

# *HOW SALES REPS SPEND THEIR TIME*

*MARK ELLWOOD  
PRESIDENT, PACE PRODUCTIVITY INC.*



## *How Sales Reps Spend Their Time*

*By Mark Ellwood  
President, Pace Productivity Inc.*

What makes an outstanding sales rep? The best ones focus their efforts on their most important priorities. This means a) finding qualified prospects, b) determining potential needs, c) closing sales and d) taking responsibility for customer service. But transcending proficiency in these areas is the issue of time. What key priorities should sales reps focus on? How do they spend their time compared to others? Are they maximizing productive time and minimizing time wasters?

Pace Productivity Inc, based in Toronto Canada, has been conducting productivity studies of knowledge workers since 1990. The information for these time studies is gathered from a portable electronic device called a TimeCorder. This device allows individuals to easily track the time they spend on 26 different pre-coded activities. At the start of each new activity, a time-study participant presses a button and time starts recording on that activity, like a stopwatch. When the person changes to another activity, he or she pressed another button, and time stops recording on the previous activity and starts on the current one. Because the device is easy to use, participation rates average 94%.

*Modern man thinks he loses something--time-- when he does not do things quickly, yet he does not know what to do with the time he gains except to kill it.  
- Eric Fromm*

For this report, we examined data from outside sales reps - those whose activities take them out of their offices to customers' locations. Thus, we have excluded inside sales reps working at order desks, retail sales clerks, and personal bankers whose customers generally come to them.

Prior to tracking their time, we gave sales reps a short questionnaire and asked, "In your job, what are the most important things you need to do?" The top responses reflect an orientation toward getting business and maintaining relationships as follows:

Prospecting / generate sales / orders / marketing	41%
Build relationships, meet, contact customers	36%
Provide customer service	20%
Time planning / planning / focus	10%

## WEEKLY DATA

The first thing we discovered about sales reps' time is that their work hours are above average, though not as long as some other jobs. Typically their work week is 49 hours long. This includes lunch and breaks, plus travel time and other miscellaneous activities. It also includes work done at night or on weekends.



For comparison, sales managers work slightly longer, amounting to 50 hours per week. Clerical employees in banks tend to work fewer hours. Among the highest jobs we have tracked are independent consultants and trainers who average over 54 hours per week.

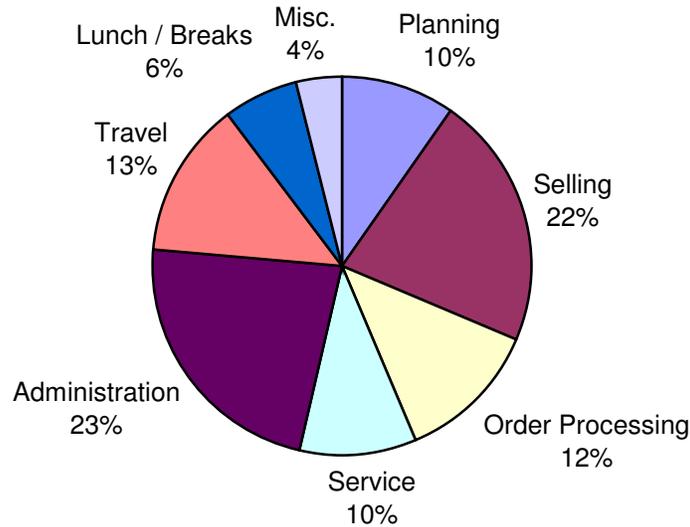
Frequency of activities is about the same as other employees. We can measure how often they are engaged in different activities based on the number of occasions they track. Sales reps are “interrupted” every 16 minutes, while employees across our entire database change activities every 15 minutes.

Weekly hours can be divided into categories of activities. Usually the participants in our time studies track 26 different activities. Each client has a different list; hence we have measured 332 different activities among sales reps. The most common activities include travel, customer sales meetings, personal development, prospecting calls, daily planning, and administration.

These individual activities can be grouped into eight major categories for analysis; selling, customer service, order processing, planning, administration, travel, personal time and miscellaneous.

The pie chart below shows how these break down. A discussion of each category follows.

