

Improve your profits through time management

By Mara Dresner

Are you feeling crunched for time? As though your days slip away without your accomplishing what you set out to do? Do you never seem to whittle down your to-do list?

Bob Prosen has a recommendation for you that's almost startling in its simplicity: For two days, write down everything you do, in 15-minute increments.

That's it. You don't have to keep track of every minute, and you don't have to do this for a long period of time.

But, says Prosen, this will most likely be an eye-opening experience. "Be candid with yourself. Then, at the end of the two days, review what you've done. That will give you a pretty good sense of what you've been doing. Ask yourself how that lines up with what you think you spend your time on. There's generally a big disconnect," notes Prosen, president and CEO of The Prosen Center for Business Advancement and author of *Kiss Theory Good Bye: Five Proven Ways to Get Extraordinary Results in Any Company*.

"What you find in general is that people are spending a lot of their time doing things they wish their organization would handle," he continues. "They're not wasting time; they're working on things [others] should be doing. That leads you to a whole different issue called accountability. If you're a strong enough leader, you're spending your time on the significant few as opposed to the important many. Generally, people aren't clear on what their priorities are. They allow themselves to be interrupted and take on responsibilities that the people reporting to them are supposed to handle. That leads to the whole path of being able to delegate, of putting people in the right jobs, holding people accountable."



Bob Prosen, President & CEO,
The Prosen Center for Business Advancement

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Prosen has put his ideas into practice at numerous companies. One big challenge came when he was a managing partner at AT&T Global Information Solutions/NCR.

"I had inherited the organization's poorest-performing piece of the business: the professional services organization. I had to quickly turn it around to be profitable and effective. One of the problems was in terms of time reporting and productivity. That was a big piece. We would get paid by the hours we would bill clients. If we charged them the correct rate, hopefully we made money at the end of the day. You don't want a lot of idle time; you want your people productive. We

had some of the wrong people in the wrong jobs. Some of the people who were put in client engagement were not capable of doing it right or well. We did a time study. We got to see what they were actually working on and could compare it to the people who were doing it well," explains Prosen.

"Say it takes Employee A three hours to do something, and it takes Employee B seven hours to do the same thing. You either train this person and help them, which is possible, or maybe they just don't have skills to do it," he adds. "You have to determine if you're efficient or effective. That's a very important piece of a professional services organization. That's very important with fixed-price projects. You'd better make sure you're efficient. It doesn't matter how much it costs, it should be productive and efficient."

Another area that Prosen addressed was accurate billing, including ensuring that staff turned in their hours every day. While eventually most people came around to complying with the new rules, he admits that one person was fired over his inability to adapt to the daily reporting.

The new time-management practices worked. In less than 18 months, the division saw a 38 percent increase in revenue, beat the profit plan by 47 percent and improved customer satisfaction.

"We had the highest customer-satisfaction rate and the highest billable-hour rate in the company's recent past. It wasn't only about getting the money, it was about keeping the customer happy," says Dick Rogier, who worked with Prosen at NCR as a senior partner.

"When Bob first got there, they were low-end services, what I refer to as 'break and fix things.' ... It was request-driven as opposed

to proactive consulting. They sold a piece of hardware, and the client needed someone to install it and make it work. We tried to make it more of a consulting environment, where we'd sell proactively as opposed to a reactionary sell, which seemed to work, because we all made a lot of money," Rogier notes.

But it wasn't just about their personal bank accounts. "Before we entered into any kind of action, we always asked, 'Will this make money?' ... We were very clear on our objective, and all activities benefited that objective," he says. "You have to keep a clear focus on what you're supposed to be doing and try to manage other people who are trying to demand your time."

Even now, as a client executive for Nortel, Rogier still follows those principles. "The first thing is, I always have to be very clear on what my objectives are, and what activities help achieve those objectives and what won't. I don't have to look for things to keep busy. Even though I'm not a billable person, I have a lot of things to do and not a lot of time. I need to stay very focused on what my objectives are.

