

Defuse the Time Bomb

Finding a Strategy to Get More Out of Every Day

If you're like most retailers, you know all too well what it's like to arrive at the store in the early morning hours and not leave until after the sun has set.

There doesn't seem to be enough time to finish your to-do list. Long days are often par for the course when you sign up to be a retailer.

There are days when big projects require big time commitments. But if long hours are the norm and you're constantly concerned about how you will get it all done, it might be time to step back and look at the big picture. Are you using your time well? Are you working smarter, rather than just working harder?

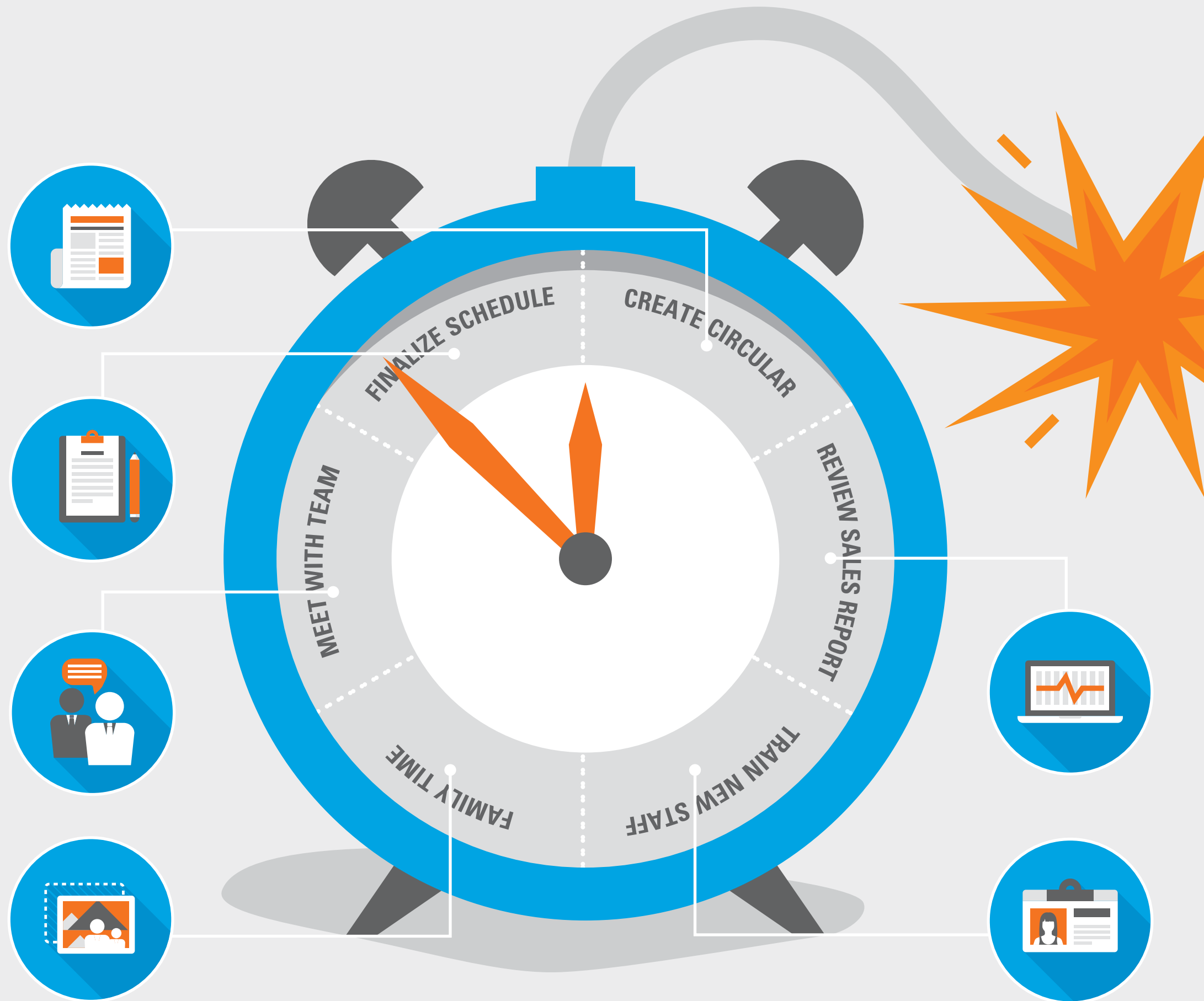
A strategy for managing your time will not only reduce your stress, but it will also give you time to grow your business. You'll have a more balanced life as you make time for family and friends and space in your schedule to pursue those recreational activities that help you recharge for the next day of work.

