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## **TIME MANAGEMENT SKILLS OF MIDDLE MANAGERS OF RUSSIAN COMPANIES: EVALUATION EXPERIENCE<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** The speed of change in the external environment forces companies to be more flexible and mobile. Among other things, this result is achieved through changes in organizational structures, delegation of authority, increasing the role of departments and middle managers. A modern manager is increasingly becoming a leader, not only an administrator. Limited time resources and new challenges that middle managers face make the issue of time management relevant.

This paper examines the time management skills of middle managers in Russian companies. The study was carried out according to the author's methodology in various regions of the Russian Federation in the second half of 2020 - early 2021.

The obtained results characterize the time management skills of middle managers in Russian companies ambiguously. On the one hand, the majority of middle managers of Russian companies have basic time management skills, many of them are actively involved in the goal setting and planning of the division's activities and have a horizon of planning their own activities from several weeks to several months. Most managers are relatively good at achieving their goals – 5 out of 6 middle managers meet their goals by 70% or more. Many managers have developed their managerial competencies not only in practice but also in the process of obtaining basic and additional education in the field of management.

Unclear tasks assigned to subordinates, focus of inexperienced managers on performing the functions of specialists, and insufficiently developed competencies in the field of delegation of authority lead to additional time, which could be spent on solving more important tasks. We also note a fairly high share of time spent by managers on the preparation of reports and other documents.

More than half of the time is spent on urgent and important work. This means that managers work in conditions of continuous stress and that the lack of time inevitably affects the quality of the work performed. The results confirm the importance of developing managers' time management skills, especially for those who do not have sufficient work experience and/or education in the field of management.

Managers with average work experience are better at managing their working time than newcomers and more experienced colleagues. They are less likely than others to have situations related to the performance of important and urgent work, and their indicators of working time consolidation are higher. We suggest that one of the reasons for this may be professional burnout and reduced motivation under long-term stress in employees with higher work experience.

**Keywords:** middle managers, time management, working time

### **1. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

In modern business, time is one of the most valuable resources. Increasing competition, increasing the complexity of the tasks to be solved and the volume of information processed, actualize the issue of improving the efficiency of working

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time use and developing time management skills among employees. The relationship between time management and performance is considered in the works of many researchers (Claessens et al., 2007; Chase et al., 2013; Grissom et al., 2015).

At the same time, it is obvious that different categories of personnel have different opportunities to manage their working time and improve the efficiency of its use.

In the context of the stated problem, our attention was drawn to the issues of the working time use by middle managers in Russian companies. Middle managers occupy an intermediate position between top managers and performers, which determines their crucial role in the success of a modern organization (Klagge, 1996; Roth, 2016). These employees can become both agents of innovation and a serious brake on organizational innovation.

1. The effectiveness of the department and the entire organization largely depends on how well middle managers organize their own work and can balance the time devoted to the implementation of the necessary functions. Often, middle-level managers are employees who previously held the positions of performers. Without management experience and special training, they may not effectively distribute working time between different tasks, which leads to their high workload and insufficient performance.
2. The position of middle managers in organizational structure indicates that their time management capabilities are generally wider than those of their subordinates, but probably lower than those of their direct managers. In these conditions, middle managers must build time management trajectories in conditions of more or less strict restrictions from above on the one hand, and certain independence on the other hand.

Thus, speaking about middle managers' time management skills, it is important to keep in mind not only the quantitative indicators of the working time use, the absence of its losses but also the quality of the working time use, the performed functions, and working methods. The last remark requires the use of universal methods in the analysis, which allows us to assess the qualitative characteristics of the working time use for middle managers in various companies.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To analyze the middle managers' time management skills, we used the results of an authors' survey of middle managers in Russian companies. In the course of the study, we set the task not only to assess time management skills and possible reserves for improving the efficiency, but also to test the hypothesis that time management skills are related to the level of managerial competencies development and characteristics of companies (business profile, company size, specialization of a middle manager).

The survey was conducted using two online questionnaires to assess the working time use and the level of time management skills formation.

1. A questionnaire aimed at assessing the formation of managerial competencies, including time management competencies. The questionnaire included blocks of questions related to:
  - planning a manager's own activities and activities of his subordinates, including the planning horizon and prioritization;
  - organization of tasks, including delegation of authority, communication; monitoring the execution of tasks, assessment of the timeliness and accuracy of the plans implementation.
2. The questionnaire for analyzing the working time use, assumed that the respondent recorded the use of time during the day with an interval of 15 minutes. The range of time during which data was collected exceeds the established working day, so the study was able to identify the actual time of work, and not only the time set by the employment contract between the employee and the employer.

In both questionnaires, questions were formulated to control the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, the characteristics of the organizations in which they work, as well as the availability of education and managerial experience.

