Getting More Done: Strategies to Increase Scholarly Productivity

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Scholarship is required for promotion at many academic institutions, and academic physicians have a multitude of competing demands on their time. This article reviews strategies for organizing time, focusing on scholarly tasks, increasing scholarly productivity, and avoiding distractions.

The "To-Do" List

Most successful people plan what they need to accomplish. It has been demonstrated that having a written plan of action increases productivity.[1,2] Studies looking at the effect of writing down a list of things to do date back to the 1920s and an Eastern European psychologist named Bluma Zeigarnik. The so-called "Zeigarnik Effect" demonstrated that the act of planning activities through "to-do" lists actually reduced executive burden on the brain by freeing the brain from having to worry about unfinished tasks.[1] More recent studies confirmed the Zeigarnik Effect by finding that when people were not allowed to finish a warm-up activity, they performed poorly on a subsequent brainstorming activity.[2] The implication is that people are more effective when they are able to cross off the first thing on their list. It allows them to go on to the next thing.

There are multiple ways to keep track of things to do. The traditional to-do list is created with a pen and paper. There are also multiple electronic to-do list applications for computers, tablets, or smartphones.[3] Stephen Covey, in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*,[4] describes a method of setting goals and then prioritizing tasks within those goals. He recommends prioritizing to-do lists into urgent and not urgent, important and not important. For faculty who are writing scholarly papers, breaking down each task into smaller tasks will help make the to-do list more effective. For instance, instead of putting "write paper" on the list, you can itemize each individual component, such as "write introduction" or "make tables."

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Finding a Balance: Learning to Say "No"

Once your to-do list is organized, it is time to focus on the actual tasks you need to do. Since each day has a limited number of hours, it makes sense to spend these hours on important tasks. Using time wisely includes limiting your workload to activities that are directly related to career goals. In doing this, you may be required to say "no" to certain requests for your time.

Saying "no" can be difficult for several reasons. The first reason is the inherent desire to help out colleagues if possible, so the first inclination is to say "yes" to a new request for help. However, saying "yes" to a project, committee, or work group that is not interesting or not aligned with career goals will potentially not allow enough time to complete work that is in your area of interest. Second, being a team player is important and saying "no" may be thought of as selfish, or may jeopardize a relationship (TABLE 1). Finding the right balance between aiding colleagues by saying "yes" to some requests, while also protecting time for your own work, can be challenging.

There are several ways to say "no."[5] Most time management experts recommend never saying "yes"

BOX
How to Decide Whether to Say "Yes" or "No"

1. Does the request fit with your career goals?
2. Would the work use your skills?
3. What is the long-term benefit of this work? Could it lead to other work that is more closely related to your goals?
4. What is the timing of this work? Does it need to be done within a week, a month, or can it be done more long term when you may have more time?
5. Can you be involved in part of the work but not all?
6. Are you able to give up another responsibility in order to take on the new request?
7. Is the requestor someone who is your supervisor or who can influence your career?
8. Would saying "no" jeopardize other parts of your job or career goals?

TABLE 1
Saying "Yes" and "No"

Dangers of Saying "Yes" Too Much	Dangers of Saying "No" Too Much
▪ Become overcommitted ▪ Not be able to do a good job on the project ▪ Not have enough time to do your own scholarly work ▪ Not be able to say "yes" to a great opportunity because you are too busy ▪ People stop asking you because you either do a bad job or don't finish the task	▪ Thought of as not a team player ▪ Becomes a habit and then it is not clear when you will say "yes" ▪ People stop asking you to do things ▪ If you say "no" to a request, you may be forced to say "yes" to the next one ▪ You may miss out on an exciting opportunity

or "no" on the spot.[6] It takes practice, but is ultimately very helpful to always say something like, "Thank you so much for asking me. I'm going to look at my other work and see whether I think I can give this project/committee/work group enough time to do a good job." Another option for junior faculty is to consult their mentors before saying "yes" to a request. Obviously, if a request is exciting and closely related to your area of interest, saying "yes" seems obvious, but consider the request first. Can you negotiate to get something else off your plate so that you have adequate time for the new project? Can you negotiate for administrative support or time away from clinical duties? Even if what you want your answer to be is obvious to you, spend a day or two thinking about it. The trick is to have a clear idea in your head of what you love to do, what you like to do, and what you are required to do. Then, saying "yes" and "no" can be based on that, in conjunction with work responsibilities (BOX).

Increasing Productivity by Making Everything Count Twice

Faculty can demonstrate a scholarly approach to patient care and teaching by developing scholarly products based on clinical or educational work. For example, if you enjoy taking care of patients with a specific disease (X), you may collect patient cases and focus your educational material on the presentation, management, and follow-up of patients with disease X. Making your clinical interests into scholarly products may involve using the lectures you have put together on disease X and writing a review article for a specialty journal. You may also involve trainees in developing posters and presentations on different aspects of disease X to present at meetings (TABLE 2).

