Working more efficiently

Efficiency and effectiveness are second nature to internal auditors. The words are frequently used when evaluating controls and forming opinions on the activities of others. Yet how often are they internalised? What of your own efficiency and effectiveness?

It is possible to be efficient without being effective and vice versa:

- *Reading a detailed manual to fix a leaking tap is effective although watching a two minute video is more efficient.*
- *Responding to emails quickly is efficient but reduces efficiency at completing any task in hand.*

It is important to balance the skills and good performance evaluation processes focus on rewarding *what* has been achieved (effectiveness) and also how it was achieved (efficiency).

We explore efficiency and provide ideas on how to work smarter rather than harder.

Are you efficient?

Being efficient is about getting to a quality end result quickly using the optimum effort.

Time is a precious commodity so it's important that as individuals and as a team it is used wisely; to enable you to do more of the good stuff and less of the mundane!

Typical warning signs for inefficiency include;

Being late for meetings	☐	Procrastination – putting things off	☐
Rushing to finish tasks	☐	Not sure which task to start	☐
Making avoidable errors	☐	Perfectionism – not being satisfied	☐
Taking on too much – saying yes	☐	Indecision – analysis paralysis	☐
Working late/weekends	☐	Stress, Anxiety, Irritability	☐

How many did you check? Do you see any of these traits in your team?

Everyday ideas

This is not an exhaustive list or a tick list of things to work through. It is a collection of thoughts to offer

practical advice on improving efficiency. Hopefully many will be familiar practices, if not they are ideas to try.

- **Natural highs.** We instinctively know when we are at our best; some people are night-owls, able to draft insightful reports whilst the world sleeps, others are early-birds creating amazing designs as the dawn breaks. If you're not sure, keep a log of how you feel at different times of the day for about a week, you'll see a pattern emerge (just a scrap piece of paper or a note on your phone, no fancy spreadsheet needed!). As audit leaders in increasingly flexible working environments it is important to plan around your peaks and encourage your team to do the same. Routine tasks can be scheduled for low energy periods enabling the more complex thinking to be done at high energy times. Is first thing Monday morning the best time for a team briefing or is it Friday afternoon?

Work to your strengths

- **Do one thing at a time.** It's easy to profess multi-tasking skills; however, it's not how the human brain works (sorry ladies!). The brain's control centre, the prefrontal cortex, co-ordinates different parts of the brain to work on a task. When we try to focus on more than one thing it just switches tasks, it doesn't do both at the same time. A little like switching channels on the TV, there is always a readjustment to get back up to speed. Tasks invariably end up taking longer and there's a higher chance of making mistakes. Suggestions include breaking down large pieces of work, put the phone on silent, go to a quiet space, defer the task if vital information is unavailable or postpone a meeting if decision makers are absent. Do your auditors work on one engagement at a time or juggle multiple pieces of work over an elapsed time of months? Could it be more efficient?

Finish the tasks you start

- **Control your calendar.** Ever felt out of control, moving from one meeting or task to another without time to pause and collect your thoughts? Take control and put time aside to reflect, prioritise, network or read. We feel better equipped to take on challenging tasks when we are on the front foot rather than playing catch up. Could you create a day a month where people are free to focus on what matters to them to do their job well?

Create time for yourself

- **Manage information.** Big data started with information overload with people having too many emails (even after the GDPR cleanse!) and unachievable reading lists. For internal auditors the 'normal' information is compounded by a deluge of data for each engagement. What is your data strategy? How do you discern 'nice to know' from 'need to know'? When is enough for audit evidence? A great discussion for a team meeting.
  Does anyone print things unnecessarily and never get round to reading them? A useful technical skill for the team is to learn to speed read. Emails beyond page one are rarely actioned or read – either file them if relevant or delete. Stop rolling your eyes, it's not impossible!! There really are efficient people out there with just one page of emails in their inbox. Watch this funny video on how email works in real life (the inclusion of this link does not imply a recommendation or endorsement for any products or services offered).

