserves. In public safety, we *always* have more than enough work to keep us going.

Regardless of your situation, time management is an essential skill that *must* be mastered by those who work in public safety. Gone are the days of quiet shifts, flush budgets and full tables of organization. We [work shorthanded](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/fallout-the-stress-of-working-short-in-corrections/) and are continually forced to do more with less. As such, making productive use of time is critical. Motivational speaker and entrepreneur Michael Altshuler had the right idea when he professed, “The bad news is time flies. The good news is you’re the pilot.” In public safety, it’s easy to blame our time losses on the job itself. But when it comes to making good use of time, we are often our own worst enemy.

We run from call to call and then try to take advantage of the sporadic pockets of quiet time so we can catch up on required tasks such as training and report writing. It’s a challenge for even the most organized individuals. And if you aren’t good at time management, the costs are even greater. I’ve worked with people who are constantly busy but don’t seem to accomplish much. Once you move into a leadership position, it’s even more important to carefully manage your time.

**Time Management 101**

In 2019, RescueTime analyzed 185 million hours of work time and found that although 94% of service professionals put in 50 or more hours per week, the average employee spends only 2.8 hours per day on productive tasks.[1] Projected over the course of a standard 40-hour work week, that leads to a 35% productivity rate each week per employee. The same study also found that just over 40% of our day is spent multitasking with communication tools.[1] Consider how that impacts our efficiency while on the job. In public safety, computers, radios and mobile phones/tablets are all part of our daily routine. As helpful as these devices are, they are also huge distractors, especially when you consider that 21% of our working hours are spent on entertainment, news and social media.[1]

It's easy to see how much of our time slips away while doing regular or routine tasks. When we add predictable (special events) and unpredictable (natural disasters) responsibilities into the mix, our time is taxed even more. According to Valerie Jackson, MD, two major time management stumbling blocks involve procrastination and perfectionism.[2] Late author and speaker Dr. Wayne Dyer noted, “Procrastination is the art of keeping up with yesterday and avoiding today.” Procrastination really doesn’t need much of an explanation since it simply involves putting off until another time what you should be doing right now. It increases our anxiety level and becomes overwhelming as we get further behind, which can delay the work even more.

On the other hand, perfectionism might evolve innocently enough when we try to do too much in an unreasonable amount of time, or if we insist that required tasks are done perfectly. As Jackson proposes, “if 80% of the effort produces 95% of the [result], does it really make sense to reach for that final 5%?” This is especially true if we’re on a compressed deadline or have many competing and/or high priority tasks. Maybe 100% is the goal, especially in this line of work, but we must consider whether a 95% result gets us close enough to our task completion goals and objectives to move on to other tasks.

Whatever the case, in public safety, [we can’t afford to be complacent](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/nail-it-fighting-the-scourge-of-complacency-in-public-safety/) with anything, especially our time. Effective time management not only makes the job easier; it creates less stress, allows us to complete required tasks, and makes it easier to disconnect from the job when we’re off-duty. This is probably the most important aspect of time management: saving enough of ourselves for [life outside the job](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/todays-tips/how-hobbies-reduce-stress/), either for when the shift is over or after we head down the [retirement](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/todays-tips/planning-for-retirement-in-public-safety/) glidepath. Sadly, we are often ineffective at juggling [work-life balance](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/todays-tips/work-life-balance-as-a-cop-dont-let-police-work-be-your-identity/). According to RescueTime, 26% of work is completed *outside* of normal working hours.[1] Now, I’m sure that number is conservative when it comes to public safety, considering the 24/7 nature of our jobs. But just think about it – over a quarter of our time is *conservatively* spent doing work while we are off-duty. That means less than three-quarters of our time off is really detached from the workplace.

**5 Tips to Help You Change the Way You Manage Time**

While time management is inherently challenging, we can get better at it—remember, we’re the pilot. After reflecting on my own experiences and reviewing quite a bit of literature on the topic, I’ve compiled five tips designed to help you better manage your time.

1. *Make a plan, set realistic goals and prioritize*: Most people who struggle with managing their time rarely sit down and make a plan. It doesn’t matter whether you write it out on a legal pad or use your computer – develop a plan of attack for knocking out the tasks you wish to complete and stick to it! Be realistic when making goals and remember there’s only so much *time* in the day. Give yourself some cushion. Above all, make sure you adequately prioritize everything you need to accomplish. My former agency used an assessment center to evaluate sworn employees who were eligible for command-level positions. One element of the process involved the use of an “in-box” exercise. There were always more tasks than a candidate could likely accomplish built into the exercise. The goal (and what we were ultimately looking for) was how well the candidate prioritized items. Did they complete the high-priority elements within the time allotted? Ask yourself that question as you prioritize the work you desire to complete within a specified time.