TABLE 2
Making Everything Count Twice: The Art of Using Day-to-Day Work as Scholarship

Context	Opportunity
Seeing an interesting patient in the hospital?	The resident presents the case for morning report. Write a case report or volunteer to do grand rounds on the topic for your department.
Working on a new curriculum for an inpatient rotation?	Consider getting pretest results from the residents before the curriculum change and then posttest results after the change. Is it an innovative model? Consider publishing it in an education journal or online.
Giving a talk to residents on a clinical topic in which you have a lot of experience?	Consider turning that talk into a publication.[7] Suggest the topic for a state or national meeting.
Developing a new clinical approach to a specific set of patients?	Review the literature to determine the various clinical management options that exist and write a review article. Then, devise a study to measure the effectiveness of your new approach and collect outcomes data. Present this work, incorporating trainees to help you. Follow up with a manuscript.
You are asked to head a committee at the medical school and realize an opportunity to start a new program on a quality improvement topic.	Send out a survey to the medical school faculty to measure their current knowledge base. Use the results to develop a workshop or curriculum. Test the faculty knowledge postimplementation of the workshop or curriculum. Present the results, and write a manuscript detailing your process and the final results.

TABLE 3
Common Distractions and Techniques to Minimize Them

Distractions	Techniques
E-mail[8,9]	▪ Decide on 2 times each day you will look seriously at your e-mails—and only look at those times to minimize the time you spend on e-mails. ▪ Turn off "alerts" so you are not distracted each time a new e-mail populates your inbox. ▪ Close your e-mail so you don't look at it. ▪ Don't spend your most productive time of the day on e-mails. Choose times when you are taking a break or slowing down from a more intensive or important task. For instance, check e-mail at lunch and at the end of the day.
Meetings	▪ It is most efficient to schedule meetings back to back so you have a "block" of meetings. This also does not allow most meetings to run over, as you have to move on to the next meeting.
Interruptions[9]	▪ Find a place no one can find you, such as home, the coffee shop, or the library. ▪ Tell your clinic or nurse you will check in with them at specific times during the day to attend to clinical questions, so to hold your nonemergent messages until then.
Procrastination	*Reflect on the reasons you are procrastinating:* ▪ Feeling overwhelmed, don't know where to start. ▪ Work not exciting or uncomfortable with the work. ▪ Worried about not doing a good job. ▪ Rather be doing something else. *Overcoming procrastination:* ▪ Reflect on the reason and seek a solution. ▪ Break down big projects into smaller ones (eg, write 1 section of a grant application at a time or work on tables for a paper). ▪ Use the 10-minute rule: Do something just for 10 minutes at a time just to get it started. ▪ Ask for help from a colleague. (Can the statistician help you analyze the data from your study?) ▪ Make a deal with yourself: If I get this done, I can get x, y, or z.
Perfectionism[10]	▪ Realize your work is never going to be perfect. ▪ Perfectionism can be a form of procrastination in that you never finish because you always want to make it better or add more. ▪ Realize everyone makes mistakes. Do not dwell on your mistakes, but learn from them.

Being Efficient

To be more productive, we need to focus. Multitasking is a misnomer because our brains can really only focus on 1 task at a time. When we think we are doing 3 things at once, our brains actually switch back and forth from task to task. In a 2006 study that used functional magnetic resonance imaging to document the activation of different parts of people's brains as they went from one activity to another, only 1 area was activated at a time. The researchers also documented what they called a "bottleneck" at a central area of information processing, which allowed only 1 thought through at a time.[11] Other research has shown that it takes 30 to 60 seconds to refocus on 1 task after transferring attention to a second one. The more complex the task (ie, analyzing data or writing an abstract) the longer it takes to refocus. It has been estimated that multitasking can reduce productivity up to 40% and actually decrease intelligence quotients up to 10 points.[12]

Finding a time to write a paper is challenging when clinical or other standing duties are ever-present. We all struggle with issues or habits that distract us and make us less productive.[13,14] It is important to identify the specific causes of procrastination and learn techniques to minimize time spent on unimportant tasks that distract us from pursuing our scholarly work (TABLE 3). Some successful academic physicians designate time each week as writing time, to limit the number of clinical phone calls and interruptions that they receive.[8] Faculty members who write regularly are more productive than those who "binge write."[15] Furthermore, avoiding interruptions of academic work by e-mail, Internet searches, or text messages will lead to more focused academic time and increased scholarly productivity.[9]

Conclusion

Academic faculty are very busy, and often wish for more hours in the day. Developing a plan of action, learning to be efficient, and limiting requests for time

that do not align with personal career goals should help faculty members accomplish more in the same amount of time while boosting scholarly productivity.

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