### TYPICAL SALES REP % OF WEEKLY HOURS



### PLANNING HOURS

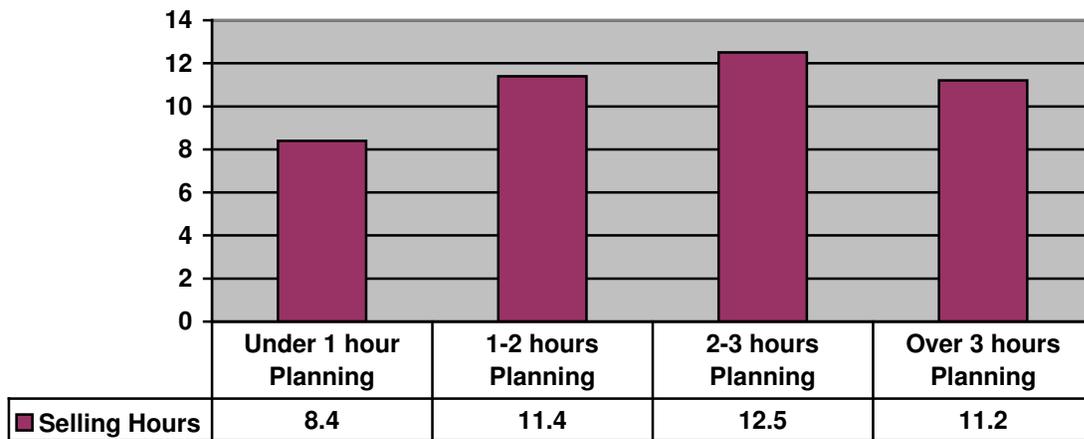
Planning takes up 4.8 hours per week, or 10 % of the time. Along with selling, planning consists of important “A priorities”, as defined by Pace Productivity. These are activities that affect results a month or more in the future.

This category includes determining long term strategies, deciding which customers to call and working on presentations. It also includes team meetings to plan strategies and share information.

Most sales reps spend about half of the time in this category, or 2 hours per week, planning their schedule and activities. Another hour is spent in presentation preparation, and just under an hour in team meetings.

There is some correlation between an activity called daily planning and time spent on the selling category. The chart below shows four groups of sales reps, distinguished by how much daily planning they do each week. Those who plan more create more time for selling – but only to an extent. Spending 2-3 hours per week, or 24 to 36 minutes per day results in 12.5 hours for selling, or 26% of the time. However, too much time spent doing daily planning (over 3 hours per week) becomes counterproductive and as a result, selling time decreases, as shown in the bar on the far right.

**THE EFFECT OF DAILY PLANNING ON SELLING TIME**



**SELLING HOURS**

The selling category consists of activities designed to seek out new business. Sales reps need to find, cultivate and maintain relationships with new prospects and existing clients. By keeping the funnel full of prospects, they can maintain a steady stream of business. Employees track such activities as marketing, cold calls, calls to existing customers, sales visits, presentations and to a lesser degree, writing articles, books or columns.

On average, these add up to 10.8 hours per week or just 22% of the workweek. This is quite surprising to sales managers who expect their reps to be actively selling for at least 50% of the time. The reality though, is that other activities outlined in this report need to be done, and they infringe on selling time.

The good news is that many individuals are able to achieve above average selling time. For instance, as a whole, financial planners spend 27% on this category. And among them, some individuals achieve over 40% of their time selling by hiring a full time assistant to handle their administrative and order processing activities.

Typically, sales reps engage in sales activities on 39 different occasions per week. These are direct contacts with customers and prospects, primarily phone calls and meetings with both current customers and prospects.

Sales calls to current customers are longer than those with prospects. Specifically, sales calls with customers typically take 11 minutes each, while those with prospects are only 7 minutes. The prospect calls may be shorter because some of them are just voice mail messages that are left.

When sales reps engage in face-to-face meetings, they spend an average of 29 minutes per meeting with current customers. Meetings with prospects are longer, at 51 minutes. Thus, telephone conversations tend to be short, but once meetings occur, there is a greater opportunity for in-depth discussions.

Sales lunches are not that frequent. Not all of our respondents measured these, but among those who did, they average 1 lunch or social event per week of only 46 minutes each.

*Working efficiently is doing things with the least amount of wasted effort. Efficiency gets you from point A to point B via a straight line. Inefficiency goes in circles and zigzags and gets fewer miles per gallon. Effectiveness means doing the things that yield results. Effectiveness takes aim at the target and hits it, even if it's beyond you. Effectiveness works.*

*- Tony Alessandra*

## CUSTOMER SERVICE HOURS

Once a product is sold, the sales rep is often responsible for delivering customer service. He or she does this through client meetings, account maintenance requests and related activities. The Pace Productivity ranking scheme identifies activities in the service and order processing categories as “B responsibilities”. Usually these need to be done in the short term, but do not tend to be as important as “A priorities” that drive future business.

Total customer service time is on average 4.9 hours per week. This category also includes customer inquiries, credit issues, handling complaints, account maintenance, service meetings and even occasional deliveries.

