If only I had more time - How to be more effective in what you do

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A few introductory points ...

- I am not an expert in task management, but I am a practising Academic with way too much to do and too little time to do it.

- I have been using task management techniques and tools for at least 10 years, in particular David Allen’s Getting Things Done (GTD) philosophy, which I will cite frequently.

- The main purpose of this presentation is to raise awareness and give some initial tips of what you can do to be more effective at work in a scientific environment.

- Like many things, task management is a skill and hence takes time and effort to learn.
Effective work is all about one thing:

FOCUS

✦ That’s all there is to it!

✦ To be able to FOCUS, you need to have two things in place:
  
  ✦ You need to know what the next thing you should be doing is - PLANNING

  ✦ You need to get yourself to actually doing it without distractions - EXECUTION

✦ Both components are important and you won’t succeed if one of them is not working.
Planning and Execution require Perspective and Control

- Crazy Maker
- Visionary
- Victim
- Responder
- Master & Commander
- Micromanager
- Implementer

D. Allen: How to Make it All Work
I use mostly GTD ideas for this

A key issue for our type of work:

Most of the time, the task is not given and it is part of our job to actually determine what the task is!

What can you actually manage?

Time? - Hardly - it just goes by; Priorities? - Hardly, you just have them.

What you can manage is actually your actions - the stuff you do!
Planning

* Some *basic principles* of planning:
  * get **EVERYTHING** out of your head - requires a trusted system of information storage - often some piece of software
  * Break down **ALL YOU DO** in **Projects** and **Actions**.
    * **Projects** are simply things that require more than one action (like “write a paper on ...”).
    * **Actions** are the smallest granule of what you need to do (like “download this piece of data to make Figure 1 ...”)
  * Only assign deadlines to things that really have them! Don’t make up personal ones. It makes you inflexible!
  * All you need to worry about for each project is what the **NEXT ACTION** is - you can ignore the others for now!
  * The choice of what to do next is now a much reduced choice from all the **NEXT ACTIONS** you have identified
The workflow chart of GTD

Stuff

Collect
Process
Organize
Review
Do

Projects

Project Plans

What

Is it actionable?

NO

YES

Trash

Someday maybe

Reference

Multi-step = Project

Will it take less than 2-3 minutes?

YES

Do it

Waiting

Calendar
do at specific time

Next Actions
do as soon as I can

Projects

Collect

Process

Organize

Review

Do
Step 1: Collect

Stuff

In-basket

Is it actionable?

NO

Trash

Someday maybe

Reference

YES

Projects

Project Plans

What is the next action?

Will it take less than 2-3 minutes?

YES

NO

Do it

Delegate

Defer

Waiting

Calendar do at specific time

Next Actions do as soon as I can

Multi-step = Project

Show example
Step 2: Process

1. Stuff
2. In-basket
   - Is it actionable?
     - YES
       - What is the next action?
         - YES
           - Will it take less than 2-3 minutes?
             - YES
               - Do it
             - No
               - Delegate
         - No
           - Defer
             - Waiting
             - Calendar (do at specific time)
             - Next Actions (do as soon as I can)
     - NO
       - Trash
       - Someday maybe
       - Reference

Multi-step = Project
Step 3: Organize

Projects

Project Plans

What is the next action?

Is it actionable?

Will it take less than 2-3 minutes?

YES

Do it

Defer

Waiting

Calendar do at specific time

Next Actions do as soon as I can

NO

In-basket

Trash

Someday maybe

Reference

Multi-step = Project

Show example
Step 3: Organize - Projects

• Everything that takes more than one action to accomplish is by default a project!

• Natural project planning steps:
  • Defining purpose and principles
  • Outcome visioning
  • Brainstorming
  • Organizing
  • Identifying next actions
Contexts to help the organization

- A great way of helping you to organize tasks is to tag each task with one or more “contexts”
- Common contexts/tags I use
  - Location: Office, Home, Errand
  - Duration: 10m, 30m, 1h
  - People: Andy, Anna, Michael, ...
  - Type of task: Read, Write, Discuss, Think, ...
- You can then sort your task by context.
  - When working on emails, list your email tasks.
  - When you have an hour to read, list the “read” and “1h” tasks!
  - When you want to knock over a few short things before going home, list the “10m” tasks and do 3!
Step 4: Review

To stay on top of things it is important to review everything you do. This review should happen at different levels with different frequency.

- **Next actions** - Review more than once a day - Expect to have hundreds of hours of work in them!
- **Current projects** - Review about once a week - Expect to have 50-100 projects at any given time!
- **Areas of responsibility** - Teaching, Students, Admin, Research, ... - Review balance of activity in these areas about every 1-3 months
- **One-to-two year goals** - What are the big things to achieve in the next couple of years? - Review every 3 months
- **Three-to-five year vision** - Where do I want to be in 5 years? - Review every so often
- **Life!** Why do what I do? Does it all make sense? Is the answer really 42? - Review all the time ;-)
Step 5: Do

- We have planned well and know what our next actions are! However, we still need to do them. How can we make ourselves do what needs doing?
- **Procrastination is our worst enemy.**
- I use the **Pomodoro technique** to overcome this common problem.
- Basic idea:
  - Break work down into 25 minute blocks
  - Write down what you are going to do in the 25 minutes
  - Work on it without distraction
  - Take a 5 minute break after each 25 minute interval
  - Take a longer break every 3-4 intervals!

- Show Vitamin-R software
Step 5: Do

- For this to work you need periods in your day where you do not have meetings or other distractions.

- **Plan your days** so that those periods exist, ideally first thing in the morning when your head is clear and your energy levels high.

- **My trick:** The mornings are mine, the afternoons belong to others.
Some email tips

- Do not watch your email all the time!

- Instead define 2 or so Pomodoro intervals a day to process it using the GTD method - at the end of this processing your Inbox should be empty!

- As usual, short replies (<2-3 min) will be done as part of the processing. Longer replies will just enter your task management system like any other task!

- When working on something not email in a Pomodoro slice, DO NOT CHECK email. Switch it off altogether! Train your colleagues!
Software that helps with this

- GTD software I have tried:
  - Easy: Things, Firetask, 2Do
  - Medium: Omnifocus, OrganizePro, Pagico
  - Advanced: The Brain

- Pomodoro software: Vitamin-R (expensive); Time-out (Free)