



## Department Chair Online Resource Center

### Time Management for More Effective Results

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If there's one thing that most chairpersons would like to have more of, it's time—time to do what's urgent and what is truly important. But time is the one resource that we can't get more of by asking the dean or by cultivating relationships with generous alumni. To have more time, we simply have to make better use of what we have. But how?

The literature on time management, although often written for business executives, can actually be useful to chairpersons. In an academic setting, the three strategies most likely to yield immediate results are organizing an effective workspace, managing workflow, and planning. Chairpersons who habitually practice these strategies may benefit by reducing stress and by becoming more productive.

#### **ORGANIZING THE WORKSPACE**

A survey of the relevant literature on time management suggests that a well-organized workspace is essential. By eliminating clutter, setting up an effective filing system, gathering essential tools, and managing workflow, chairpersons can easily organize an effective workspace.

Removing clutter is itself a time-consuming task, but a cluttered workspace significantly impairs your ability to find things. To retrieve materials quickly, you'll need an effective filing system that includes three basic kinds of files: 1) working files (materials used frequently and needed close at hand), 2) reference files (information needed only occasionally), and 3) archival files (materials seldom retrieved but that must be kept). For ease of retrieval, organize files simply (e.g., label files with a one- or two-word tag and arrange the files alphabetically).

Once clutter has been eliminated and other materials have been filed, the effective workspace includes only what is essential: a set of three trays to control the workflow on your desk, standard office supplies, a computer, and a telephone. Everything else, except for what you are working on at the moment, can and should be filed where it can be retrieved as needed.

#### **MANAGING WORKFLOW**

How do you process the mountain of material that collects in your paper and electronic in-baskets? The answer is one piece of paper, one electronic message at a time. Many of the experts on time management

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agree that the most effective workers act on an item the first time it is touched. Although difficult at first, the practice can become habitual, and is made easier by remembering the four Ds: 1) delete it, 2) delegate it, 3) do it, or 4) defer it. If the message you receive is trash (or spam), *delete it*. Or, if it's something that you might use later on, file it. If a task is not yours to do, then *delegate it*. If a task can be completed in two minutes or less, *do it* immediately. If the task is one that can't be completed quickly and if it's not high priority, *defer it*. Electronic communications can be managed just as easily and as quickly as paper by using the four Ds. Like other routine tasks (returning phone calls, paper mail), email is best handled in batches at regularly scheduled times of the day. If you limit the number of times per day that you process email, you'll notice immediate time savings.

**Using calendars.** To manage all of the things that you have to do, it's important to organize your reminders into a small number of calendars and lists that can be reviewed regularly. A calendar (paper or electronic) is the obvious place to record reminders of meetings, appointments, and due dates. For chairpersons with multiple responsibilities, an annual calendar organized by areas of responsibility (e.g., budget, personnel, schedule, planning, miscellaneous) may be especially valuable. For each of these areas, one can list (month by month) the major responsibilities. With such a calendar, the chairperson can see at a glance what tasks must be completed in a given month of the year.

**Using lists.** Because chairpersons typically have hundreds of tasks to complete, a calendar may not be the best place to record reminders other than those specific to a time or date. Instead, a variety of lists can be used to manage the collection of reminders. Three kinds of lists are especially useful for academic chairpersons: 1) a list of projects, 2) a list of "next actions," and 3) a list of things you're waiting for (Allen, 2003).

**Projects list.** A project is "any desired result" that takes more than one step to complete (Allen, 2003, p. 37). Thus chairpersons typically have a long list of projects underway at any given time. Each of the chair's major responsibilities, for example, can be defined as a project, just as other desired results (e.g., curriculum change) can be so defined. As an organizing tool, the list of projects provides a reviewable list of the scope of your responsibilities and initiatives.

**Next actions list.** To move any project forward, Allen (2003) recommends that you define for each project the next action: "the next physical, visible activity that needs to be engaged in, in order to move the current reality toward completion" (p. 34). Just as you need a calendar to remind you of tasks to complete at specific times, you also need a list of next actions to do as soon as possible. For the academic chairperson who routinely handles scores of projects and hundreds of next actions, it may be helpful to organize these next actions by area of responsibility or project name.

**Waiting for list.** Allen (2003) also recommends that you keep track of things you are waiting for. The effective chairperson who delegates responsibility can benefit from a list that monitors to whom responsibility has been given, the task to be completed, the date it was assigned, and the date it is expected.

## **PLANNING**

Organizing the workspace and managing workflow are two important strategies for using time more wisely, but equally, if not more, important is planning. The basic steps in planning include 1) setting goals, 2) listing tasks, 3) setting priorities, and 4) implementing the plan. For academic chairpersons, calendars, project lists, and lists organized by categories of responsibilities are among the most effective management tools for setting goals, scheduling tasks, and implementing plans.

**Setting goals.** If a project is a desired result, then the chairperson's list of projects amounts to a list of goals. If for each project on the list, the chairperson also develops an action plan—a sequence of steps necessary to achieve the desired results—then the chairperson only needs time to implement the plan.

**Listing tasks.** If you've tried to list all of the things that you plan to do on a daily calendar, you probably know the futility of such an effort. For most chairpersons, listing tasks to do within a week is more appropriate. You may be surprised to learn that in as little as one hour per week, you can review your calendars and lists of reminders and update them for the following week. The task is made simpler by knowing that you have a limited number of calendars (dates and responsibilities calendars) and lists (projects, next actions, waiting for) to review. By also reviewing your complete list of projects and the action plans needed to complete them, long-term planning may be accomplished at the same time. Simply add the next action to complete a long-term project to next week's list of next actions.

**Setting priorities.** The chairperson who plans on a weekly basis and who has written reminders is free, on a daily basis, to assess what is most urgent and important to do. In five minutes or less, the chair can jot down (using a simple grid to divide the categories; see Table 1) what is 1) urgent and important, 2) urgent but not important, 3) important but not urgent, and 4) not urgent and not important. Even if interruptions occur (and they will), and even if tasks take more time than anticipated (and they usually do), the chairperson can still focus that day on what is most important.

**Table 1. Assessing Priorities**

1. Urgent and Important	2. Important and Not Urgent
3. Urgent and Not Important	4. Not Important and Not Urgent

Covey (1990) argues that the second quadrant (where the focus is on important tasks that are not urgent) is “the heart of effective personal management” (p. 153). In this area, Covey groups “all those things we know we need to do, but seldom get around to doing because they aren’t urgent” (p. 154).

**Implementing plans.** By listing tasks and setting priorities, you’ll be able to execute the next actions needed to accomplish goals, but even if, at the end of the week, not everything has been done, you’ll be in a position to say, “I absolutely know right now everything I’m not doing but could be doing if I decided to” (Allen, 2003, p. 185).

## **CONCLUSION**

Since even the best of plans seldom survive the first encounter with the enemy, the effective chairperson must still be flexible, disciplined, and well prepared to confront time wasters, realizing that sometimes the enemy is us. No one, of course, can eliminate time-wasting behaviors overnight, but it is possible to make incremental change starting with a simple commitment to do it now. Organizing an effective workspace, managing workflow, and planning to achieve goals are all strategies that chairpersons can use to reduce stress and be more productive. Writing things down and knowing where they’re written down (on your calendars or lists) relieves stress. Managing workflow makes it easier to plan, and planning makes it possible to strike a balance between what’s important and what’s urgent. By using time more effectively, you’ll actually have more time to be productive.

## **REFERENCES**

- Allen, D. (2003). *Getting things done: The art of stress-free productivity*. New York, NY: Penguin.
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