Among some of the activities tracked are service and support calls, which take 1.6 hours a week, averaging 13 minutes per call. Among those who conduct service meetings, the average is 5.9 hours per week, with each meeting taking 27 minutes.

Receiving one complaint is more than any sales rep would like. The average is 3 per sales rep per week, with each taking 12 minutes for a total of 0.6 hours (36 minutes) per week.

When we ask sales reps, “What things outside of your control get in the way of your productivity?” dealing with customer inquiries / complaints emerges as the second most popular response. Sales reps would rather spend as little time in this category as possible. The irony is that they also claim customer service is one of their priorities.

To achieve efficiencies in this category, they delegate many of their service activities while remaining as the main contact point for the customer. When sales reps do not need to worry about back orders, deliveries, customer training, and account changes, they can gain more time for selling.

## **ORDER PROCESSING**

The order-processing category includes generating quotes, pricing repeat orders, entering orders in the system, handling stock orders, and assisting with designing the order (i.e. layout for print ads and business forms). This category also includes client administration activities. These are not direct service activities, but are necessary to support the account. They include setting up accounts, filling out forms, and writing reports on customers.

All together, these activities take 6.1 hours per week or 12% of the time. These are difficult to delegate. However, where repeat orders are involved, many sales reps can increase their efficiency by giving these to an inside or telesales rep.

## **ADMINISTRATION HOURS**

Administrative activities are the “C requirements” that do not directly generate revenue, but are a necessary part of the job, and must get done eventually. Some need to be done immediately, some can be done in a day or two, but none support the main priorities. They are essentially a requirement of the job. They include paperwork, filing, handling mail, internal phone calls, sales meetings, correspondence, meeting with one’s manager and reading.

Together, these activities can be a huge time hog. On average they consume 10.7 hours per week, or 21% of the time. What this shows is that sales reps spend equal amounts of time selling, and doing administrative activities!

For employees across a broad spectrum of jobs, one of the biggest time gobblers is an activity called “general administration and paperwork”. Depending on the person, this might include

filling out government forms, writing regular reports, sending service updates, updating databases, and even fixing computer problems.

For sales reps, the paperwork activity can represent over 5 hours per week. When asked, “What things outside of your control get in the way of your productivity?” sales reps cite administration and paperwork activities more often than any other response. Successful sales reps find ways to minimize their administrative requirements. They delegate to others, they automate them, they standardize them, or they batch them, completing a number of these tasks during a designated period.

Other administrative activities are shown on the list below. The list shows averages among those who tracked these activities. Not everyone tracked all of these, so the list should not be added. Nonetheless, it demonstrates how some reps could accumulate over 10 hours per week on these non-priority activities!

	<u>Hours / week</u>
General administration / paperwork	5.1
E-mails not connected with other activities	4.2
Internal calls	4.0
Maintaining customer data	2.2
Correspondence	2.0
Handling mail	2.0
Head office communications	1.3
Filing	1.2
Completing expense reports	1.0
Personal training	1.0
Reading	0.4

Another activity within the administration category is personal training. We place it in this category because often training is a requirement of the job. For instance, sales reps occasionally need to learn about new products or upgrade their software knowledge. Sales reps spend about 1 hour per week on this activity. Other employees in our database spend more time in training, 1.4 hours per week. Over the course of a year, this can be a considerable difference.

## TRAVEL HOURS

Travel activities add up to 6.6 hours per week, or 13% of the time. Typically outside reps make 17 trips per week of 23 minutes each. (Few of the study participants did overnight trips.) When asked about their ideal time, this activity is one where they would prefer to spend much less time, ideally only about 3 hours per week.

## OTHER HOURS

Breaks, lunch and personal business usually average about 3.2 hours per week, consisting of 8 breaks of 24 minutes each. This is lower than most office workers who spend 4.3 hours per week on personal time.

Finally, the miscellaneous activity includes activities that were not tracked anywhere else. If items such as mailing or filing were not specifically included in the list of activities given to a participant, the time spent on them may have ended up in this activity. It might also include charity projects, special task forces and office socializing. At 1.7 hours, miscellaneous time is relatively low for sales reps.