1. *Organize your day and stick to a schedule*: Using a calendar is essential here. When I was working in a traditional office, I would use both a desk calendar and my computer. The desk calendar gave me a quick reference for the month, in addition to places to jot down notes that helped me stay organized and on task. I also used Outlook, which was synced to my mobile phone. That gave me quick access anywhere to what I had on my plate. I realize schedules and commitments on the calendar routinely change but maintaining visibility on scheduled commitments ensures you don’t over-commit or forget about meetings and tasks that might get lost in the shuffle otherwise.
2. *Delegate tasks when possible and appropriate*: Public safety professionals are largely self-directed, motivated and task-oriented. As such, it’s common for us to stay our own course when it comes to completing tasks. Many feel that not completing all assigned tasks is a form of weakness or an indication of not carrying one’s own weight. Quite the contrary. Public safety involves working in a [team environment](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/teamwork-in-public-safety-key-attributes-and-strategies-for-success/). That means using everyone to accomplish our mission. Don’t be afraid to delegate tasks you won’t be able to complete on time. This serves two distinct purposes. First, it helps you get the job done. Secondly, it provides [career development opportunities](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/career-development-in-public-safety-agencies-its-personal/) to others so they can better learn the job. This assists with professional growth and development. It also ensures continuity of operations when you are gone.
3. *Use checklists*: This goes hand in hand with using a calendar. Write down or log what you wish to accomplish today, tomorrow or next week. Keep good notes on how you’ve made progress toward required goals and objectives. In the military I learned to use what we referred to as a “tasker.” It was a simple spreadsheet, which contained a checklist of required tasks, along with an assignment log (who’s responsible) and notes related to the task itself or progress toward the task. This was a very effective instrument and kept me on track, especially when new tasks emerged and shuffled prioritization. It might also involve a simple notepad next to your computer whereby you list the things you wish to accomplish today. Check off the list as you go and be sure to update the list in preparation for the next day.
4. *Relax, recharge and avoid burnout*: This will not only maintain your sanity, but keep you healthy and energized enough to hit it again the next day. Even though we work in a high-stress environment, don’t sweat the small stuff. Rely on your instinct, proper prioritization and the assistance of others to get everything accomplished. Once you leave for the day, enjoy the time off and resist the temptation to read work emails or conduct work activities while you’re off-duty. Sometimes this can’t be helped, but if it’s not critical, it can wait until tomorrow. I used to always tell my employees that the agency owed them enough time in the day to accomplish expected daily tasks. Anything left over is on the agency and can wait until the next shift unless it’s a life-or-death matter. Make sure to exercise and get adequate rest before you head to work the next day. Remember, anything you do now to contribute to your overall well-being will likely pay dividends long after you hang up the uniform for the last time.

**Fitting It All In**

Working in public safety is demanding. Schedules are often volatile and there are myriad competing priorities around every corner. Staying on task is difficult, no matter how organized you are or how well you manage time. It’s tempting to expand our work life while off-duty, but just remember that doing so means sacrificing time for yourself or with loved ones. Even though life in public safety often means a life immersed in chaos, there are ways to manage your time effectively so you don’t simply spin your wheels. Carefully planning, prioritizing and organizing tasks will go a long way to ensuring you get everything completed in a reasonable amount of time.

Don’t forget about the power of delegation and how it can not only assist you but also help develop others who will do the tasks long after you’re gone. Use a simple checklist to keep track of what you wish to accomplish. Finally, [don’t forget to relax](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/stress-management-in-public-safety-the-supervisors-role/). Take time away from the job and avoid the temptation of taking work with you after the shift unless it’s necessary. One of my favorite quotes from Benjamin Franklin is, “Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today.” Years ago, I expanded on these words of wisdom, even to the point of placing it high on my wall where it was easily viewed: “Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today … Tomorrow may never come.”

**References**

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2. Jackson VP. (2009) Time Management: A Realistic Approach. *Journal of the American College of Radiology*, 6(6). Accessed 11/9/22 from [https://www.jacr.org/article/S1546-1440(08)00581-4/fulltext](https://www.jacr.org/article/S1546-1440%2808%2900581-4/fulltext).



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