

( **BERNARD MOSS** )

**COMMUNICATION  
SKILLS IN  
NURSING, HEALTH  
& SOCIAL CARE**

**5<sup>TH</sup> EDITION**

 **SAGE**

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# TIME MANAGEMENT

How you manage your time professionally communicates important messages to others about how you view them and the work you undertake with them. In western society at least, great store is put on punctuality: to arrive half an hour late is tantamount to insulting the person(s) waiting for you. It conveys in terms of non-verbal communication the message that they are not important enough for you to put yourself out for them and to be on time.

And yet we all know how difficult this can be at times. You may set out with every good intention of being on time for all your appointments, but people-work is a complex activity, full of the unexpected. It only takes a sudden crisis for your schedule to be thrown into chaos. And you can become very resentful when the people you have kept waiting are angry at you for letting them down and are not willing to accept what (to you) are compelling reasons for lateness.

There are no absolutely foolproof strategies for perfect time management, and certainly in the early days of your people-work career you will at times struggle to balance the many, sometimes conflicting, demands upon your time. If only there was an easy way to learn how to prioritise!

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## Activity

Look back over your diary/electronic calendar for the past two weeks. How well do you feel you managed and planned your time? Were there any occasions when you were unavoidably delayed? How did you handle this? How might you deal with it differently?

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Good time management comes with experience, and it is a skill we all have to develop for ourselves. There are some useful tips that will help. These include:

- Keep your appointments diary/electronic calendar in some detail. For example, note the address and telephone number (if available) of people, meetings and visits you arrange so that they are easily to hand if you need to contact them while out of the office. A quick telephone call to say you have been delayed will help to defuse people's anxieties about why you are late, and will reassure them that you have not forgotten them.
- Allow time for travelling and breaks. If you are not sure of an area, allow enough time for getting a bit lost on the first time you go there. Not everyone has 'sat-nav' facilities, and even the joys of Google Maps or similar electronic direction finders cannot guarantee total success against road works, accidents and rush-hour jams. If you are planning on several visits in one day, allow time 'for you' in

your schedule, for refreshments, comfort breaks and unwinding, and for making notes on each visit afterwards so that they do not all blur into one. Try not to allow yourself to be run ragged by giving yourself too ambitious a list to tackle in any one day. If your agency provides you with a laptop, you will be able to record each visit there and then, but not everyone yet has this facility provided for them.

- When you arrange home visits, think about what else you have to do that day, and in your appointment letter, or when you speak face to face, give the time you hope to arrive, and say that you will make every effort to be punctual, but explain that there may be occasions where something unavoidable crops up and you may be delayed. Forewarned is forearmed.
- Know what are your best times and your worst times. If you are a morning person, for example, you will probably want to ensure that you tackle the most demanding of tasks when your energy levels are at their best, and leave the more mundane things for later in the day when you can be a bit more on 'autopilot'.
- Ensure that you put regular events into the diary well in advance. Team meetings and supervision sessions are good examples of this, but it is also helpful to allocate some time each week to catching up with reading, filing and record keeping.
- Think about your annual leave entitlement and how you want to take it. Do you have free rein, or is there an agency culture about when leave can be taken? Plan ahead so that you have the breaks you need and deserve to avoid burn out.
- Ensure that really important events, like attendance at court, case conferences and key meetings, are put into your diary as soon as you know of them.
- If you keep a social diary as well as a work-based diary, you need to be doubly vigilant. If you fail to take into account an important birthday, anniversary or social function, and plan to work late that evening, you will find your popularity ratings plummeting with certain people close to you. For this reason, many people keep a basic note of personal matters in their work diary to avoid such clashes. Again, to miss these events when you could reasonably have planned not to, is to communicate something about your priorities to the other person(s) involved. And there is life outside work – or there ought to be – to keep you lively and vibrant as a person. Electronic diaries, of course, present added complications if others can make appointments on your behalf. It is important, therefore, to ensure that you keep control by making it clear when you are, and are not, available.

## A NOTE OF CAUTION

Diaries contain information both about you and those with whom you are working and visiting. You need to take reasonable steps to ensure that confidentiality is maintained in your diary. But most of all you need to keep it very safe. A lost diary is a multi-dimensional disaster to be avoided at all costs. So do keep it secure, and don't leave it unattended in the car or anywhere else.

## A USEFUL TIP

If you use a paper-based diary, it is a good idea to photocopy your diary every now and then so that a spare copy of your appointments is available in the event of your

diary going missing for some reason. In moments of stress, we can all do things we regret, and a mislaid diary can cause all manner of complications. A photocopy kept in a safe place really can save the day. Alternatively, it may be useful to save such information electronically, for example on a smartphone, laptop or in your Outlook calendar.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Although time is a very measured, and measurable, phenomenon, it is also a social and an emotional construct. To be late in some cultures is almost to insult people, whereas in other settings the concept of being 'late' hardly seems to occur to people. In our own lives, time can drag, stand still or fly by. And, of course, for some professional people, time is money. Time therefore is a multi-layered phenomenon, and in our professional lives we need to be aware of its many complexities, as well as ensuring that we make the best use of it in our work.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING



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**RELATED CONCEPTS** endings; establishing a professional relationship; reflective practice

**ENGAGING WITH THE PCF** context and organisations; professionalism

**ENGAGING WITH THE NMC CODE** practise effectively; promote professionalism and trust

### Service user snippet

Johann (36), social worker:

'I can't tell you how mortified I was to have lost my work diary. One minute I had it but then ... I must have put it down somewhere in a stressful moment ... it had so much information in it as well – it was as if I had lost an arm or a leg ... I felt totally disempowered, as well as guilty having to tell my manager. I was given a verbal warning, and rightly so. I'll never allow that to happen again ... ever.'