Hardware Retailing can help you get more out of your time. Two experts with experience in business who have learned to manage busy schedules offer some advice on time management and changing what may be unproductive work habits. When you learn to manage your time, you'll find you have more time to meet your business goals and spend less time worrying about how you'll get there.

Why You Need a Plan

Having a strategy for managing your time isn't just about organizing your calendar. It's a way of getting work done so that you can be more productive.

Byron Clouse oversees five hardware stores in northern Michigan, along with two grocery stores, an auto parts store, 18 condominium properties and other real estate holdings.



He's active throughout his community and still finds time to spend with his wife and two children. He says knowing how to manage your time is critical to the success of your business.

"If you don't have a strategy for managing your time, you procrastinate, you don't get things done and you could actually end up failing. You will stress yourself out, and that will impact your quality of life," Clouse says.

Dr. Mike Goldsby, who teaches classes on entrepreneurship at Ball State University and has established himself as a leading researcher, speaker and author on the subject of entrepreneurship, agrees. Goldsby is also an instructor for the North American Retail Hardware Association's (NRHA) Retail Management Certification Program, where he coaches young business leaders on how to be successful. He says the only way someone can expect to meet their goals is to know how to control their time.

First, realize that being busy is not the same as being productive. "There are plenty of people who appear very busy, but at the end of the day haven't accomplished much of anything," he says. "People who manage time well are spending more time working on things that are important, rather than just staying busy."

When you get more done in less time, you feel less stressed, and that allows you to manage yourself and your business more effectively. Stress, whether you realize it or not, actually has a detrimental effect, not just on your health,

but also on your ability to make good decisions. "When you are stressed, you are not using your brain at its highest level," Goldsby says. "You become more fearful and more reactive."

A stressed mind is less likely to process higher-level thinking, such as strategy and vision. It's more likely to be caught up in trying to resolve whatever crisis may be on hand at the moment. On the other hand, if you are managing your time well, you are more likely to think about the big picture, set goals for your business, and then achieve them. When stressful situations do arise, you are better prepared to handle them than if you are continually operating in a state of crisis.

An owner or manager who can regulate their own time well is in a better position to effectively lead their employees. Your attitude toward your workload will trickle down to other relationships, whether it's to employees or family.

"The way you operate affects more than just yourself," says Goldsby. "If you are operating in such a way that you are in control of your time, the more likely employees will be less stressed when they interact with customers."

Employees who feel they are working in a low-stress environment are more likely to enjoy where they work and provide better customer service. Customers who sense an environment that is well-managed when they come to your business are likely to feel more comfortable shopping there.

Perhaps the most limited resource we have is our attention, not our time or money. We often are so distracted by keeping those to-do lists in our heads that we are unable to focus our full attention on one specific item.

Find a Plan That Works

What does a time management plan look like? More than likely, it will look a little different for everyone. Learning what works may be a process of trial and error until you find the perfect fit. And, it may take a while before your approach to managing your time becomes a natural part of your daily routine. What's important is that you start somewhere.

Clouse starts each week by listing all of the tasks he needs to do that week. That includes consulting with his father (co-owner in the business) so they coordinate efforts. He also prioritizes what needs to be done first and what he can delegate to his employees. Keeping his big-picture perspective includes letting his store managers execute the details of the day-to-day business and only stepping in when he needs to. When he knows the steps needed to reach a particular goal, he can push himself and his staff to complete each step at the prescribed time so he's not scrambling to finish at the last minute.

