Time Management – Is Your Outlook Calendar Managing You?
Or, are You Managing Your Outlook Calendar?

Time management, what a great topic that managers have been discussing, debating, and dreaming about probably since we have been keeping track of our time and all the things we want or hope to do each day. There is probably a million methods, tricks, books, and training classes that will help solve the ageless problem of How do we get more done in the constantly reducing amount of time we have to complete our chosen tasks? We all have our favorite tricks to help us to keep from forgetting something important including: to do lists, Post-it notes, computer calendars, task lists, Smartphones, and I even now have a watch that vibrates when I sit still too long. It tells me to get up and move my lazy ....

Today I wanted to focus on the Outlook product and all of the similar products responsible for scheduling our personal and especially our work lives. Outlook seems to dominate the business world as the software of choice for organizations to provide a system which will manage our meetings and conference calls. It also will track to do lists or tasks, special notes, emails, and I’m sure many other things that I’m not even aware of.

So why did I pick this topic this month and what does it have to do with managing a maintenance department you ask? Well it has a lot to do with the management of really any department of your organization. My motivation of this topic came from some recent experiences with clients of mine in several locations around the country. As I spent days and weeks in the client’s facilities, my day was constantly being interrupted with people saying “Oh, sorry I have a meeting to go to.” Meetings were popping up all during the day even ones people didn’t know they were supposed attend. I won’t go into the phone call interruptions; (maybe I will save that for another Tip of the Month) but in my opinion because of laptops, tablets, Smartphones, and now even talking and vibrating watches; we have lost most of our discipline and professional behavior. Nothing appears to be sacred anymore, if it beeps, rings, vibrates or even worse sounds like a duck quacking, our brain and hand have an unconscious response to pick it up or get up a run off to a meeting. It really is incredible! So back to the topic...Outlook is managing your daily life with hundreds of meeting requests, phone calls, and emails to the extent it is controlling your work life... not the other way around.

The corporate networks have made things even worse because now everyone can see if you are on-line, at work, if you are currently in some other useless meeting, or whether you are not scheduled for anything at the current time; which normally means you are actually working! There is a novel idea.

One quick and effective trick I teach many clients is teaching them a new word which is “NO.” No, I can’t attend, No, I can’t take that call, No I can’t do whatever. So how do you break out of the vicious cycle of others controlling your life? Here are a few of my own tricks I have used for years:

- I have a meeting with my direct reports and explain the problem. I instruct them to make sure they talk to me in person if they need me to assist or handle something important because the delete button is my favorite key on my laptop.
• This one may seem dangerous but if the email is not addressed directly to me, and it’s not from my boss, and the subject does not seem important to me... it gets deleted! If I’m scared to delete it then I place it in a special folder (which means I will never look at it anyway) so I can always go back and search for it.

• I create folders for all types of work topics. For me that means I have a folder for each client I have had contact with over the last two years (sometimes longer). If I was a Maintenance Manager I would have folders with topics like:
  o Safety
  o HR
  o Weekend Work
  o Customer Complaint
  o Shutdowns, and
  o Personal for those personal items I may have on my computer

Now I always have the emails and information I was sent and if it becomes important down the road, I can always go back and retrieve it. For those of you that have a wonderful IT department that deletes your old emails after a couple months you can save them to a folder on your desktop and they can’t delete them.

• The big one for this Tip of the Month is your calendar; especially if other employees can see your meeting availability. You must control this function or it will drive you nuts. The trick I have used for years is to block out part of every day for my own personal or quiet time which allowed me to actually get something done. So what happens when someone tries to schedule a meeting and invite me? My calendar shows them that I am busy and unavailable for their meeting. It’s a great tool but it takes discipline to stick with it and tell employees with nothing else to do except to attend meetings, “NO, I am not available.”

Remember only you can control your work life and your schedule. All of us need quiet time to think, complete work tasks, and develop our visions and plans for the future. If you don’t control your own work life then someone will control it for you.

Good luck and begin practicing with the delete button, it actually feels good.

Oh by the way...turn your phone off too!