The Basics of Organizing your Work and Time

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If you are like most academic physicians, you have too much to do and you feel over-busy. Although it may not be possible to eliminate the increasing external demands on your time or to stop the reduction in resources many of us are experiencing, you can improve your productivity by making the most of the time under your control.

I will describe five principles for organizing your work and time that will help you maximize productivity and minimize stress. These approaches are only one piece of the puzzle. Having **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant and **T**ime-bound – a.k.a. "SMART" -- goals is another; see Bickel, AP&S for more on goals. The third piece is maintaining a high energy level. "How" is no secret: get enough sleep, eat right, exercise, take breaks, stay in the moment, and maintain an optimistic and upbeat attitude (see Loehr and Schwartz, 2003).

Here are the five principles, along with concrete advice as to how to begin to implement each one.

1. Do it now. A common characteristic of highly productive people is the habit of dealing with tasks immediately (Gleeson, 1998). The typical response to this advice is to point out that it is impossible to do *everything* "now." True enough – but about 80% of what comes across your desk each day *can* be done now. To develop this habit, handle all 2-minute mail, e-mail, and phone messages immediately (Allen, 2001). The key is to look at these tasks *only* when you have time to deal with them. Eliminate the practice of opening and closing messages without responding. Wait until you have a small block of time (say, at least 10 minutes or so), and go through, one by one, *without skipping,* each piece of paper, message, or call slip, and finish each before moving on to the next.

What about the advice to organize tasks by priorities? Some experts recommend that tasks should be assigned a priority– and then you should only work on the "A's" until those are done. Priorities are important -- but to deal with 2-minute items that pour in everyday. Large backlogs of these "little" tasks sap your energy, take up space, and reduce your overall efficiency. Dealing with them right away will actually allow more time for high priority projects.

2. **Work from a clear space.** Start by clearing off your desk. Many academics seem to take perverse pride in a messy workspace. If mess is so common, why clean up? Working at a clear desk improves focus, which in turn improves efficiency and the quality of work. A clear desk declares that you have made a commitment to change. As you de-clutter the entire office, you will feel less overwhelmed, and you will waste less time looking for things.

Some academics who are highly productive appear to thrive in the midst of chaos – however, they are often more stressed than they need to be. For anyone with administrative responsibilities (as head of a lab, division, department, committee, course, or other administrative endeavor), an organized workspace is critical.

The rule: nothing on your desk except a telephone, computer, an in/out basket, a coffee cup AND the

one task / project you are working on at that moment. Banish pencils, pens, the tape dispenser and stapler, post it notes, reference books, to drawers or a credenza.

How to start when you don't have time? Take everything (except the aforementioned items) and *put them on the floor*. Your desk is now clear! The long-term solution is to find a home for everything, but for now, just clear off your desk. See how much better you feel about the work you doing, how much calmer you feel walking in to your office and seeing a clear space. Every night when it is time to go home, make sure everything is again off the desktop.

3. Keep track of *all* your work commitments.

"List aversion" is common, and for good reason. Lists scattered about (stuck on the computer monitor, tucked in your pocket, taped on the bookshelf above your desk) are more disorienting than helpful. Long lists of tasks for the day are usually destined to fail, because the list is long, and, the day never goes as planned.

Here is simple two-part system, which fulfills the cardinal rule of lists: "remember nothing." Part one: Keep a single list of every task that you cannot complete immediately (Mayer, 1991). Include phone calls, voice mail, verbal requests, actions items that come out of meetings, thoughts that come into your head – everything except new e-mails, which may stay in your inbox. A legal pad works well. When you finish a task, cross it off. When 2/3 of the items on the page are crossed off, tear off the page, re-record all the undone items onto the new page, and keep adding. This is a running list, not a daily list – it never ends, and everything you need to do is on it. Part two: make a folder for every project – that is, anything you are doing that has several steps, and accumulates paper. Put all the folders in the same drawer. For example, make one folder for each manuscript, committee, new lecture, trip etc.   A more sophisticated system can improve your effectiveness even more (Allen,2002).

4. Use a single master calendar.

This critical rule is too often ignored. Some people have an electronic calendar on their desktop computer, a paper-based calendar in their pocket, and a calendar at home, and, each calendar has different events listed. This is a sure fire way to miss deadlines, forget meetings, "double book," and generally feel disorganized. Pick one calendar as your master, and make sure every appointment is listed. Then you may have secondary calendars with subsets of events – for example, while there is every reason to have your home-related commitments on the master calendar there is probably no reason to have your complete work schedule on the family calendar at home.

5. Plan by the week.

Time management experts agree that planning for the week is best (Gleeson, Allen, Covey). Daily planning leads to frustration, because no day ever goes as planned; trying to plan for more than a week is unrealistic because the landscape changes too quickly. The principles of weekly planning are to stay flexible (don't assign exact times to every task), and to not over-schedule (about half your "free" time will get eaten up with emergent work).

Here is how to get started: First, estimate how much time will be unscheduled each day. In addition to clinic, teaching sessions, committee meetings, etc., don't forget to block out time for eating, commuting,

taking the kids to soccer, routine chores like emptying your in basket and e-mail, etc. Second, read through your entire master list of tasks, and look at each of your project folders. Make sure these are up to date, and, note the things you would like to do in the coming week, using your goals and priorities as a filter. Do not assign small tasks to specific times – just get to them when you can. For a task that will involve 30 or more minutes at a time, pencil into a time slot – but remember that you may need to move it elsewhere as the week progresses. That's it. The secret to this system is having a complete list of all your work, and reviewing the entire list each week.

Any time and work management system, integrated into your daily life, can improve your productivity. These five principles are a good place to start. In fact, if you implement even one of these suggestions you will become more productive. Later, read one or more of the referenced books. Get going. Good luck!

<div align="center">Books</div>

Kerry Gleeson. Personal Efficiency Program: How to get organized to do more work in less time, 2nd edition. Wiley & Sons, New York, 1998

David Allen. Getting Things Done: the Art of Stress Free Productivity.
Viking Pr, New York, 2001

Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, Rebecca R. Merrill. First Things First. Simon & Schuster, New York 1994

Jeffrey Mayer. If You Haven't Got Time to Do It the First Time, How Will You Find Time to Do It Again? Fireside, 1991

Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz. The Power of Full Engagement: managing energy, not time, is the key to high performance and personal renewal. Free Press, New York, 2003