How Clouse manages his time comes practically second nature to him, he says. But if you're just starting out looking for a plan, one good place to begin is one of the many models constructed by experts. The model Goldsby recommends to his students, and what he's adopted in his own life, is called Getting Things Done® (GTD®), created by author and consultant David Allen.

The premise of the plan is that people, in general, are very distracted, whether it's from the bombardment of news and social media or from cramming our days with too many things to do. In fact, perhaps the most limited resource we have is our attention, not our time or money. We often are so distracted by keeping those to-do lists in our heads that we are unable to focus our full attention on one specific item.

Allen's solution is to put everything you need to do in a written list, and then start a



Byron Clouse (left) has created detailed checklists of daily tasks for his employees so they know what is expected of them. The lists also help them plan their day.



Byron Clouse, who oversees multiple retail locations in northern Michigan, says having a time management strategy is critical not only for being successful in business, but also for reducing stress and living a more balanced life.

systematic approach of organizing and executing those tasks. He suggests these five steps.

- **Capture.** Clear everything out of your mind that needs to be done. Make a list and put it in a place where it will not get lost. If you come to something that can be done in 2 minutes or less, do it then and clear it off your list.
- **Clarify.** Ask yourself some important questions about what is on your list. Is it actionable? Decide what to do now, what to delegate and what to defer until later.
- **Organize.** Divide the list into categories that make sense for your operation.
- **Reflect.** Every week, review and update your list. This is where you can set priorities of what needs to be done next.
- **Engage.** This is where you get those tasks on your list done. At this point, you are confident that whatever task you've chosen to do is the one that will make the most productive use of your time.

Allen's method, explained in greater detail in his book, "Getting Things Done," is just one of many models created by experts who have studied productivity. When you find a method to try, you are just at the beginning of a long, but rewarding, journey to learning how to manage your time effectively.

Getting the Plan to Work

While it can be easy to theorize about time management plans, the real work comes in putting that plan into practice. For most people, adopting a strategy requires a change in mindset and means embarking on a long learning process. Goldsby and Clouse both identify ways busy retailers can improve how they manage time.

• Analyze Your Behavior

The first step to having better time management may be taking self-inventory of how you are spending your time each day. Are there recurring stress points? What is most frustrating? Are there areas where you'd like to spend more time, but feel you can't? "A good place to start is to ask what is the common denominator in all the things that stress you?" says Goldsby. "Many people realize that their behavior has a lot to do with the reason they are stressed."

As you analyze the way you spend your time, you may discover habits you need to break. For example, if you're in the habit of micromanaging employees, it may be time to step back and let a trusted manager handle those tasks. Have patience with yourself as you break those habits.

"When you start a time management plan, it's not going to be easy, you need to be patient with yourself because it may be a while before you start to feel like you're making a difference in how you get things done," says Goldsby. "There will eventually be a tipping point where you feel you are making a difference."

• Minimize Distractions

While some people may be able to multitask effectively, others are simply splitting their attention so that they are unable to focus on one task at a time, thus getting less done. In a retail setting, the result may be giving less attention to customers. Distracted employees end up providing sub-par customer service to employees. Putting greater focus on a task means you will likely get it done more quickly and do a better job.

One way to eliminate distractions is to designate certain times of the day for certain tasks. Avoid the temptation to answer every email as it comes in, or respond to every text message immediately. It may be OK to ignore electronic devices for a short time during the day.

• Make Priorities

One of the difficult parts of creating a time management plan is learning how to prioritize tasks. One plan, the ABC method, suggest separating tasks by (A) urgent tasks that need to be done now, (B) tasks that need to be done in the next week or month, but not right away and (C) tasks that are not critical.

"A lot of people work on the C tasks first. They're not critical issues, but they may be easier to do," says Goldsby. "However, at the end of the day, you may not feel as if you've gotten anywhere. It's those A projects that make you feel as if you're accomplishing something."

Clouse does that by making his list at the beginning of the week of what needs to get done. He also does it when he makes his weekly visits to each of his locations. During a store visit, he makes a list of every task that needs attention. While he may pass that list off to a manager to finish, he's identified what needs to be done first so his staff knows where to focus their time.

