Ask Judy

by Judith S. Olson
jsolson@uci.edu

Introduction

Normally in this column, I answer questions asked by people like you about how to cope with the myriad of things that happen in a professional woman's life, either specific to being in the computing field or just in general. I have found that many of the questions hint at the perennial problem of time management: what to decide to do and then how to fit it in to an already busy life. So this month and next (a two-part series), I will share with you the highlights of how I manage my time. I have struggled with this all my life, but now am comfortable with what I do and what I get done.

Know that I talk to people about this all the time, always looking for good ideas to make my life easier. What you'll see here is a compilation of both my own best practices and those gleaned from my colleagues. If you have more ideas, please send them to the Ask Judy link: http://tiny.cc/AskJudy. For this topic it should be called "Tell Judy."

Why it is important to manage one's time

As professionals, we are asked to do many things: Teach, mentor junior people, get our own research done, serve on committees, etc. This happens on top of living our own lives with their own set of demands: Maintenance of daily living (groceries, car maintenance, clothes), cultivating and enjoying friends and family, and dealing with the exigencies of real life.   And there are expectations about when these things will be completed—sometimes deadlines, sometimes simple realization that something hasn't happened for a long time (e.g., spending quality time alone with one's partner). Too many things; too little time. We forget; we do the urgent instead of the important; we work hard but are always feeling guilty about what we are *not* doing. It's tough.   Let's strive for some balance and mental health here.

In my own life, a symptom of not "having it together" is *thrashing.* I start in on something important, remember that there's this other thing that is also important that I haven't done. I do it. While doing it, I realize the other thing that's important.   I switch. This is not working! And it's making me crazy.

"Plans are nothing, planning is everything"

This quote from Dwight D. Eisenhower stuck with me. By planning, you will have looked ahead at all the things you know today that you need to do. You can map them out about when you're going to do them. Fine. But then life happens, and new things arrive or situations change. The plan is no longer appropriate. *BUT* the fact that you did the planning, gathered what you need to do and by when you need to do it, makes you much further ahead in being able to re-plan and get things done.

Collecting and Prioritizing the Stuff

First, you have to decide what to say, "yes" to when asked. This topic could be a whole column or two. But let me be brief here: Say "yes" to the things that will advance the career you want. But also say yes to things that will make your department good and your field excellent. Get advice from more senior people in your field. The more senior you get in the field, the more you should say "no" to those things for which you are not uniquely qualified (others could do it as well as you) or those you don't want to do. Time is the most precious thing we have.

Once you have decided to say "yes," now you have to remember to do this and you have to find the time to do it. The best advice I learned from a time management course I was offered when I first became a manager at Bell Labs a gazillion years ago was: **One life, one list**. Everything goes on the same list. Do not have a separate list for work and home-life. You have only one life and all these things need to be shuffled into *your* 24/7. The second thing I learned, but later, was that if you don't do the important (not necessarily the urgent) ones early, they won't get done. If there's something you want to accomplish (e.g., to learn a new language (computer or human), get fit) and there's no external pressure to prioritize it, you are going to have to prioritize it yourself or it won't get done.

Besides having *everything* go on the list no matter what part of your life it entails, the size of what you put on the list is important. If you have to do something with a nearby horizon, break up the big goal into smaller steps, those that can be accomplished in *less than three hours.* So, "Write dissertation" does not go on the list; items such as "Check TOC with advisor," "read Olson article," etc. are what goes on the list. There is joy in crossing things off on the list that are done. Make sure that happens often. (And, to add to the joy, I often use a very heavy black magic marker to cross things off, fully held in my whole hand like a child.)

To save time later, I also put key information on the to-do item, like an email address or a phone number, some other note that will be important to remember. To-do lists are first of all memory aids; make full use of that feature.

Next, you **highlight** the items that have to be done in the next three days, including the "important-but-not-urgent" ones mentioned above.

Getting Stuff Done

Sometimes it's easy to just look at the list of highlighted items and get going on some. Other times, there's a crisis and you are totally overwhelmed about how *all* this stuff is going to get done. In these "other times," there are two more steps to the process. First, **estimate how long** each of the tasks will take. "Read Olson article" will take 1.5 hours; reading email and populating the to-do list will take .5 hours; and so on. Second, **add them up**. This act usually provokes panic. "I don't have 56 hours in the next 36!!" This is where the hard prioritizing comes in. Re-think not how long a task can take, but how long *you are going to give it*. For example, you can read enough of the Olson article to decide whether it warrants deep "knowing" in a half hour, maybe 15 minutes. Re-prioritize what really has to get done in the next 3 days, assign times to each item, add them up and *repeat* until you are filling the time appropriately (and still getting a good night's sleep). It is at this "repeat" phase that you not only re-prioritize but also delegate.
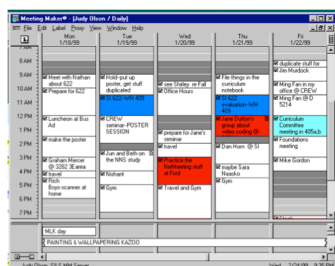
The next, and crucial, step is to put these things on your calendar. This is VERY important. By putting them on your calendar you avoid thrashing. You start on one high-priority item, remember there's another high-priority item you're not doing right now, and then say, "Ah, but I'm doing that this afternoon at 4." Case closed. Back to work on item one. And, better yet, when someone asks you when you're going to have their task done, you can say, "Thursday afternoon."

Really Getting Stuff Done

At this point, you are about to do the important task for a fixed amount of time. No, you just have to do it. For this, I remember an invention by a student in a Psychology course on creativity, the prize winner in a contest on inventing things "useful for students." Most of the suggestions had to do with getting out of bed, various kinds of alarm clocks. But my favorite, and indeed the winner of the contest that year, was the "Just-Do-It Belt." This was a belt attached to your desk chair, like a car seat-belt, that had a timer on the latch. You sat in the chair, buckled the belt and set the timer for the time allotted for this task. The timer did not unlatch the belt until the time was up. You had to "just-do-it."

Of course, human motivation to get stuff done waxes and wanes. The trick about putting things on your calendar is to know your own motivational rhythms. I know that I am motivated to get stuff done in the morning; others are at their best in the late evening. In putting things on your calendar, put the ones that need the most motivation into your **good** times. I've been told that you have 5 good intellectual hours a day. Spend them well. For me, it's doing the thing I most don't want to do first. The rest of the day goes better with that one done. And it's a very satisfying act to cross that one off the list with the big magic marker.

More Details Next Time

As I mentioned at the beginning, this is the first of a two-part series on time management. This time I covered some of the high level strategies about collecting and prioritizing the things you have to do; next time I'll cover some of the tricks and tools, both ones that I use and those suggested by others I talked to. Please send your ideas to the Ask Judy link: http://tiny.cc/AskJudy. Think of this as "Tell Judy" and we'll share your good ideas with others.

Rest assured; all this is doable. It's not easy, and it takes discipline. But if you follow these guidelines, both selecting the things you agree to do and then prioritizing, estimating and putting things on the calendar, you can live a sane, productive life.

About the Author

Judith Olson is the Donald Bren Professor of Information and Computer Sciences at the University of California Irvine. She was the 2011 ACM-W Athena Lecturer. With all she has experienced in her 40+ years of academics and industry, she thought she'd share some of her "tricks" through a column, "Ask Judy." Want a question answered by Judy? Ask it at http://tiny.cc/AskJudy