

Bench philosophy (12): Managing time in the Lab

Time Management and the State of Flow

Do you have too much to do and too little time to do it all in? Constantly running up against deadlines and unimportant jobs seeming to take up too much of your precious time? If so, you may well be tempted to turn to TM – not the once popular form of Eastern meditation – but one of the many time-management systems on the market. Beware! They may not deliver all they promise and all you really need are just a few commonsense guidelines.

Time management is big business. Seduced by the promise of a low stress, high output lifestyle, individuals or their employers are paying out large sums of cash for seminars, tapes and books to make them more productive and more efficient. Some of the time-management (or TM) techniques have something of a cult about them. Testimonies lure the seekers after productivity enlightenment. For example, “The amazing XXX system has transformed my life, made me less stressed and more productive”. Just a quick Google on time management will show you just how many people are tortured by TM anxiety and how TM can easily develop into a full-blown, pathological obsession. To separate the silver from the ore, I have distilled the best of what TM techniques have to offer into a list of ten simple guidelines, firstly to optimise use of time and secondly to avoid TM anxiety.

Decide what's important

Put most of your efforts into what matters most. Have a set time of day, with a fixed duration, for dealing with irritating little jobs that aren't furthering your work. Call them “spoilers”. These include things like reading emails, filling in safety forms or writing reports about a meeting. The idea is to box these spoilers up like a shoe-box in a drawer, the drawer is your day and the box is the set-aside time slot. It stops the little odds and ends spilling out and filling the drawer. Let your attitude be, “Let's get this rubbish out of the way as soon as possible so I can get down to some real work”.

From arriving at work until the first tea break is a natural period to accomplish this but everyone is different. Certainly, give each spoiler its due attention and effort, otherwise you may end up having to do the job again (or worse) but don't let these tasks spill over their boundaries and

steal time from research. I am not a great believer in to-do lists. They have a way of growing faster than you can take things off them. To-do lists too easily become a tyrant! However, this little list of irritating things you just have to do – spoilers – is simply there to keep tabs on things and to make sure nothing vital gets forgotten. Do not use it as a work scheduler. Simply scan this list first thing in the morning to make sure there isn't anything there you really need to do before starting the real work.



Sculpture from Salvadore Dali depicting the flow of time.

It doesn't need to be a list on a piece of paper. It can be the tasks list on Outlook or, as in my case, a pile of email printouts, order forms, or anything to remind me of what needs to be done.

It would be ideal to have only one project on the go at a time and never start anything else until this is done. However,

that is unrealistic for most of us. A project can “freeze” while you are waiting for input from someone else, or a resource may become unavailable for a while. By having one or two other projects in view, this downtime can be used to prepare for later projects. One solution is to have a mentally demanding project on the go – your main attention-user – with a less demanding project as a backup. This secondary project should be something that can be picked up or set aside without difficulty.

Don't be afraid to say no. This is the best way to gain extra time. We are tempted to think we need to be doing everything that is asked of us. We are afraid that unless we say yes to everything we are asked to do, we will appear lazy. There is no way, however, of getting around the fact that there are only so many hours in the day and only so many things we can do well. It is better to refuse to do something, than to take it on and do a bad job. Or, more likely, to end up doing a thousand minor jobs at the expense of doing real research. There are tactful ways to say no: “Yes, of course I can organise a lab party. I'll have to postpone that *Nature* paper, though . . .”

Delegate but maintain control

Pass a task for which you are ultimately responsible to someone else, as often as possible. It can either be someone who is fully capable of doing that task, or alternatively someone who will learn from doing that task. Don't leave it to them entirely, though, even if they are fully capable. If it is a time critical job, or one for which you will hang if it doesn't get done right, figure out how much time before the deadline you would need to get it done yourself and at that point check tactfully how it is going. Then, if things are really going wrong you can at least step in, get the job done yourself and save your reputation. Keep some sort of

All you need to keep control over time is to adopt a list of guidelines to improve the way we work, or rules of thumb to make the most of the time. In separating the wheat from the TM chaff, what is offered by the most sensible and practical of the TM systems can be summarised in ten simple guidelines:

- ▶ Decide what's important and spend most of your time doing it
- ▶ Keep a list of irritating little things you have to do
- ▶ Only have 2 or 3 projects on your radar
- ▶ Don't be afraid to say no
- ▶ Delegate but keep track of what you have delegated
- ▶ Do one thing at a time: don't multitask
- ▶ Complete what you have started
- ▶ Form habits/rituals
- ▶ Avoid surfing the internet at work
- ▶ Get into a state of flow

reminder of things you have delegated and make sure you check up on them at periodic intervals.

