

Seize the Time! Better Time Management for More Productivity

Since time is a limited quantity, we all seek ways to make the most of it. The problem is finding how best to accomplish that. In this article our goal is to help you take better advantage of your time, using an approach that has worked for us and for others. This approach, which may be applied to planning your life and career as well as your daily schedule, can be summed up as follows:

- Prioritize
- Plan and organize
- Focus; stay on track
- Engage others to help
- Be flexible to shifting priorities

From Goals to Priorities

As a preamble to the process, it is essential first to decide on your goals. Ask yourself, “Where am I going?” and “How will I get there?” This sets up your priorities and gets you to focus. Once you have defined your objectives and can associate each with a time frame in which to carry it out, you can plan and organize. For example, if you are in a traditional academic research position, typical short-term objectives (days/weeks) include planning and executing your next experiments or lectures. Intermediate-term objectives (months) are assembling and writing your next paper or grant. And long-term objectives (years) may involve growing or maintaining your lab and gaining promotion or tenure.

Let’s take “writing the next grant” as an example. Assume that the goal is to submit a National Institutes of Health grant by October 1, 2009. Break down your overall objective into smaller defined tasks, prioritize and order them sequentially, and then systematically start to work:

Task 1: Write Specific Aims section (January 2009).

Task 2: Identify essential preliminary data needed (January).

Task 3: Design and implement key experiments (January–September).

Task 4: Write Background and Significance sections (any time).

Task 5: Tackle administrative tasks: Collect CVs and letters of collaboration; prepare budget; etc. (any time).

Task 6: Write Experimental Design section (identify other key experiments) (May–August).

Task 7: Write Preliminary Results section (May–August).

Task 8: Finish first draft (August).

Task 9: Have a colleague(s) read your full grant (August–September).

Task 10: Incorporate suggestions and fine-tune application (September).

Task 11: Compile sections, deal with administrative issues, and submit (October 1, 2009).

By planning (and doing) a little each day or week, you avoid the stress of an imminent deadline and take better advantage of the enjoyable part of grant writing: seeing the “big picture” and how your own work fits into it.

By planning (and doing) a little each day or week, you avoid the stress of an imminent deadline and take better advantage of the enjoyable part of grant writing: seeing the “big picture” and how your own work fits into it.

Staying Focused

Having defined a path and the steps/tasks along the way, the major problem is to keep focused. This often involves triage—asking yourself if a particular task is on track, and being able to say “no” if it isn’t. Save time at work by turning off the “You’ve got mail” alert and corresponding with friends from home. The same goes for the Internet: Keep on track; don’t browse at work.



Among the most important ways to save time is to organize your work area and create a quiet place (or time) to work.

Balance in your life among family, career, fitness, service, and friends is essential for creativity and for effectiveness in all aspects of life.

Among the most important ways to save time is to organize your work area and create a quiet place (or time) to work. If working at your desk has too many distractions during the day, consider going to the library, coming in early, or working efficiently at home and coming in late. And yes, you need a daily “to-do” list to set your priorities. Once again, define your goals, identify the tasks needed to complete them, and break large tasks down into smaller tasks. Set aside blocks of time for specific tasks and match the block length with the complexity of the task. It also helps to recognize that the toughest tasks are the ones you probably like to do least and will normally try to avoid—and so they will take the longest. But also remember that by organizing properly, you can eventually reduce the time you spend out of your comfort zone.

Engaging Others

Engage others to help achieve your goals. This includes both peers and subordinates. In the case of colleagues, this engagement means much more than formal collaborations. Ask others for comments in the early development of your grant proposals, to get critical feedback as you write your Aims section. Fresh eyes can uncover fatal flaws and provide new insights, and it's best to know about both as early as possible. In the case of subordinates (students, postdocs, staff), get them onboard in your efforts. Help them to feel a part of the project, assume personal interest, and take responsibility for it. In both cases this requires honing your communication skills, and starts with having understandable goals and being able to explain them clearly. To solicit help from peers this may be all that's needed, but in the case of engaging subordinates the process can become more complicated. Start by sharing simple goals and expectations, and quickly test whether they are understood. Then provide feedback. Give praise soon after it's earned, and find ways to reward achievement. Equally important is constructive feedback to improve the working relationship: a reprimand followed by re-instruction. Give feedback often as you begin working with someone and you won't have to do it as often later on.

You'll find that your efforts in engaging others are mutually beneficial. They will increase your efficiency and enhance your leadership skills, and your students and fellows will become better organized and better able to set their own goals, define tasks, and complete projects efficiently.

Having It All

During the early stages of your career you are also likely to be in the early stages of

raising a family. Therefore, you will need to find ways to make that part of your life more efficient as well. Just as in your professional life, don't do this alone. Hire housekeeping/child-care assistance, share the workload with your spouse/partner, and empower your children to take on appropriate responsibility. Importantly, having children is typically planned and is usually not something that unexpectedly prevents parents from working. Therefore, try to anticipate the impending changes in your life and work habits, and work with your advisor or chair to formulate the most essential objectives and a well-defined plan to accomplish these. For example, teaming up with a grad student, technician, or colleague and developing detailed plans to keep your project and tasks moving forward will allow you to call in from home and remain engaged even when you are not physically in the lab.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of being more efficient is that you can better distribute your time, allowing you not only to work more effectively but also to develop your hobbies and to connect with your family and friends. Balance in your life among family, career, fitness, service, and friends is essential for creativity and for effectiveness in all aspects of life. Some days and weeks will be busier than others, but realize that your work schedule need not be relentless to ensure your success. The key is to apply the basic rules: prioritize, plan, focus, and engage others, while you remain flexible and allow your priorities to shift as needed. We hope that using these tools to increase your effectiveness will allow you to achieve a balance in work and life that comes closest to “having it all”—even if not all at once. ■

—Sandra K. Masur and Sandra L. Schmid,
Women in Cell Biology Committee

Recommended Reading

Austin L. (2001). *What's Holding You Back? 8 Critical Choices for Women's Success*. Basic Books Paperback.

Blanchard KH, Johnson S. (1983). *The One Minute Manager*. Berkeley Trade.

Covey SR. (1990). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Simon & Schuster.

Feibelman PJ. (1993). *A PhD Is Not Enough: A Guide To Survival In Science*. Basic Books.

Tools & Resources: How-to Guides. *Science*. Available at http://nextwave.sciencemag.org/career_development/tools_resources/how_to_guides#.

Zigarmi D, Fowler S, Lyles D. (2007). *Achieve Leadership Genius: How You Lead Depends on Who, What, Where and When You Lead*. Financial Times Press.