

Your most important task of the day

Eric N Bush

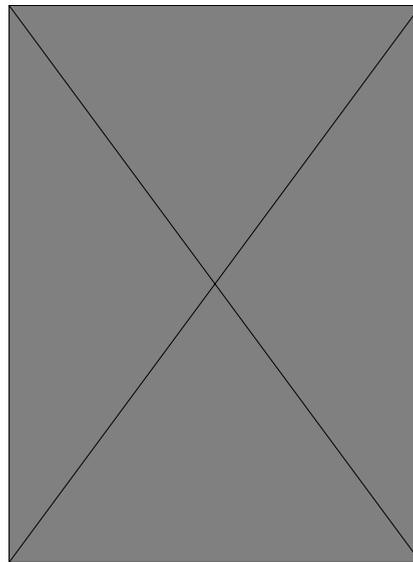
BILL GATES gets away from the office twice a year for what he calls his “think week”. He isolates himself from people, phone calls and e-mail, and he devotes this time to reading. He ponders the state of technology at Microsoft and in the world. He tries to understand what his company and others are working on and how they can move forward in a more strategic manner. Gates knows the value of pondering and planning.

Each of us can benefit by reserving time every day to simply think and plan – time to formulate ideas, problem solve, prioritise tasks, set goals and daydream. Try to carry out this exercise at the same time and place each day, and avoid all other interactions during this period. Your most important task is to plan and prioritise what you will do with your day. If you are in a management role, you may actually spend most of your time planning and prioritising the work of others.

Whether you are managing the corporate network, administering a mission-critical database or designing and managing the enterprise information systems, there are issues that come up daily that can divert your attention from making progress on the work that really counts. By the end of the day, you can’t really tell if you have actually moved forward or just fallen further behind.

Your goal should be to become more preemptive, better organised and better prepared to respond to IT emergencies. By planning, you can move from being reactive to proactive. In order to make that switch, though, you have to ponder, plan and prioritise. It helps to maintain a task list – organised under three categories – and to start each

day by reviewing this list: In Progress, ASAP and Wish list. Using these lists, you can make time to create solutions that prevent crises from happening in the first place.



Knowing how to plan your time wisely will help you do your best work

The In Progress list is the one that’s critical to get right. It’s vital that you make progress on these critical tasks each day. Deliver first on your company’s and group’s primary goals. Tasks that don’t directly affect that priority can move lower down the list. If you are in a management position, put a process in place that helps all employees stay in sync with the top priorities.

The ASAP and Wish lists are usu-

ally for those strategic plans that will save your company time and money and thus make it more competitive. Identify these tasks and go after them slowly and methodically, moving them into your In Progress list as they become more of a priority.

Don’t forget, though: just because you have these prioritised lists doesn’t mean that anything will actually get done. Here are some tips to help you work through your tasks:

- Get the fast and easy tasks out of the way first.
- Next, do those things you are not as motivated to do.
- Finally, get on to the exciting tasks.
- Avoid context switching. Serialise your work if at all possible.
- However, if you get blocked on one thing, go on to the next task until you can switch back.
- Delegate or refuse tasks that don’t make sense for you to do, or suggest alternatives.
- Know when you work best and are most productive. Reserve this time to focus on important tasks.

Knowing how to plan your time wisely will help you do your best work. People who drift through life without a plan are never really happy with where they arrive because they never really knew where they were going in the first place. ■

ERIC N BUSH is a Software Development Lead in the Engineering Excellence group at Microsoft. He works as an internal consultant and classroom instructor driving engineering and organisational improvements in the areas of people skills, process and technology. Reach him at ericbush@microsoft.com.