

Time management skills: A checklist

By Mary M. Nofsinger

How to make the most productive use of your time

Time management techniques are usually not included as part of the academic curriculum in library science programs. Perhaps it is assumed that newly hired librarians will receive additional on-the-job training in skills and knowledge relevant to a specific position. However, beginning librarians frequently feel overwhelmed by the quantity and complexity of work-related responsibilities which they are expected to perform. As workloads increase, so does job stress. A newly hired librarian might consider asking the following questions to learn about managing time more effectively.

How can appropriate goals and objectives be developed?

While overall library goals are usually developed by higher level administrators, each librarian also needs to plan for what he or she wants to achieve and then determine specific actions that can accomplish these tasks. This process involves setting individual goals, determining priorities, and then following through within a given period of time. Here are some guidelines for developing goals and objectives:

- 1) Check your job description and identify what tasks need to be done. Compile a written list of specific goals to be achieved so you can visualize them better. Consult with a unit head or supervisor for assistance in clarifying job responsibilities and performance expectations.

- 2) Analyze your unit's goals in regard to your personal values. Make sure that your goals are also in harmony with the overall mission of the library.

- 3) Identify the most important goals that will make a significant difference in what you want to achieve.

- 4) Develop realistic strategies to achieve each desirable goal. Jot down your ideas in writing so they will not be overlooked or forgotten later.

- 5) Set timetables for accomplishing your highest priority goals, either short- or long-term. Short-term goals would include tasks to be accomplished by your next annual review date. A long-term goal might be attaining tenure in five or six years.

- 6) Regularly review your list of goals, perhaps twice a month. Update them as unit values and priorities change.

How should daily activities relate to priorities?

Successful time managers must learn to prioritize work daily since there is frequently not enough time to accomplish everything. Analyze your job responsibilities and assign a priority ranking, depending on whether each supports the achievement of an important goal. Make a list of your high-priority tasks and then use this list to provide direction for daily work. Here are some suggestions for implementation:

- 1) Take a few minutes each day, either first thing in the morning when you arrive or just before leaving work in the afternoon, to plan for accomplishing highest priority tasks.

- 2) Set your work priorities a day ahead, if at all possible.

- 3) Be flexible and willing to deal with unexpected issues and events that cannot be planned for in advance, since circumstances often change from day to day.

- 4) Be realistic about how much time you need to accomplish specific tasks, and thereby avoid putting unnecessary stress on yourself.

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5) Consider long-term goals when setting priorities. Keep in mind that issues which are "urgent" are not always important for promotion or professional development.

6) Try to take action every day to move closer to your goals. Reward yourself for completing tasks, however small, which contribute to the attainment of a high-priority goal.

7) Post a written list of your priorities in a prominent place as a constant reminder to focus efforts on what is most important. Then use your own best judgment on how to use time most effectively each day.

What tasks should be delegated?

Work that is low priority for a newly hired librarian may sometimes be delegated to another colleague, staff member, or secretary who would enjoy learning new skills, improving their chances for promotion, or experiencing additional challenges. Since only a unit head or supervisor has the authority to permanently assign work to others, seriously analyze the following factors before making a delegation proposal to your immediate superior:

1) Decide whether the task really needs to be done. Some tasks might be eliminated or reorganized instead of delegated.

2) Identify tasks, preferably in writing, that could be delegated. Clearly indicate your rationale for delegation.

3) Identify someone who could assume the authority and responsibility for carrying out the task effectively because he or she possesses the right attitude, knowledge, and/or skills required.

4) Identify who would be responsible for monitoring progress, reviewing results, setting deadlines, following through with corrective action, and achieving desirable results.

What work must be done today?

Keeping your goals and objectives in mind, plan your daily schedule carefully. Develop a written action plan which lists what you want to accomplish daily, using a notebook, a planner, a time management diary, or a PDA (personal digital assistant). Carry it with you throughout the day. Also consider the following suggestions:

1) Make preparing your daily "To Do" list a habit which you perform at the same time each day. Regular routines often facilitate the achievement of goals.

2) Focus on your immediate objectives and set aside time to work on the highest priority items first.

3) Consider the hours during the day when you perform best and schedule the most difficult activities to be accomplished when you are most alert and energetic.

4) Remember to add items to your daily list from a "tickler file"—reminders about things that must be done on certain days such as letters, phone messages, preparation for meetings already scheduled, etc.

