

Ask Judy

by *Judith S. Olson*
jsolson@uci.edu

Introduction

Normally in this column, I answer questions asked by people like you about how to cope with the myriad of things that happen in a professional woman's life, either specific to being in the computing field or just in general. I have found that many of the questions hint at the perennial problem of time management: what to decide to do and then how to fit it in to an already busy life. So last month and this (a two-part series), I am sharing with you the highlights of how I manage my time. I have struggled with this all my life, but now am comfortable with what I do and what I get done.

Know that I talk to people about this all the time, always looking for good ideas to make my life easier. What you'll see here is a compilation of both my own best practices and those gleaned from my colleagues.

Next month we'll return to the standard format of Ask Judy: You asking questions about how to cope. Please submit your questions to:
<http://tiny.cc/AskJudy>.

Recap on What Was Covered Last Month

We are all plagued with having too many things to do and too little time. We forget; we do the urgent instead of the important; we work hard but are always feeling guilty about what we are *not* doing. It's tough. Let's strive for some balance and mental health here.

In bullet form from last month:

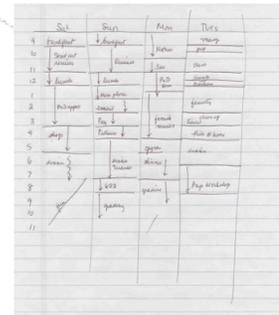
- "Plans are nothing, planning is everything"
- Say "yes" only to things that will advance the career you want and that will make your department and field a better place for everyone.
- One life, one list, with large goals broken into smaller steps

- Highlight the things that have to be done in the next three days
- In stressful times, estimate how long each will take. Add up the times. Readjust and delegate (as needed) until the priorities and the time you will devote to each task is right.
- Put those tasks on the calendar. Now you know when you will do what.
- Know your motivational rhythms. Do the hard stuff when you are best motivated. Put on the “Just-do-it” belt.

Tools and Tips

The scheme I outlined last time is not unique to me. It shares a number of features with other schemes both in the popular literature and among my colleagues whose time management I respect. I do not think my system is the only way to achieve balance and mental health while getting a lot done. I often say, “Any system is better than none.” Find what works for you.

Many of us use some online tool to keep our to-do lists (the “one life, one list”). I happen to like keeping mine in Word Outliner for two reasons. I keep major headers constant: Class, Conferences, Budgets, Writing, etc. and populate each category with specific items, with the near-term ones of a size no bigger than 3 hours to accomplish. The items that are further off on the horizon I close up in the outliner so I don’t have to see them and be overwhelmed. What I have to do now is enough to contemplate. Others use email reminders, Entourage, Omniplan, Tudumo and Remember the Milk, the latter of which apparently does all of the steps I recommend! I missed my opportunity. I print out the outline and highlight the near-term ones; I write on the printout how long the near-term tasks will take, sum the time at the bottom of each page, add them up and then blanch. Once I have iterated down to a manageable set, these items go on my calendar. It used to be MeetingMaker, then Oracle, and now Google Calendar. For this purpose, it doesn’t seem to matter. Many times, however, especially in planning an upcoming weekend, I just draw the next 3-4 days on a piece of scrap paper and plan the slots with pencil.



How long do you work? How do you keep it up?

I mentioned in the first installment on time management that I heard (and believe) that we can do hard intellectual work about 5 hours a day. I also recommended that you learn your own rhythms enough to know when those 5 hours are: Morning, afternoon or evening. Do your hardest work then.

That doesn’t mean that you have the rest of the day off. Hardly. We laugh that in academics we have flex time; we can work any 60 hours a week we want. It means that in our less good times, there are

things you can do that require much less intellectual horsepower: Collecting references; finding sources of figures you've used; proofreading (not serious editing); formatting references or putting them in EndNote or the equivalent. I remember a long time ago while working at Bell Labs that we had a dictate from above to not leave the building until 5 (even though we often worked at home in the evening). Often my intellectual time would be over by 4 (or earlier) so I would then use the time until 5 to clean up my desk. I had the cleanest, best-organized file system and desk in my entire life that year... until the dictate was rescinded.

But, then, "all work and no play makes *you* a dull *person*." I take plenty of time to schmooze with friends and colleagues, laugh, explore my environment, work out at the gym, spend quality time with Gary and our family. If you could zoom in on the handwritten figure of tasks on my calendar, you would see good amounts of time blocked off for dinner and "fun." If you don't nurture the whole person, there won't be anything to give intellectually. Besides, there's fun to be had. Just know when it's going to be, or if something comes up spontaneously, you'll know what task you'll have to reschedule. Your choice, but an informed choice.

Keep data on your own work habits

Are you in this field because you like data? Because you like to know stuff? You should collect data on yourself! I often advise people who are new graduate students, especially, to log their time during the whole week. What did they do? How long did it take? There are two benefits to this. One is self reflection on what activities are really contributing to your learning and growth and productivity; how much time is spent on really wasted activities. The other is collecting data on how long things *really* take. How long does it take you to read and digest an academic article? To know briefly what's in it? To take notes on it in depth? These time data will help in your estimates of how much you can get done when the going gets rough.

Other things to keep you productive and happy

There are three things that additionally can make you more productive: Organizing, the right place to do your work, and office supplies.

You should spend some of your "less good times," described above, organizing and gathering the information you're going to need when you are spending your 5 "good" hours a day. Don't waste your 5 good hours finding stuff. For me, it means keeping things visible. My ideal desk is the size of a dining room table, where I just move to the area that has the stuff I need for the current task. For me, if I put something in a file cabinet, it's as good as dead. One of my favorite office supplies (more on that in a

minute) are the plastic, colored, translucent file folders that are closed on two sides. They are self-labeling, hold about the right size chunk of stuff for a 3-hour task, and are cheerfully colored. Try them.

Where you work is extremely important. You need social stimulation, but not when you're spending your 5 good hours a day. Find a quiet place, the right desk and chair (and footrest?), a big monitor and as much equipment that is ergonomically fitting as you can afford. You can have a cheap stand-up desk by tilting your monitor up and putting your keyboard (or laptop) on a stack of fat books. When I was a graduate student, I did all my serious work in the art-deco hall on campus that just made me feel smart. Find your place.

People who reflect about how they work often *love* office supplies. Find a pen you really like, that fits your hand and has the right resistance to make your handwriting as good as it can be. Flow is important in a pen. Use ruined printer paper for notes; your short-term memory is very limited; take quick notes on paper. Many people swear by sticky notes - the paper ones. Some people keep "lab notebooks" in chronological order with an index in the back; others take notes on their laptops/iPads and then later organize them into files. There are two steps here: Take the notes and find them later. There is no easy way; find the way you're comfortable with.

You can do it

Rest assured; all this is doable. It's not easy, and it takes discipline. But if you follow these guidelines, both selecting the things you agree to do and then prioritizing, estimating and putting things on the calendar, you can live a sane, productive life.

Next Time

As I mentioned at the beginning, this is the second of a two-part series on time management. Next month we'll return to the normal format of Ask Judy. Send your questions about how to handle various professional situations to: <http://tiny.cc/AskJudy>.

About the Author

Judith Olson is the Donald Bren Professor of Information and Computer Sciences at the University of California Irvine. She was the 2011 ACM-W Athena Lecturer. With all she has experienced in her 40+ years of academics and industry, she thought she'd share some of her "tricks" through a column, "Ask Judy." Want a question answered by Judy? Ask it at <http://tiny.cc/AskJudy>

