

WORK



TIME MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR DEATHCARE PROFESSIONALS

LOAD

BY WELTON HONG

Almost half of all professionals in this country say they experience stress related to overwhelming workloads, and that's as true for funeral service professionals, if not more so, as it is for those in any other industry.

While you can't (and wouldn't want to) reduce the number of people who require your at-need services or who wish to pre-arrange, you *can* manage your workload better with the right time management strategies.

CHECK IN AND OUT OF EVERY WORKDAY

Studies and interviews with CEOs and other highly effective people turn up some common time management strategies. One of those is the habit of checking in and out of each day. It works like this:

Every morning when you arrive to work, take 15 minutes to "check in." While each person's check-in routine can be unique, it should involve looking at what you have to do that day and setting some expectations about when and how you'll accomplish the tasks. Many time management experts recommend choosing one to three "priority" tasks for the day during this time to help inform the direction of your day.

Each evening before you leave

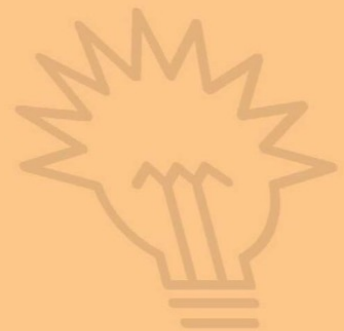
work or shut down your laptop if working remotely, take 10 to 15 minutes to check out. Cross out or check off items you've completed, jot down notes about what worked and what didn't during the day and leave yourself bulleted notes about what needs to be done tomorrow. This sets you up for a more successful check-in session the next day.

Checking out of work each day lets you create a virtual barrier between work life and home life, which can help you enjoy your post-work time more and rest better. Checking into work each morning signals your brain that it's time to settle into work mode, which can improve your productivity during the day.

This can be especially important for funeral directors in small firms who feel like they're effectively on the clock 24/7. Of course, you must be ready for unexpected immediate-need calls, removals, etc., but you'll benefit from adding structure as much as possible to your standard work day.

ALLOW TIME FOR UNFOCUSED THINKING AND REST

As a funeral director or other deathcare professional, you likely have a lot of tasks to handle each day, many of them time sensitive. But people in *all* pro-



fessions, including deathcare, can fall into the trap of scheduling every minute of every day.

For example, if you have eight tasks that take about an hour each, you might think you have enough time in an eight-hour day to handle them.

But you need *unfocused* time as much as you need focused time throughout the day. When you're not focused on an immediate task, your brain uses what's known as the default mode network. You might think being unfocused uses *less* mental energy than being focused, but the opposite is true. When you're in default mode network, your brain uses about 20% of its total energy. The average energy used for focused efforts is about 5%.

That's because during unfocused times, your brain is doing all kinds of behind-the-scenes work, including recombining ideas, making temporal thought shifts and activating various old memories. The results include better ability to problem-solve and think creatively. This mental state also helps you better understand other people's thinking, which is important for strong teamwork and *critical* for understanding the needs and wants of clientele so that you can provide compassionate, appropriate levels of service.

PLAN BUFFER TIME, ESPECIALLY AFTER MEETINGS

Even if you didn't need unfocused time to do your job well, it would be forced on you most days. It takes an average of 23 minutes to refocus completely after an interruption in work, which means you experience unfocused time for every phone call or text you answer and every meeting you attend during the day.

As a professional in a people-

first industry, you may not have a choice about picking up the phone. And if you're the on-call funeral director, those interruptions aren't necessarily limited to business hours.

While you can't plan for at-need situations or business emergencies, you can be proactive about that loss in productivity. For example, if you have four meetings tomorrow, you're going to have less focused time to get other tasks done. Consider doing some of those tasks today or plan to get them done the day after tomorrow.

CUT OUT "MULTITASKING"

Multitasking doesn't work the way most people believe it does. Sure, you can walk and talk at the same time, but outside of functions your body can do on autopilot, you probably aren't multitasking when you think you are. Consider the practice of answering emails while taking part in telephone meetings. This is actually *task switching*, not true multitasking.

