On the Job

Time Management for Individuals with Diverse Work Responsibilities

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Keeping up with the demands of today’s world of continuous technological advancement and increasing communication options can be overwhelming. This reality has particular relevance for those in healthcare technology management (HTM), as the duties involved in performing our jobs touch upon a variety of fields and disciplines, leading to a diverse constellation of work responsibilities. At some point, the challenge of maintaining quality work performance may be determined less by our professional talents than our ability to complete them in a timely manner.

In my journey to find solutions to, for example, inadvertently missing a deadline or overlooking a task, I have developed practices to help ensure that these oversights do not recur. Rather than getting lost in the weeds of specific strategies, this article provides useful principles that can contribute to the overall success of performing one’s job.

Motivation

“Motivation is the fuel, necessary to keep the human engine running.”

— Zig Ziglar

A lack of interest or desire can be the greatest obstacle you can face in completing any task. Thus, the most profound action you can take in establishing your work efficiency and ability to tackle the variety of associated tasks is to ensure that you are in the correct job. In the book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Daniel H. Pink explores the factors that influence high performance and satisfaction.¹ He concludes that we are motivated by work that is self-directed (autonomous), is challenging (yet achievable), and serves an inherent worthwhile purpose. Fortunately for most in the HTM field, work that ultimately serves to provide for improved health outcomes instills an inherent worthwhile purpose. Thus, if we are able to find an appropriate level of autonomy and challenge in our jobs, the factors cited above should be present, keeping us strongly engaged in our work.

Although the degree of autonomy is limited by our particular work environment, we typically have a high degree of control regarding the manner in which we organize ourselves to complete the tasks and responsibilities assigned to us. This means that there is no magic bullet or one-size-fits-all solution to keeping organized and fulfilling job-related duties. The best solutions will be the ones that you create for yourself. Thus, the solutions and strategies described here should be viewed as potential tools that you can follow to the letter, reject outright, or customize to meet your unique needs.

If you are still having difficulty properly motivating yourself, numerous audio, video, and written works are available to help you out. For example, *The Essential Motivation Handbook* contains a list of motivational tricks and techniques.²
Flow

“As flow with whatever may happen and let your mind be free. Stay centered by accepting whatever you are doing. This is the ultimate.”
— Zhuangzi

As for the proper degree of challenge, the constant introduction of new scientific discoveries and engineering developments to the HTM field is typically sufficient to address most people’s needs. Tasks that are too easy become boring, and our minds tend to wander. Tasks that are beyond our current abilities become frustrating and fill us with a sense of futility, desperation, and/or hopelessness. Between these two extremes is the sweet spot that allows us to focus our undivided attention on the task at hand. This psychological state was defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as “flow.”

In this state of flow, we enter “the zone,” becoming completely absorbed in the task. Our perceptions of the passage of time and physical surroundings become muted to varying degrees.

If we don’t have enough to do at work, we can become bored and start searching for distractions to occupy our time. Conversely, having an overwhelming workload can result in frustration—a scenario with which readers of Biomedical Instrumentation & Technology are more likely to identify. In addition to seeking out external solutions (e.g., delegating certain assignments, getting approval to hire more staff), the goal should be to acquire additional skills and strategies to bring your work into this flow range. Acquiring a deeper sense of self-awareness and knowing your threshold are essential to achieving flow. However, when you are at or near your threshold, you also need to have the courage and conviction to say “no” to additional requests for your time and effort. As you master and expand your set of time management and organizational skills and habits, the upper limit of your flow range also will increase, allowing you to take on more tasks and responsibilities.

General Strategies for Managing Time

“Time is the scarcest resource and unless it is managed, nothing else can be managed.”
— Peter Drucker

The following is a summary of the general strategies I provided during an education session titled Pearls of Time Management for Individuals with Diverse Work Responsibilities at the 2016 AAMI Conference & Expo in Tampa, FL.