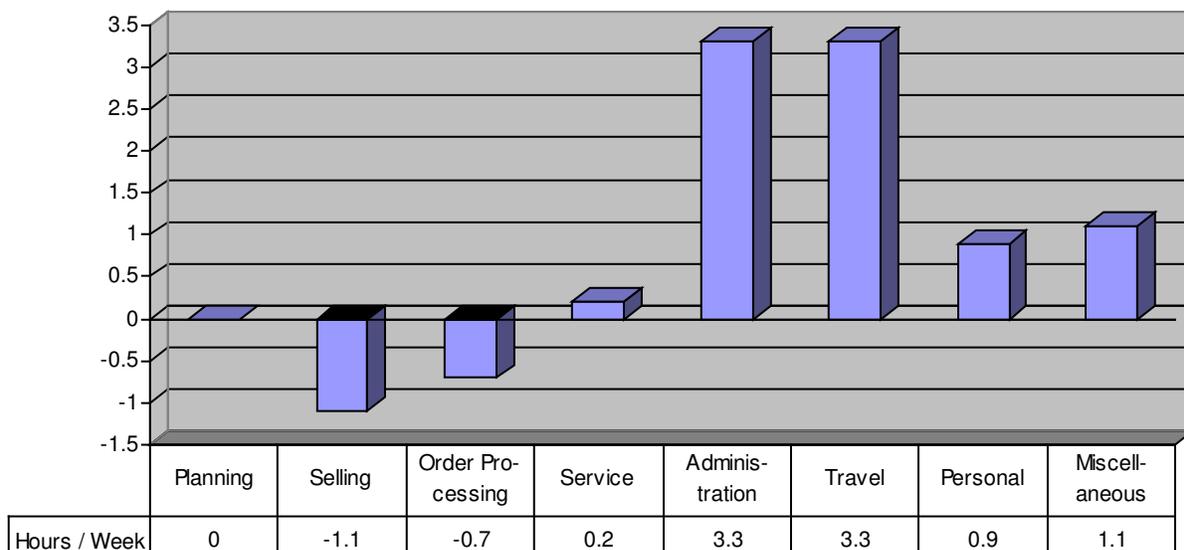
## DIFFERENCES VERSUS IDEAL

Prior to beginning their time studies, reps fill out a survey indicating how they would ideally like to spend their time. They do this with the aid of small “time tokens”; plastic discs that they use to allocate their hours to an ideal profile.

Ideal data is compared to actual data gathered using the TimeCorder. Overall, their work week of 49 hours is 7 hours longer than they feel is ideal.

Lower priority activities such as administration and travel take up much more time than ideal. Meanwhile, more vital activities such as selling and order processing come in slightly below ideal expectations.

**SALES REPS' HOURS - DIFFERENCES VERSUS IDEAL**

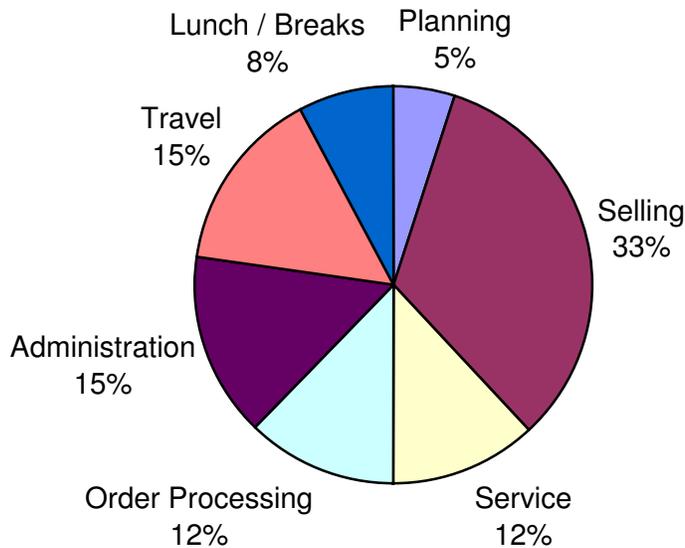


## THE IDEAL PROFILE

The data in this report represent averages, based on actual time tracking results. Here is what we believe an ideal profile should look like, based on a 48-hour week. That is the equivalent of working 8:30 a.m. – 5:30 p.m. Monday to Friday, plus another 3 hours spread out between evenings and the weekend. The key to success is to make more time for A priorities, manage the B responsibilities efficiently, and minimize the C requirements.

	<u>Hours</u>	<u>% of Time</u>
Planning	2.4	5
Selling	15.8	33
Service	5.8	12
Order Processing	5.8	12
Administration	7.2	15
Travel	7.2	15
Lunch / Breaks	3.8	8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>48.0</b>	<b>100</b>

### SALES REP - IDEAL PROFILE



*Mark Ellwood is the president of Pace Productivity Inc., a consulting firm based in Toronto, Canada that shows employees how to gain three hours per week on their top priority activities.*

[www.getmoredone.com](http://www.getmoredone.com)