Recording the fact of the work, the respondent then recorded its main characteristics. Given that we were faced with the task of obtaining the most universal estimates, the following characteristics of the work were used.

First, the functions performed by the employee. The grouping of the functions of middle managers was based on the work of S. Bekhterev (Bekhterev, 2018). All functions were grouped into six groups:

- receiving instructions from the head of the department on the issues of the department's activities;
- setting and clarifying the tasks of the division's activities, determining options for achieving them;
- distribution of work among subordinates, organization and control of work performance;
- preparation of reports, filling out documents on the work of the department;
- creating a favorable working environment, motivating subordinates;
- development of work performance regulations;
- performing work as a specialist.

Second, the classification of work performed on the principle of importance and urgency (Eisenhower matrix). It allows us to identify the development of time management skills through the assessment of time reserves associated with the redistribution of unimportant and non-urgent work and the rejection of "chronophages", as well as through the ratio of the quadrants of the matrix "important and urgent work" and "important and non-urgent work".

Third, the classification of time spent depending on the possibility of managing it. Middle managers cannot regulate all the time they spend. For example, this is associated with solving urgent issues or participating in meetings with higher-

level managers. At the same time, it is also obvious that effective work requires concentration, which cannot be achieved in short periods. Time consolidation is necessary for effective work (P. Drucker, 2017).

Therefore, it can be assumed that the effectiveness of a manager's work will be higher, the greater the average duration of periods that a middle manager can manage independently in the structure of his time expenditures. The greater the average amount of working time that the manager can manage independently in the structure of the working time of a middle manager, the more likely it is that his productivity will be higher. In other words, the manager's productivity will be higher if he works for 60 minutes without interruptions, rather than four periods of 15 minutes each.

The study was conducted in October 2020 - February 2021 and involved about 900 middle managers representing various sectors of the economy of 7 Russian regions (from St. Petersburg to the Krasnoyarsk Territory). The main methods of analysis are descriptive statistics and regression analysis.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

Before turning to the analysis of the results, we will focus on the general characteristics of the sample of middle managers. Women are more likely to hold positions of middle managers than men (64% and 36%, respectively). About half of middle managers are relatively young workers between the ages of 31 and 45. Every third respondent has a management experience of 6 to 10 years, while every sixth employee has been in this position for less than two years. About 12% of the respondents have higher education in the field of management. Another quarter of the employees received additional professional training in this area. Most middle managers do not have a special management education and form their management skills in practice. The average middle manager works slightly more than the standard working time - 43.5 hours per week against the 40 hours established by Russian labor legislation.

#### 3.1. Middle managers' work planning and organization skills

The basic skill of time management is planning. The majority of respondents stated that they regularly plan their activities. However, a quarter of middle level managers have a planning horizon within one week (Table 3).

**Table 1:** Distribution of responses of middle managers to the question "What is your usual planning horizon?" (% of the total number of respondents)

| Planning horizon                                     | Percentage of respondents, % |
|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| The next day                                         | 0.7                          |
| The next week                                        | 20.1                         |
| The next few weeks                                   | 36.2                         |
| One to several months                                | 38.3                         |
| I do not plan, I work according to the circumstances | 4.7                          |
| Total                                                | 100                          |

Source: Authors, 2021

The planning horizon is poorly related to the size of the organization and division, and the respondents' characteristics. The only significant factor is the work experience in the manager's position: a short planning horizon is 36% more common among managers with up to two years of experience ( $p < 0.05$ ). The main planning tool remains a paper planner, which is used by 67% of managers. Among managers, electronic planners are also quite common – they are used by 53% of respondents, the majority use them both with paper notes. At the same time, only a third of managers meet their goals by 90% or more, and 15.5 % of respondents meet their goals by less than 70% (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Distribution of responses of middle managers to the question "How many percent on average do you meet your goals?" (% of the total number of respondents)

| Percentage of goals | Percentage of respondents, % |
|---------------------|------------------------------|
| 90% and more        | 30.9                         |
| 70-89%              | 53.7                         |
| 50-69%              | 12.1                         |
| 50% and less        | 0.7                          |
| N/A                 | 2.7                          |
| Total               | 100                          |

Source: Authors, 2021

The most effective in meeting their goals are managers who have higher education in management. Among them, 90% and 40.0% of the respondents meet their goals, while among managers without such education only 19.4% meet their goals. The degree to which goals are met is positively related to the size of the organization. In large companies with a staff of more than 1,000 people, a third of managers meet goals of 90% or more, while in small organizations with a

staff of up to 100 people. only a quarter of employees have similar results. Contrary to expectations, the assumption that the work experience of middle managers is positively related to the degree of meeting the goals was not confirmed.