"I tell the people I work with, to this day, I always have to ask myself, if you're making a request for my time, I have to be able to say, 'My goal is X. How will this time be spent helping to surpass X?' If you can't answer that question, be diplomatic, but frankly don't get involved with things that don't match your objectives. You have to be very clear on the objective and have high expectations of everybody. Keep their objectives focused and in the forefront of their minds."

Rogier says it's important to be focused, not only on objectives but on how those objectives fit in with the company's vision. He notes that when AT&T acquired NCR, there was a change in the corporate culture.

"AT&T did things differently. They believed in 'top-down' objectives. You had to understand what your boss's goal was, and your boss's boss's goals and the company's goals. Eventually, everybody works toward the same point. ... Frankly, if you didn't work toward it, you didn't work for them very long."

'TAKE IT SERIOUSLY, AND GET STARTED'

Even when your team is on board with their individual goals and the objectives of the company, it still can be difficult to ensure that everyone is maximizing his or her time to the best benefit of the organization.

When Prosen served as chief operating officer of Data Return, a fast-growing Internet company with several hundred employees, they implemented time reporting. "We wanted to find out what people were doing, how productive we were, were we working on what our clients needed us to do?"

Prosen and his team would talk to employees to find out where they were spending their time and what their job responsibilities were. One group of employees assisted with customer service.

"A customer would call in with a trouble report, say the Web access was not working. The call would come in to the help desk, and they would pass the call to this group. This group would pass the call to the people who would actually fix the problem. We said, 'Why not just turn the call over to the people who fix it, and we'll give you a job you like. We'll put you in a job that fits your skill set.' We removed a number of people whom we could see were totally ineffective in their current positions, and we put them in positions that increased customer satisfaction, where they could be more effective.


"That's pure profit. They could handle more work with no increased cost," notes Prosen. "You have to know what to look at and have a good business mind and see what story it tells you."

It's a balancing act between managing your own time and ensuring that your staff is managing their days. Prosen says that it's natural for entrepreneurs to want to be deeply involved in every aspect of their businesses.

"The entrepreneur generally knows all the details and wants to stay involved in all the details. But they can't stay involved; the business needs them to do other things," he explains. "They feel as though if someone comes to them with something, they're almost obligated to handle it. They have a hard time saying no, a hard time prioritizing. They allow interruptions, because they think it wouldn't be fair if they didn't. And at the end of the day, they didn't get done what they wanted to get done. What they should do is teach people how to do it instead of doing it for them.

"Employees have to trust you. The attitude has to be, 'I want to make sure we're all doing the best we can, using every hour of every day as productively as possible.' You're looking at ways to become a better service provider through time management, to keep

costs lower and keep your pricing lower in the marketplace."

Prosen's advice for those who aren't convinced that managing their time better will make a difference? "Take it seriously, and get started," he says. "You'll be surprised by how you can improve your profits." 

Bob Prosen's TIPS TO GET CONTROL OF YOUR DAY

1. Determine your top priorities.

There should only be three or four. Write them down, and keep them on your desk so you won't get distracted.

2. Delegate, delegate, and then delegate some more.

Remember, delegation is not the same as abdication. You don't just turn your back. Stay involved at appropriate points until your goals are realized. Obviously, if you have hired smart and surrounded yourself with pros, delegating effectively is pretty easy.

3. Perform a two-day time study.

Write down where you're spending your time for two days and, at the end of those two days, assess yourself:

- Are you spending time on too many things that aren't priorities?
- What types of activities are taking more time than they should?
- Where are you gravitating in the business?
- Is that the best place for you to be spending your time?
- What issues are coming to you that shouldn't?

Be brutally honest with yourself, and make whatever adjustments are required. Be certain to communicate those changes to your team, or they won't understand why you're doing things differently.

After you re-prioritize, block out time on your schedule for planning and for thinking about the Big Picture and the Next Big Thing as they relate to your business. If you don't schedule it, you won't do it.