Task switching occurs when you move rapidly from one task to another. That means when you're actively reading or writing emails, you're not *really* participating in the meeting.

We engage in "multitasking" because we think it improves our productivity and lets us get more done during the time we have. But studies have shown that task switching reduces productivity by as much as 40% because your brain has to make a switch every time you change focus, which takes mental effort and at least a little time.

And it's not just your current productivity at risk if you rely on task switching; long-term use can lead to an inability to focus and other negative changes in cognitive function.

BATCH WORK WHENEVER POSSIBLE

Batch work is generally more efficient than one-off workflows. Consider all the information I provided earlier in this article. Whether you're interrupting your workflow to answer a single phone call or switching between tasks, it takes time and effort to refocus. If you save like tasks and complete them during the same work session, your focus doesn't have to switch, and you can get things done faster.

Here are some tasks funeral service professionals might batch:

Answering emails: Set aside time in the morning and afternoon to answer emails. Most emails are not urgent enough to need an immediate answer, but if you're in a clientele-facing position and are worried about missing urgent at-need messages, allow email notifications on your device or computer. Sort them as they come in, answering only the urgent ones and leaving the rest for your email batch time.

Focus isn't an unlimited resource. One study found that the optimal focus session is around 52 minutes long. Approaching the hour mark, though, people began to feel fatigue.

Paperwork: Review and process new preplanning contracts, sort and handle funeral home mail, place obituaries or manage HR and payroll paperwork once a day (or even a few times a week, depending on the needs of your business). For most people, paperwork is a low-energy,

high-tedium task. If this is true for you, consider scheduling these tasks during times you're normally low on energy and creativity, such as during the 3 p.m. slump.

Care for the deceased: If your work includes embalming and preparing the deceased for services and burials, you probably already batch your work. That does not necessarily mean caring for more than one body, but it does mean handling as much of the process as possible without switching to other tasks. This saves you time and also supports sanitary practices and reduces opportunities for errors.

SET TIMER FOR FOCUSED WORK SESSION

Focus isn't an unlimited resource. Most studies have determined that people can focus for between 45 and 90 minutes at a time. Optimal work

practices use bursts of focused time followed by short breaks or changes in focus of 15 to 20 minutes.

One study tracked people's work habits via a computer application and found that the optimal focus session was around 52 minutes long. For almost an hour, people focused well and worked efficiently. Approaching the hour mark, though, they started to feel fatigue.

That caused them to separate from their work, often by checking into social media or performing similar tasks that had the potential to distract them from work longer than necessary.

The study found that a 17-minute break was best for resting the brain and getting back to working efficiently. Instead of waiting for your focus to wander and finding yourself mindlessly scrolling Facebook, set yourself up for success with purposeful focus and unfocused sessions.

Set a timer for 45 minutes of work. Then take 15 minutes for a reset. Those resets don't have to be complete breaks, although grabbing some water in the break room, using the restroom or even taking a few laps around the funeral home (or a cremation garden) can be good ways to care for your body. You can also simply switch tasks to do something easy for 15 minutes, such as file paperwork or clear old files off your desktop.

You can download numerous apps for

your mobile device or computer and set up automatic timers for yourself. Search for Pomodoro timer apps to get started.

DO QUICK TASKS IMMEDIATELY

Productivity consultant David Allen recommends that you never save a task that can be done in two minutes or less. This is specific to items you aren't batching. For example, you might answer numerous emails that take less than two minutes each, and it's typically more efficient to save those for one session.

But imagine you're taking a quick walk around the funeral home during a break and another staff member asks for your help with a task that would only take a minute. You could go back to your desk, record that task on your to-do list and forget about it until later. But just doing *that* might take the same amount of time you could use to handle the task immediately. According to Allen, it's better just to tackle the small task right now.

START WORKING FOR FIVE MINUTES

Getting started with your work is often the hardest part of getting it done. If you're stuck in default mode network, using just 20% of your brain energy, and can't find your way to focused work, try this hack: Tell yourself you're going to work on something for only five minutes. Chances are once you start, you'll work much longer than five minutes. And even if you only make it five minutes, that's better than nothing. ☰

Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing and author of Making Your Phone Ring With Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes.

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