Problems with planning their own activities are also reflected in the work of subordinates. About 44% of managers use personal communication when setting tasks, discussing it with a subordinate in person. However, the majority prefer to do this either in writing or in working meetings (51.2%). In the latter case, managers often note the presence of problems related to the performance of tasks by subordinates.

Every tenth manager has obvious problems with delegating tasks to subordinates. Such managers spend a significant part of their working time (30% or more) working as specialists, arguing that the manager should participate in everything himself and that this allows controlling the work progress. This position is more often typical for senior managers with a long work experience (over 10 years). Another 27% of middle managers believe that subordinates need constant total control, because this is the only way to achieve results. Control only in critical situations is typical for half of the respondents, the remaining ones are ready to give their subordinates freedom of action, while remaining accessible to the council.

The content of the functions performed by middle managers does not always correspond to modern ideas about their role and place in the management system. As the analysis shows, 25-30% of middle managers practically do not deal with strategic issues related to setting and coordinating the goals of their division, based on the goals of the organization's activities; making or coordinating decisions on the feasibility of implementing various projects; forming proposals for improving the activities of the division; evaluation of the division's activities, etc.

It is advisable to supplement the analysis of time management competencies with information on the use of working time, which is presented below.

### 3.2. Use of working time by middle managers

Analysis of the time distribution shows that the greatest time spent by middle managers is associated with the performance of work as a specialist in a certain functional area and with the preparation of documents and reports related to the department's activities (Table 3).

**Table 3:** Structure of middle managers' working hours by type of activity

| Types of activity                                                                                       | Working time, % |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Performing work as a specialist                                                                         | 28.4            |
| Preparation of reports, filling out documents on the work of the department                             | 21.3            |
| Distribution of work among subordinates, organization and control of work performance                   | 13.8            |
| Setting and clarifying the tasks of the department's activities, determining options for achieving them | 10.2            |
| Development of regulations and procedures for the performance of work                                   | 10.0            |
| Receiving instructions from the head of the department on the issues of the department's activities     | 9.1             |
| Creating a favorable working environment, motivating subordinates                                       | 7.3             |

Source: Authors, 2021

This situation can have two explanations. On the one hand, the concentration on the functions of a specialist may be related to the size of the department, when in small departments these functions should objectively occupy a significant part of the working time. On the other hand, this can be explained by the level of managerial skills, insufficiently developed competencies of time management, and delegation of authority.

Indeed, the distribution of working hours differs statistically significantly among groups of middle managers, depending on their managerial experience, availability of special education, and the size of the department. For example, working time as a specialist is negatively associated with managerial experience. If managers with experience of up to 2 years spend almost 50% of the time on this work, then managers with experience of 5-10 years - no more than a quarter of the time ( $p < 0.05$ ). The size of the department has a similar impact. So, in departments with more than 20 subordinates a manager works as a specialist for about 20% of the working time, and in departments with up to 5 employees - 35% of the working time ( $p < 0.1$ ).

Managers with managerial education spend a little more time on setting and clarifying the tasks of the department's activities, determining options for achieving them (14.9% vs. 9.9%), as well as determining regulations and procedures for performing work ( $p < 0.15$ ).

It is impossible not to mention the problem associated with the large time spent on the preparation of reports and other documents related to the department's activities, which is typical for all the groups of managers studied. It takes 1.85 hours a day for an average middle level manager with a five-day work to do this job. In these conditions, reducing the time for preparing reports, reducing the bureaucratic burden on middle managers, including through the use of digital solutions, can become an important reserve for improving labor efficiency.

At the first stage, we evaluated the time management skills of middle managers using the Eisenhower matrix (Table 4).

**Table 4:** Structure of working time spent by middle managers according to the degree of urgency and importance of the work performed (% of total working time spent)

| Work characteristics | Urgent work | Not urgent work |
|----------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Important work       | 50.8        | 41.6            |

|                    |     |     |
|--------------------|-----|-----|
| Not important work | 3.4 | 4.2 |
|--------------------|-----|-----|

Source: Authors, 2021

As can be seen from the presented data, the structure of working time costs is not optimal due to the high proportion of the quadrant with important and urgent work (50.8% of the total working time). The use of working time is effective when it is used to perform important, but not urgent work, which allows the manager to concentrate efforts and develop a rational solution and assess the various consequences calmly. The structure of time spent on performing important and urgent work is generally similar to that shown in table 4, except that the time spent on getting instructions from higher-level managers is slightly higher, and the time spent on motivating subordinates is slightly lower compared to the average.

The share of important and urgent work decreases if managers have special education in economics and management. So, for managers who do not have special education, the share of important and urgent work takes 57.5% of the working time, while for employees with a management education it is only 44.6%.