Prioritize Tasks

The impact-effort matrix is a method by which you create a two-by-two chart, with effort on the x-axis and impact on the y-axis, both with relative scales from low to high. Then, rate all of your work tasks according to both of these elements and plot on the graph. Tasks in the upper-left quadrant (low effort and high impact) should be at the top of your priority list and done first, as these will have high impact for little effort. Next, you should plan out implementation of your upper-right quadrant tasks (high effort and high impact) and begin executing them. These tend to be major projects that are complex and/or time consuming but are important and will yield high returns in the long run. Lower-left tasks (low effort and low impact) should be used as fill-ins after you’ve completed your upper-left quadrant tasks but do not have sufficient time to make a worthwhile impact on tasks in your upper-right quadrant. Finally, your lower-right quadrant tasks (high effort and low impact) are typically inconsequential “time wasters” that are not worth doing and should be removed from your to-do list. An example impact effort matrix for an HTM manager implementing a preventive maintenance plan at his/her facility is provided in Figure 1.

As you master and expand your set of time management and organizational skills and habits, the upper limit of your flow range also will increase, allowing you to take on more tasks and responsibilities.
Don’t Overcommit
High achievers tend to value the service they provide to their “customers.” Beyond customers of your organization, the term can be applied to any individual(s), including coworkers, supervisors, and subordinates, to whom you provide a service. Saying “no” to a request for your assistance can be difficult, but we all have limitations on the total number of commitments we can take on while still delivering high-quality results.

Focus on One Task at a Time
In The Myth of Multitasking: How “Doing It All” Gets Nothing Done, Dave Crenshaw explains how the human mind is only capable of directing focused attention to one task at a time, making true multitasking physiologically impossible. Even computers process data one task at a time and only appear to be multitasking because the rate at which they cycle among tasks is so rapid as to be imperceptible to humans. When we attempt to multitask, we actually mimic this rapid shifting by cycling our focused attention from one task to another and then quickly back again. The end result is that all of the tasks with which we are engaged are completed less efficiently than if we were to focus on each task from start to completion before moving on to the next one. In his book, The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains, Nicholas G. Carr points out how this is becoming progressively more difficult to achieve in the age of the Internet. We have trained our brains to rapidly jump from one webpage to the next while rarely reading the entire content of any given page.

Start Early
Our minds are capable of cycling through all of the steps involved in a task much more rapidly than we are capable of executing each of those steps. This results in a perception that we are capable of completing tasks much more rapidly than we do in actuality, leading to the tendency to overestimate how quickly we will finish. In addition, inevitable distractions and setbacks emerge that were not included in our original estimate. Given these factors, it is wise to heed Benjamin Franklin’s sage advice: “Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today.” With experience, you will develop a sense of how far ahead of time you should begin working on particular tasks in order to finish them in advance of deadlines.

Create Positive Habits
Acquiring a new skill will almost always involve a learning curve and resistance to change. If you develop the patterns of behavior conducive to managing your time such that you automatically perform them without having to consciously motivate or remind yourself to do so, you have created a habit. Gardner et al. showed that providing the following habit-formation tips to parents enabled them to establish healthy eating behavior patterns in their children: identifying cues, establishing routines, planning actions, and performance contexts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Develop an MEMP that includes the criteria for determining the PM frequency for a given category or specific piece of equipment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>To implement the MEMP, enter all pertinent information for the medical equipment in your facility into a software program. This will in turn create a list of all of the PM inspections due in a given month, allowing inspections that have been completed to be tracked and those that have become overdue to be flagged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>At the beginning of the month, print out all of the PM inspections due that month and distribute this list to your staff.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Build a robot with artificial intelligence whose job it is to move around the office and notify HTM staff when it is time to perform a PM.</td>
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Figure 1. Example impact-effort matrix for tasks involved in implementing a preventive maintenance (PM) program. Abbreviations used: HTM, healthcare technology management; MEMP, medical equipment management plan.
Lally et al. showed that habit formation takes, on average, 66 days to become established as an automatic behavior. However, this ranged from 18 to 254 days, so the specific training period needed to establish your new set of behaviors may vary considerably.