Appropriate and proportionate

- **Be tidy.** Organisations that practice 'lean' reduce time wastage by knowing where all the essential

tools are kept. Having a filing system (electronic and paper), clear desk or tidy trolley/locker is imperative to being efficient. Why waste time looking for something when putting it away properly takes such little effort – physically and digitally!

Right first time

- **Re-engineer.** Inefficiency can creep into ways of working when they are not reviewed. It is something that internal auditors are adept at identifying during audits – but what about their own processes? Does the team apply a continuous improvement mindset either informally or through disciplines such as Kaizen, Kanban or Lean? Looking at the everyday and questioning if it can be done easier/better is motivational as well as productive.

Less is more

The internal audit team at Progress Housing Group embarked on a programme of working more efficiently as part of a corporate drive towards being more agile. Their journey is one of practical insights.

Read the Progress Housing Group case study here.

- **Communicate clearly.** A poorly worded email can create hours of avoidable 'recovery' work, calming emotions, placating wounded egos or reworking misinterpreted instructions. Whilst it seems efficient to fire off an email or pick up the phone mid-sentence on hearing of a problem – taking time to pause, think through the impact of the communication and make sure it lands as intended saves time in the long run. Set an agenda for meetings, be sure that stakeholders know what is expected of them. If in doubt check, don't assume – it makes as Ass out of U and Me!

Listen/read – pause/reflect – respond

- **Delegate.** Knowing when it is better to seek support is a sign of self-awareness not weakness. Working long hours and/or weekends is not a solution. It is empowering for others to have exposure to different tasks and utilising different skillsets is what leadership is about. Leaders need to be wary of micro-management invest in developing those around you, build trust and create the foundations for efficiency.

Share the load

- **Plan.** All internal auditors know the phrase fail to plan, plan to fail. The reason everyone knows this is because it is true! As tempting as it can be to get started on a task, taking time to research, prepare or plan can save time in the long run.

Ready – set – go

Top Tips

Efficiency	Effectiveness
Work to your strengths	**Clarity of vision**
know your natural highs, what time of the	be clear of the goal, objective, or purpose

know your natural highs, what time of the day you are creative, productive, energised…	be clear of the goal, objective or purpose of what you are doing
Finish the tasks you start plan in small stages to finish what you start, avoid multi-tasking	**Prioritisation** consider the urgency and value of tasks and the effort required to complete them
Create time for yourself take control of your calendar, build in 'me time' for reading, networking, lunch...	**Challenge meetings** your time is valuable, know your purpose or decline the invitation
Manage information limit what you ask for and what you read, think 'appropriate and proportionate'	**Schedule** allocate specific times to do tasks rather than a to-do list
Right first time double check documents, avoid rework, know where things are, be tidy	**Now and next** differentiate time horizons, separate lists or schedules for immediate and long term tasks
Less is more re-engineer work flows and processes to remove unnecessary steps, work smart	**Finish ready to start** when unavoidable, leave tasks in a way that helps you quickly get back in the zone
Communicate clearly listen and read carefully before responding take time to pause, reflect and learn	**Signal work time** develop a start routine, let you mind and body know that it's time to get started
Delegate know your strengths and those of others, no-one is awesome at everything all the time	**Reduce distractions** know how you work best, when to use quiet space, background noise, interaction…
Plan save time overall and get a better outcome	**Resilience** change happens, adapt and rebound
	Accountability take ownership avoid blame and excuses
	Self-talk be positive, shift your own perspective

Closing thoughts

Finding the time to be efficient isn't easy! It is a skillset like any other, a soft skill with some hard edges developed through practice and self-awareness, not learned on a course or certified. It is essential to audit leaders. It weaves through all aspects of work and life – creating space to think and time to be. Are you and your team efficient or is everyone too busy hitting deadlines to think about it just now…

"Efficiency is doing things right - Effectiveness is doing the right things."

Peter Drucker

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