

Checklist for effective time management as an assistant professor

Aaditya Ramdas (aramdas@cmu.edu), Carnegie Mellon University

Some personal suggestions (via accumulated wisdom) for assistant professors.

- **You cannot manage time.** Time management is a misnomer. You cannot manage time, it flows just fine by itself without your help, and no intervention of yours can change that.
- **So what can I manage?** So if you cannot manage time, what should you aim to manage? You can manage yourself of course. You can manage your expectations (from each day) and your attention (which may be drawn to Reddit, your phone, the news, social media, etc.). You can manage your will power (to not procrastinate on things that need to get done), and you can manage how you experience the flow of time.
- **Prioritize, plan and organize.** Every night, I plan my next day out. I use Google Calendar to organize my meetings and I recommend everyone use something of the sort (as opposed to memory). If something is due soon (either by deadline or by promise), I block out chunks of time in the calendar to do those things (I use a different color for such soft time commitments, compared to hard ones). If other things end up occupying me in those soft time commitments, I move those blocks to the next day. My calendar looks very busy from a distance, but that's because I've interspersed hard time commitments with soft ones. Whenever a new block starts, I (try to) look at my calendar and do what I am supposed to do: it reduces decision fatigue. I don't have to re-plan: I know I planned my day well the previous night already and blocked off time for all the things I need to do, so I don't have to rethink about what's due, I just have to act on my plan.
- **Unscheduled time.** At least once per week, if not more often, I try to have a long multi-hour chunk of unscheduled unplanned "loose time". This is not for last-minute meetings; exactly the opposite — it is time to think, let the mind wander, revisit past questions, who knows what. I think creativity comes partially from concrete directed thought, and partially from wandering uncontrolled thought — perhaps the former is better for finding good answers, and the latter for asking good questions? (I am not sure.)
- **Family time and personal time.** It is important to schedule some non-work personal time, for example to pursue your hobbies. In my case, it is often for exercise. I'll sometimes go to the gym or swim or run in the middle of the day, because before 9am and after 5pm is time with my baby. I try to sleep from 11pm to 7am. I do work before sleeping, after my baby sleeps. I do not work on weekends due to my baby (except when she sleeps perhaps), but even before that, I would definitely take at least one full day off. Each person should decide for themselves how much time they need to recuperate, to feel fresh and excited and not burnt-out. There may be significant variation in the amount of less personal or family time that people desire, but it is definitely important to prioritize them and concretely incorporate those considerations into schedule planning.
- **Constructive procrastination.** We all procrastinate. If you're going to procrastinate, do it constructively, meaning: do something that you anyway wanted to do. Procrastinate making a homework assignment by completing a review instead (or vice versa). Procrastinate editing your students' writing by finishing that old rebuttal instead (or vice versa). Non-constructive procrastination may involve browsing the web, watching videos, and so on, which is fine for a short time perhaps as a break, but that time can quickly run away from you without you realizing it. I rarely spend more than 30mins per day on non-constructive procrastination — if I'm not working well, I'd rather go work out than waste my time on the internet.
- **Build good habits.** While some amount of time must go into changing one's habits for the better, the majority of your days may be spent in auto-pilot, where you do the things (small and big) that you typically do without thinking much about them. If you invest time to build good habits, the good work ethic that results will seem effortless, as opposed to requiring daily effort to maintain. Habits trump will power.
- **Tools that help.** My work life is dominated by 4 apps: Calendar, Mail, Slack and Chrome. I have essentially shifted all research to Slack, and email is for every other aspect of faculty life. I try to leave Slack messages unread till I deal with them, while I leave emails in my inbox until I deal with them, archiving them when I do. So my inbox only has TODOs, as do my Slack unreads, making constructive procrastination easier.