If only I had more time - How to be more effective in what you do

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A few introductory points ...

- I am not an expert in task management.
- I am not being paid to sell a particular method or piece of software.
- However, I have been using task management techniques and tools for at least 10 years, in particular David Allen’s Getting Things Done philosophy, which I will cite frequently.
- The main purpose of this presentation is to raise awareness of what you can do to be more effective at work in a scientific environment.
- I would be happy to provide a longer training course at a later time if there is interest in the details.
So what is work all about

FOCUS

✦ That’s all there is to it!

✦ To FOCUS, you need to have two things in place:
  
  ✦ You need to know what the next thing you should be doing is - **PLANNING**
  
  ✦ You need to get yourself to actually doing it without distractions - **EXECUTION**

✦ Both components are important and you won’t succeed if one of them is not working
Planning

- Use mostly GTD ideas for this

- A key issue for our type of work:
  - Most of the time, the task is not given and it is part of our job to actually determine what the task is!

- What can you actually manage?
  - Time? - Hardly - it just goes by; Priorities? - Hardly, you just have them.
  - What you can manage is actually your actions - the stuff you do!
Planning

* Some **basic principles** of planning:
  * get **EVERYTHING** out of your head - requires a trusted system of information storage - often some piece of software (show Pagico - others at the end of this talk)
  * Break down ALL YOU DO in **projects** and **actions**.
    * Projects are simply things that require more than one action (like “write a paper on ...”).
    * Actions are the smallest granule of what you need to do (like “download this piece of data from NCI...”)
  * Only assign deadlines to things that really have them! Don’t make up personal ones. It makes you inflexible!
  * All you need to worry about for each project is what the **NEXT ACTION** is - you can ignore the others for now!
  * The choice of what to do next is now a much reduced choice from all the **NEXT ACTIONS** you have identified
The workflow chart of GTD

- Stuff
  - In-basket
    - Is it actionable?
      - NO
        - Trash
        - Someday maybe
      - YES
        - Reference
        - What is the next action?
          - Will it take less than 2-3 minutes?
            - YES
              - Do it
            - NO
              - Delegate
              - Defer
                - Waiting
                - Calendar do at specific time
                - Next Actions do as soon as I can

Projects

Project Plans

Multi-step = Project

Collect
Process
Organize
Review
Do

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Step 1: Collect

In-basket

Is it actionable?

NO

Trash

Someday maybe

Reference

Stuff

What is the next action?

Projects

Project Plans

Will it take less than 2-3 minutes?

NO

Defer

Defer

Do it

Delegate

Waiting

Calendar do at specific time

Next Actions do as soon as I can

Show in Pagico

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Step 2: Process

In-basket

Is it actionable?

NO

Trash

Someday maybe

Reference

What is the next action?

Multi-step = Project

Will it take less than 2-3 minutes?

YES

Do it

Waiting

Calendar do at specific time

Next Actions do as soon as I can

NO

Defer

Delegate

Projects

Project Plans

Projects
Step 3: Organize

Stuff

In-basket

Is it actionable?

NO

Trash

Someday maybe

Reference

YES

What is the next action?

Multi-step = Project

Projects

Project Plans

Will it take less than 2-3 minutes?

YES

Do it

Waiting

Calendar

do at specific time

Next Actions

do as soon as I can

NO

Defer

Delegate

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Step 3: Organize - Projects

 Everything that takes more than one action to accomplish is by default a project!

 Natural project planning steps:

 - Defining purpose and principles
 - Outcome visioning
 - Brainstorming
 - Organizing
 - Identifying next actions

 Audience participation

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A great way of helping you to organize tasks is to tag each task with one or more “contexts”

Common contexts/tags I use

- Location: Office, Home, Errand
- Duration: 10m, 30m, 1h
- People: Andy, Anna, Michael, ...
- Type of task: Read, Write, Discuss, Think, ...

You can then sort your task by context.

- When working on emails, list your email tasks.
- When you have an hour to read, list the “read” and “1h” tasks!
- When you want to knock over a few short things before going home, list the “10m” tasks and do 3!
Step 4: Review

To stay on top of things it is important to review everything you do. This review should happen at different levels with different frequency.

I use the GTD “Flight Level” model of the review process. From bottom to top this means:

- Runway: Current actions - Review more than once a day - Expect to have hundreds of hours of work in them!
- 10,000 feet: Current projects - Review about once a week - Expect to have 50-100 projects at any given time!
- 20,000 feet: Areas of responsibility - Teaching, Students, Admin, COE, Research, ... - Review balance of activity in these areas about every 1-3 months
- 30,000 feet: One-to-two year goals - What are the big things to achieve in the next couple of years? - Review every 3 months
- 40,000 feet: Three-to-five year vision - Where do I want to be in 5 years? - Review every so often
- 50,000 feet: Life! Why do what I do? Does it all make sense? Is the answer really 42? - Review all the time ;-)
Step 5: Do

- We have planned well and know what our next actions are! However, we still need to do them. How can we make ourselves do what needs doing?
- Procrastination is our worst enemy.
- I use the “Pomodoro” technique to overcome this common problem.
- Basic idea:
  - Break work down into 25 minute blocks
  - Write down what you are going to do in the 25 minutes
  - Work on it without distraction
  - Take a 5 minute break after each 25 minute interval
  - Take a longer break every 3-4 intervals!

- Show Vitamin-R software
Step 5: Do

* For this to work you need periods in your day where you do not have meetings or other distractions.

* Plan your days so that those periods exist, ideally first thing in the morning when your head is clear and your energy levels high.

* My trick: The mornings are mine, the afternoons belong to others.
Some email tips

- Do not watch your email all the time!

- Instead define 2 or so Pomodoro intervals a day to process it using the GTD method - at the end of this processing your Inbox should be empty!

- As usual, short replies (<2-3 min) will be done as part of the processing. Longer replies will just enter your task management system like any other task!

- When working on something not email in a Pomodoro DO NOT CHECK email. Switch it off if you want!
Software that helps with this

+ GTD software I have tried:
  + Easy: Things, Firetask
  + Medium: Omnifocus, OrganizePro, **Pagico**
  + Advanced: The Brain
+ Pomodoro software: Vitamin-R (expensive); Time-out (Free)
+ Brainstorming software: Mindmanager, FreeMind