

Time Management Strategies: Some Ideas From my and Others' Ongoing Quest to Become More Efficient

Nancy Kressin, Ph.D.,
Associate Professor, Section of
General Internal Medicine, and
Director, Health/care Disparities
Research Program

With credit to:

- Somnath Saha, MD
- Frances Weaver, Ph.D.
- Lisa Rubenstein, MD, MSPH
- Morris Weinberger, Ph.D.

NR Kressin, S Saha, F Weaver, L Rubenstein, M Weinberger (2007).
Career and Time Management Strategies for Clinical and Health
Services Researchers. Journal of General Internal Medicine 22(10):
1475-8.

My competing priorities

➤ At work:

- Full time researcher
- Two jobs: one in VA, one at BUSM (2 offices, 2 bosses, 2 e-mail accounts, sets of responsibilities and colleagues, etc.)

➤ At home:

- School aged child, husband, house, garden
- Community volunteering
- Exercise, rest, time for myself

First, know thyself

- What are your values and their relative priority?
 - Work vs. personal goals
 - Stage in your life (e.g. young children, aging parents)
 - Craft a 'values' statement for each dimension of your life (~ mission statement) to help clarify priorities

What is your preferred work style? Your strengths, weaknesses

- Do you prefer/need
 - External deadlines to get work completed?
 - Multitasking vs. serial tasks
 - Do you like to lead?
 - Do you like large, complicated tasks/projects or prefer smaller ones?

What are your goals?

- Which activities are most satisfying for you? (Research? Teaching? Clinical work? Mentoring?)
- Try taking your affective temperature during different activities
- Use your personal goals to prioritize your time commitments

Organizing your schedule

- Try to have it reflect your values, strengths, and weaknesses – “Pay yourself first” by devoting your best (most productive) time to the most important tasks
- If writing is a priority, determine your best writing time and block it out on your calendar
- Literally block out time for high priority activities

Know thy environment

- Try to understand your environment's formal and informal rules, expectations, and resources
- Then, you will understand what is valued, how success is measured, and resources available to help your career
- This can help you prioritize your activities and plan your time in accordance with your needs and goals

Determine what you need to succeed

- Try to maximize your 'person-environment fit'
- If too many administrative tasks, identify someone to delegate to
- If too many committees, or too much teaching, or too much clinical, can you rearrange your time? Ask your mentor for help!

Manage Volume

- Think carefully when considering new tasks
 - Is it relevant to your mission (either personal or professional?)
 - Can you offload activities?
 - If you have already accepted an additional assignment, use that when declining an additional one
- Give yourself time to carefully consider requests
 - “Thank you for asking but let me think about it and get back to you” or “Let me discuss with my mentor and get back to you”

When to say yes and when to say no (with permission from Marshall Chin, MD, and SGIM Forum)

1. Does it fit your mission and agenda?

Is the opportunity something you are excited or passionate about?

2. What impact will you have?

Do you have skills and perspectives that will be a valuable contribution, and do you have the resources to accomplish the goal?

3. What is the time commitment?

Can you offload undesirable parts of the task, and will you have administrative support to complete it?

4. Can you make it more academic?

Is the opportunity purely service or are there academic possibilities that might lead to a publication opportunity?

5. Can you say no or negotiate the responsibility?

Are you pulling your fair share of the weight? Is there an alternative service obligation that more closely fits your interests?

6. How stable is your research program and/or funding streams?

The weaker your funding and power base, the more you need to concentrate upon shoring this up before taking on new responsibilities.

7. How stable is your family/personal situation?

If you just had a baby or have ill parents, it might be better to wait for future opportunities (more will always come).

Minimize switching costs

- Definition: those time costs associated with excessive multitasking in which switching back and forth between projects incurs significant losses of time and energy associated with refamiliarizing oneself with a prior project, where one left off, and organizing a new set of papers or files

Some possible remedies to reduce switching costs

- Focus within a particular content area to minimize intellectual switching costs
- Designate an entire day for a certain activity – e.g. writing, or for meetings
- When ending an activity, leave a ‘to do’ list to remind you where to start up again
- Document and date your work so you can reconstruct what you have done
- Develop an overall project work plan

Minimize interruptions

➤ Consider

- Limiting e-mail to certain times of the day
- Asked to be paged only in emergencies, directing non-urgent clinical matters to voice mail or e-mail
- Avoid impromptu meetings (keep your door closed, work at home or in the library or where you can't be easily found)
- Minimize psychic interruptions (e.g. when doing one thing, develop a list of other things that need doing later rather than changing tasks)

Summary

- Understand yourself, your goals, your needs, your work style
- Understand your environment, its demands, what it rewards, and its resources
- Organize and use your personal and environmental resources carefully, to maximize your productivity and time