

Time Management and Prioritisation

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Abstract – this brief describes a time management and prioritisation method which I have found useful in managing the conflicting demands in academic life. It is based on a detailed to-do list which uses categories and sub-categories to organize the tasks. To balance the trade-off between the urgent versus the important, a schedule of rotation is used to spend time on tasks in each category at regular intervals.

I. INTRODUCTION

The pace of life can be overwhelming. Some degree of stress is often useful to keep us moving along but too much can cause loss of productivity. It can all seem too much when multiple deadlines are looming, there is a queue of people outside the door, the email box is full, the phone is ringing and one is buried in paperwork.

Most time management approaches involve :

- detailed listing of tasks (and deadlines if known);
- identification of the highest priority items and selection of the order in which to do them; and
- development of a realistic timescale to complete these.

A detailed listing of the tasks to be done is important to keep track of items and to avoid the risk that important tasks are forgotten or overlooked. It can also reduce stress as it clarifies exactly what needs to be done.

The identification of the highest priority items and the order to do them in is perhaps the hardest step. This needs to balance urgency versus importance. There is much truth in the well-known management principle that what is urgent is rarely important and what is important is rarely urgent. In general the exact priority order is not as important as coming up with some reasonable list without spending excessive time on it.

The final step is developing a reasonable timescale for the tasks. For instance out of the ten highest priority items, based on the estimates of time to complete for each item, I calculate that I can finish six of these in the time I have available. It is important in developing this timescale that it be realistic and on the conservative side. I find a great deal of satisfaction being able to complete the tasks I have planned in the time allocated. On the other hand I find it frustrating to complete only a little of what was planned.

Over the years I have tried many methods to manage my time and what is described below is what I have found to be most successful.

II. PROPOSED TIME MANAGEMENT METHOD

In a nutshell the proposed time management method is based on a detailed to-do list which fits on a single page, and uses categories and sub-categories to organize the tasks. An example of this is shown over the page. To balance the trade-off between the urgent versus the important, a schedule of

rotation is used to spend time on tasks in each category at regular intervals.

A. To-Do List

This list is designed to fit into a single page for convenience. It is broken up into categories each forming a column on the page. I used five categories :

- teaching : undergraduate courses and project supervision;
- research : research students, projects, and papers;
- administration : related to the university and professional organizations;
- extras : my personal technical development;
- personal : non-work related items.

Each of the categories are further broken down into sub-categories, and particular tasks are listed under the sub-category headings. It is generally better to split major items of work into multiple tasks so that the required work can be more easily visualised and progress more clearly seen. I typically have around 50 to 100 tasks listed at any one time.

I produce the list in a word processor and then print it out. I then use the hardcopy of the list for prioritisation and update it by pencilling in new tasks and crossing out tasks which have been completed. At regular intervals, I update the electronic version and reprint the hardcopy.

B. Prioritisation

This is best done by prioritisation on a category by category basis. For instance, I first consider teaching and determine say the top three priorities within this category and repeat this for the other four categories. This avoids the need to try to determine the relative priorities of tasks which are in different categories.

The next step is to use some form of system to spend time on the highest priorities in each category in a reasonable sequence. This could be based on spending pre-determined amounts of time on tasks related to each category. Alternatively this could be based on completing particular tasks in each category in sequence. For instance, I may decide to complete the top priority item in Category A, and the top two priority items in Category B, and so on.

The main advantage of working in rotation through the categories is that it ensures that some time is spent in each category at regular intervals. This is particularly important for non-urgent but important categories such as the extras category which is related to personal technical development.

III. CONCLUSION

Finding the right time management approach which suits your personality and work style is important to maximising your productivity. Some of the principles discussed above may be helpful for you.

A WORD FOR TODAY

Mortals make elaborate plans, but God has the last word. Humans are satisfied with whatever looks good; God probes for what is good. Put God in charge of your work, then what you've planned will take place.

Proverbs 16:1-3 (The Message)

Action List : October 2008

A) Teaching

Course 1

1. Task 1
2. Task 2

Undergraduate Supervision

1. project 1 reports
2. project 2 reports
3. project 3 reports

Course 2 Lectures

1. Lecture 27
2. Lecture 28
3. Lecture 29
4. Tutorial
5. Review

Course 2 Queries

1. queries
2. survey

Course 2 Tests

1. Week 11 Tests

Course 2 Experiments

1. Exp 3 marking
2. Exp 4 marking

Course 2 Assessment

1. Task 1
2. Task 2

B) Research

PhD Student 1

1. review Chapter 5.4

PhD Student 2

1. conference paper
2. thesis review

Phd Student 3

1. conference paper

PhD Student 4

1. Chapter 4
2. Chapter 5
3. Chapter 6
4. Chapter 7
5. Chapter 8

Proposal 1

1. Task 1
2. Task 2
3. Task 3

General

1. Task 1
2. Task 2

C) Admin

Publicity

1. Task 1
2. Task 2
3. Task 3

Professional Organization

1. Task 1
2. Task 2

PhD Applications

1. Task 1
2. Task 2

Reviews

1. Task 1
2. Task 2
3. Task 3

D) Extras

Short Course

1. Task 1
2. Task 2
3. Task 3

PEBN

1. Task 1
2. Task 2
3. Task 3

E) Personal

- 1.