Leave multitasking to your PC

It is a simple fact that people cannot multitask. Admittedly, there are some who rapidly switch from one thing to another but each time you switch there is a cost. It takes a certain amount of run-up time ("now where was I? . . .") when you pick up a task. Constantly changing from one task to another breaks the concentration. This is made worse these days by the interruption-based lifestyle that computers have introduced. MSN, email, RSS feeds all grab our attention with popups and alerts, each of which momentarily breaks our concentration and stops us getting into a state of flow. Disable those alerts!

Author Scott Young (<http://www.scotthyoung.com>) identified one characteristic shared by all the successful academics he knew: an almost obsessive desire for completion. This is particularly so for the big projects: keep working until the job is done. This is the opposite of the GTD task-list philosophy which likes to fragment work into atomic tasks. As far as possible, stay on the

same project until it is complete. That will not always be possible. For example, when a paper has been submitted there will be down time while waiting for the referees' reports. Time now for that minor project on the radar. However, as far as possible, never begin a new project until you have finished the last one. Have a major blitz, work late through the night or through Saturday and when the project is complete, take a few days off. You can then leave that project completely behind and clear your mind ready for the next major campaign.

Daily routines can be very powerful. Don't have a full daily timetable, in the world of research that is impractical and even counterproductive. Simple routines, however, can be a powerful ally; I have already mentioned the spoilers' routine but there are more: printing out and reading one research paper a day at tea break; 15 min lab tidy up; checking on cell cultures; asking your research student if he is OK. It doesn't matter when you do them; just ensure that whenever possible they are done each day.

No Internet surfing

Avoid recreational Internet use during lab time! Pretty obvious tip this but I think that recreational surfing disguised as research is one of the biggest time-drains in the lab today. If a shop assistant was caught Googling, there would be a case for dismissal. It is much harder, though, for a researcher to draw the line. Keeping up with news and trends relevant to our research, looking through *Nature*, etc are all a necessary part of our work. If, however, you find your-

self "just quickly" booking theatre tickets or looking up football results, consider if this can be done "just as quickly" at home!

Get into a state of flow. I have saved this point until last because it is the most important. The state of flow is that frame of mind where all thoughts are concentrated on one meaningful piece of work. The mind is totally absorbed in the task at hand, almost to the exclusion of all else. Even the passage of time goes unnoticed. More commonly associated with working on a piece of art or craft, this same state can sometimes be attained in the research lab. You may not get there every day but it should always be your goal. To enable us to adopt a state of flow is why we get all those irritating little jobs out of the way as quickly as possible, why we delegate as much as we can, why we should do one thing at a time and why we work to completion. Its enemies are multitasking, constant emailing, instant messenger and online banking in work hours. State of flow is the goal that all these other tips lead up to.

The final word

In all this, we have forgotten to ask the most important question: do TM techniques actually make any difference? In view of the money and time spent on time management (!), there is surprisingly little empirical evidence on whether they really do make us more productive. A 1994 paper in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* asked this question and came to the startling conclusion that "engaging in some time management behaviours may have beneficial effects on tensions and job satisfaction but not on job performance." (Macan, 1994, *Journal of Applied Psychology* Vol. 79, 381-391).

Admittedly, newer TM methods such as GTD have emerged since then but what does productivity ultimately mean to the lab researcher? Are you looking for a reputation as a good organiser of lab parties, or making exciting discoveries? If you are heading for the first, then sign up for TM. If the latter is more appealing, stop reading this article and go off and get yourself into a state of flow.

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Fancy composing an installment of "Bench Philosophy"?

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