• Prepare to Break Traditions

More than likely, when you adopt a plan to manage your time, you are going to change the way you do your work. "A lot of the challenges I see retailers dealing with are family generational issues," says Goldsby. "The way a parent ran the operation is different than the way the son or daughter wants to run it."

For example, the parents may have spent more of their time on the floor interacting with customers. As the next generation starts to think about how to best use their time, they may realize it's more beneficial to spend time in the back office while a manager interacts more with customers. This may take some adjustment for an older generation of customer who always spoke to the owner.

Don't accept a way of doing business simply because it is a tradition. Is a certain business practice stressing your time? Consider ways you can change.

• Do the Least Desirable Task First

If you're like most people, you're most motivated to do the things you enjoy doing and the least motivated to do what you don't enjoy doing. Undoubtedly, some days will have that one task you dread doing, and therefore more than likely you'll procrastinate doing it. Put that task at the top of your list so it's done first.

Chance are, if you put that undesirable task off as long as you can, you're going to waste time worrying about it. Good time management, says Goldsby, is spending less time doing what stresses you and more time doing what you enjoy. "Get those stressful tasks out of the way first and it will make you feel lighter the rest of the day," he says. "You will also have that sense of accomplishment in having completed something difficult."

• Learn to Delegate

If you're trying to manage your time and continue to feel overwhelmed, or if you feel like you're still in a reactive mode, something may be wrong. Maybe you're simply trying to do too much and you need to delegate, Clouse says. "You cannot do it all," he says. "You have to be able to let go and have good people help."

With multiple retail locations, Clouse does not have time to be hands-on at every level of the business. He checks in with managers at each location every week, but generally lets them manage the day-to-day tasks.

Time management isn't just about your own time; it's learning to manage your employees' time as well. While Clouse advises against micromanaging employees, he does think it's beneficial to have some tools in place that can help your employees be productive. He has created guidelines employees can utilize to remind them how they should manage their day. These checklists include everything from punching the timeclock to reminding them to ask open-ended questions when they're waiting on customers. "By having a plan of expectations and tasks, I'm helping them manage their time," he says. "But it's also important to show how to balance that with customer service. We don't want them to become so task-oriented that they forget the customer."

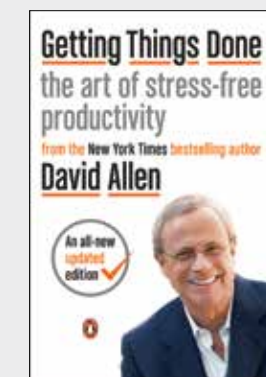
Learning to delegate also means training and empowering people down the ladder of responsibility to do more on their own. "You may need to teach employees to do more problem solving on their own, instead of always relying on the manager," says Goldsby. For example, some employees may rely on senior members of the staff, or even the owner, to answer a customer's question. While in some cases this may be necessary, very often it results in using the time of two employees for a task that should be handled by one. Offer product knowledge training to employees so they are prepared to handle questions on their own. —



Byron Clouse successfully integrated a grocery store and a hardware store in Oscoda, Michigan, giving locals a one-stop-shop in a 43,000-square-foot building.

Recommended Books

If you'd like to learn more about time management, both Mike Goldsby and Byron Clouse have books they recommend you read.

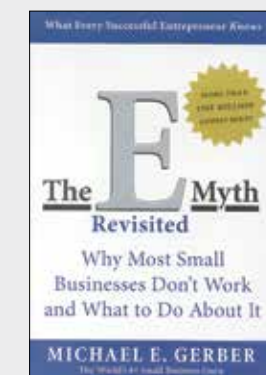


Getting Things Done By David Allen

"This guide will lay the basic foundation for how to structure your time. It helps you learn the art of stress-free living."

—Mike Goldsby

gettingthingsdone.com



The E-Myth: Why Most Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It By Michael E. Gerber

"This book inspired me to create a plan for my employees that helps us deliver a consistent customer experience."

—Byron Clouse

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Managing his time effectively at work allows Byron Clouse to spend more time serving the community and enjoying his family.