Stay Organized
I use essentially the same filing strategy for emails, paper files, and electronic files. I have an inbox where new material is placed. When I go through the material, I take one of three actions: 1) respond/take action immediately, 2) flag for response/action at a later time/date, or 3) file away in a system of nested folders. Then, when the amount of material in a given file folder becomes too onerous to be navigated easily, I further categorize the material by making subfolders.

Keep a Portable ‘To Do’ List
Various smartphone to-do list apps for task management are available. However, if you don’t have a smartphone, to-do lists can be kept in a small notebook that you keep on your person at all times. The key is to update and use this list on a daily basis to keep you focused and organized. By updating it daily, an additional motivation may be created to complete a task: not having to keep writing it on your “to do” list every day! Remember to apply the previous principles and list tasks in order of priority, eliminate the time wasters, and focus on a single task until you are able to cross it off as complete. Then, move on to the next task. For long-term projects, try to identify a daily goal so that you can cross it off your list even though the entire project may still have many tasks remaining. Your goal each day should be to complete at least the top three prioritized items on this list.

Pearls
“All art is autobiographical; the pearl is the oyster’s autobiography.”
— Federico Fellini

Although in no way exhaustive, the following list of tricks and strategies can help in your quest to better manage your time. By experimenting with these strategies, you can pinpoint the ones that work best for you.

Electronic Calendar Reminders
To avoid missing a deadline for one task or being late in performing the next iteration of a recurring task, I began flagging important items in my email and creating to-do lists. However, I found that as these lists became too long to view in their entirety on a single page, some of the older ones would get missed regardless. No to-do list can help you if you don’t have time to use it. To help prioritize the tasks and provide set guidelines, I have instituted the habit of creating a calendar event on the date of the deadline for a given task and then setting the reminder for the total time I would expect to need to complete that task. Thus, the first reminder of the upcoming deadline appears at about the time that I should begin planning for the task. I then will “snooze” the task for when I would like the next reminder to appear to ensure that I remain on task to achieve the ultimate deadline.

Plan Ahead
Being proactive rather than reactionary is the best way to ensure that you don’t miss a task or skip important steps. An effective method is to determine all of the steps necessary to reach your ultimate goal and record them, along with milestones, in your calendar and to-do lists.

Create and Use Templates
You may find that you are writing much of the same information repeatedly in various documents. Saving basic information (e.g. name, contact information) in “template versions” will save you time by only needing to fill in project-specific information for the current iteration. Beyond the information that stays the same, you can also add the most common entries to your templates and only change them for the exceptions. However, be warned: To circumvent using incorrectly templated information of this nature, any information that may change in certain circumstances should be marked in such a way (e.g., highlighting relevant text, using a different color font) as to require at least a cursory review each time you use the template. This way, in the most common scenario of using your default template information, you only need to remove this mark rather than retyping the information itself.
Emails
When reading through your emails, try to group them by topic and read all of the relevant emails pertaining to one specific topic or project during a single sitting. When catching up on an email string, group the emails by subject to read the entire conversation only once. If you are strapped for time, you might assume important passages weren’t deleted along the way and read the entire string within the most recent email. When you finish, you then can highlight and file away all emails in the chain simultaneously.

Update Documents
Similar to using templates (as described above), previous versions of documents should be updated and saved with a new name rather than starting a similar document over from scratch or copying and pasting large sections of information.

Closing Thoughts
If several of the behaviors described in this article are new to you, I would recommend beginning with just one or two of those that appear the most “high yield” and try to incorporate them into your everyday routine. After these become habits, I encourage you to come back to this article and choose another one or two items to incorporate into your routine, should you find them helpful. Repeat this process until you have tried out each of the recommended strategies and incorporated the ones that work for you.

References

Be willing to make yourself unavailable during crucial intervals.

Other Pearls
- Structure set times for certain activities and stick to them!
- Be willing to make yourself unavailable during crucial intervals.
- Take breaks.
- Break work down to actionable steps: identify the first action.
- Rush the unimportant.
- Set SMART goals that exhibit the following qualities: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound.9
- Microsoft OneNote: During my talk at AAMI 2016, several members of the audience strongly recommended this application as a helpful tool to help them organize their digital lives.