At the same time, for employees with less than 2 years of experience, important and urgent work takes up about a third of the working time, for employees with 3-5 years of experience it takes 50%, and for employees with more than 5 years of experience it makes up 58% of the working time. This fact seems illogical and requires additional explanation, and is probably related to other characteristics of managers.

If we are talking about the allocation of time to perform important and urgent work on management functions, we note that employees with a management education are better at allocating time spent on the preparation of reports and other documents – for them, this work is 1.5 times less urgent compared to employees who do not have a special management education.

The descriptive analysis did not reveal a relationship between the work experience and the list of types of important and urgent work. In other words, the structure of the types of work that are classified as important and urgent repeats the general structure of working time.

To more accurately estimate the probability of performing important and urgent work, we have constructed a logistic regression equation. The following methods were used as regressors:

- characteristics of respondents: gender, age, experience in the position of a middle manager, availability of special education in the field of management;
- characteristics of the workplace (size of organization and the department managed by the manager, the form of ownership, the functions performed).

The results obtained made it possible to clarify the conclusions made during the descriptive analysis. All other things being equal, the probability of urgent and important work is higher for middle managers who

- do not have a special management education ( $p < 0.01$ );
- have an average work experience in managerial positions - from 3 to 9 years ( $p < 0.5$ );
- are under 45 years of age compared to older managers ( $p < 0.05$ );
- head small (up to 5 people) or large (more than 20 people) departments ( $p < 0.05$ );
- work in the private sector ( $p < 0.01$ );
- prepare reports or other documents related to the activities of the department ( $p < 0.05$ ).

As mentioned earlier, a manager's productivity is affected by the ability to manage working time, its consolidation in relatively large intervals, allowing concentrating on completing tasks. Our analysis showed that almost two-thirds of the working time is the time that managers can control themselves and independently determine what work to do. About a quarter of the time managers can not independently manage, since this is the time that their immediate supervisor manages (participation in meetings, interviews with a higher-level manager, performing urgent tasks, etc.). The remaining 20% is the time that can be partially regulated by the manager (for example, working with subordinates). And in this case, we can record that the ability to manage their own time is more common among middle-aged managers (from 30 to 45 years old) with an average work experience in managerial positions (3-9 years,  $p < 0.01$ ), as well as employees of small enterprises compared to large ones, where there are more than 1000 people ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Time consolidation analysis shows a high variation in the average length of time that the manager can control independently. With an average of 66 minutes, a quarter of managers have average self-controlled sections of working time that do not exceed 33 minutes. And only 19% of managers can allocate a period from 1.5 hours or more for independent work. As before, managers with an average work experience (3-9 years) demonstrate the highest indicators. The duration of consolidated working hours is 20-30% higher compared to managers who have more or less work experience. Managers of larger departments (20 or more subordinates) have more opportunities for concentration than managers of smaller departments (up to 5 people) - the duration of independently controlled periods is higher by a third.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The obtained results characterize the time management skills of middle managers of Russian companies ambiguously. On the one hand, it can be concluded that the majority of middle managers in Russian companies have basic time management skills, many of them are actively involved in the processes of goal setting and planning the department's activities and have a horizon of planning their own activities from several weeks to several months. Most managers are relatively good at achieving their goals – 5 out of 6 middle managers meet their goals by 70%. Many managers have

developed their managerial competencies not only in practice, but also in the process of obtaining basic and additional education in the field of management.

At the same time, our research also revealed certain problems.

One of them is related to the functions performed by middle managers. Probably, in some cases, we are dealing with excessive control of the manager over the subordinates. Unclear tasks assigned to subordinates, the focus of inexperienced managers on performing the functions of specialists, and insufficiently developed competencies in the field of delegation of authority lead to additional time spent by the manager, which could be spent on solving more important tasks. We also note a fairly high share of the time spent by managers on the preparation of reports and other documents. A reduction of at least half of this workload by at least a third would almost completely solve the problem of excessive employment of managers outside of the working day.

The second problem was identified when analyzing the structure of working time. The fact that more than half of the time is spent on urgent and important work not only means that managers work under continuous stress, but also that the lack of time inevitably affects the quality of the work performed. In our opinion, the results confirm the importance of developing time managers' management skills, especially for those who do not have sufficient work experience and/or education in the field of management.

The third problem is somewhat unexpected. Managers with average work experience are better at managing their working time than newcomers and more experienced colleagues. They are less likely than others to have situations related to the performance of important and urgent work, and the indicators of consolidation of working hours are higher. And if the reasons seem obvious in comparison with managers with little experience, then the results of comparison with more experienced managers require an explanation. We assume that there may be several explanations. In addition to the explanation related to intergenerational and educational differences, we believe that it makes sense to take a closer look at the issue related to professional burnout and reduced motivation under long-term stress in employees with higher work experience.

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