5) Batch routine and similar tasks and perform them during your less productive hours. As you reach momentum, you will be able to finish them quickly.

6) Use transition time (time spent waiting for appointments, standing in line, commuting to work, etc.) productively. Carry reading material with you at all times. You never know when you might get stuck in an elevator!

7) Try to do a little "elephant eating" each day; tackle a small portion of your highest priority goal. It's usually impossible to deal with a

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large task entirely at one sitting, so "start chewing" on a smaller part of it.¹

8) Accomplish as many items on your "To Do" list as possible today and use what is left over as the starting point for tomorrow's list.

How should paperwork be managed?

A cluttered desk or work area can become a serious time management problem that detracts attention from more important tasks. Having clear objectives will guide you in making decisions on what to retain and what to throw away. As you work, constantly ask yourself, "How do I plan to use this piece of paper or file?" Here are several time-tested rules for effectively managing paperwork:

1) Keep a neat desk surface clear of other papers except for the project at hand. If you

clean off your desk regularly, you will usually know where to find something in a hurry.

2) Handle each piece of paper or file only once, if possible. To avoid procrastination, use the measles method: every time you handle a piece of paper, put a dot in the corner. This gives a powerful visual clue to move things along, especially after three or four dots appear.²

3) As you examine each piece of paper or file received, decide which should be kept, referred or delegated to someone else, or tossed in the trash. Put those items needing action into three piles for efficient handling such as A (urgent), B (soon), and C (reading).³ The A items will usually relate to high-priority tasks.

4) Promptly file important papers and other items that need to be retained after noting any actions already taken and the date. Each time you add new material to a file, take a minute to dispose of superseded items. Keep only items you expect to need in the future.

What other time management skills are useful?

There are many ways to find time for high-priority responsibilities and tasks. Some librarians work at home one day a week, while others schedule several mornings a week to work on major projects. Here are some additional suggestions:

1) Set aside large blocks of time to allow for uninterrupted work on your highest priority tasks. Use self-discipline to push secondary matters aside. Estimate how many hours are needed to wrestle with a project, and then take the necessary time to finish it.

2) Minimize unnecessary interruptions by setting fixed times when you will have a "closed door" policy. Post these hours to avoid being interrupted when you want to concentrate on a project. If drop-in visitors arrive, have an interruption-beating phrase rehearsed in advance, such as, "I'm busy now, I'll get back to you."

3) Learn to say "no" to low-payoff tasks and activities that are not compatible with your own personal goals and priorities, or those of the library. If this is difficult, practice in front of a mirror. It often helps to briefly explain your rationale when declining someone's request, or to offer them alternative options.

4) Avoid procrastination when tasks need to be done. Focus on only one high-priority task at a time. Break the task into individual components and concrete steps, and then plan a schedule for completing the project. Start on

one small, identifiable portion and reward yourself after each accomplishment.

5) Use visible reminders or give yourself a penalty by agreeing to give up something if you do not start your task by a certain time.

Conclusion

Although time management is not a panacea for many of the problems plaguing librarians in the 20th century, using these techniques can help you gain increased satisfaction from work. Time management skills can also help librarians deal more effectively with job stresses and assist with balancing professional and personal priorities. Ultimately, librarians who use effective time management techniques can become more productive, thereby experiencing increased self-esteem and career satisfaction.

Notes

1. Lynne Wenig, *The A to Z of Time Management* (Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 49.

2. J. Wesley Cochran, *Time Management Handbook for Librarians* (New York: Greenwood, 1992), 37.

3. Dian Walster, *Managing Time: A How-to-Do-It Manual for Librarians* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1993), 94. ■

(Staffing cont. from page 643)

tance with Web systems administration, backups, implementation of new software, markup and scripting, etc. Information Arcade student assistants are assigned to these activities.

Summary

The organizational structure described here has enabled the libraries to move forward in LWIS development. A new libraries homepage, a departmental libraries homepage template, a new Gateway to the Internet, the converted Library Explorer Program, revised Information Arcade homepages, and a new staff Web site (which provides a way for library administrative offices and departments to publish data for use within their units and throughout the libraries) were unveiled at the spring 1996 Staff Technology Fair. LWIS development is truly a systemwide accomplishment for the University of Iowa Libraries.

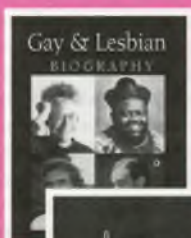
Note

1. The Information Arcade name is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

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