Tools, tips and tricks for improving (research) productivity

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INFORMAL • NORTH AMERICAN
make a mistake; mishandle things.
"I really dropped the ball on this one"
- Google Dictionary
• Saying **NO** is the most powerful thing you can do for yourself... and others

  ✓ **NO** opens up new possibilities down the road
  ✓ Makes your **YES** stronger
- Corollary -

• You need to know as accurately as possible at any time what’s on your plate in order to decide to take on (YES) or not (NO) new stuff.

✓ You head is not the place to store that information!
How *stuff* come to you?

- **Written:**
  - ✓ Paper
  - ✓ Teams, Slacks, ...
  - ✓ E-mails!

- **Verbally (e.g. boss, colleagues, spouse ...)**
  - ✓ Becomes a written note somewhere!

- **Your own: while reading, jogging, ...**
  - ✓ Becomes a written note somewhere!
Productivity

• Being busy ≠ being productive ...
Productivity

Project Planning Phase

Tasks Definition

- Project Overview
  - Define the project
  - Create and validate project definition documents
- Create and publish project announcement
- Assemble and organize project team
- Control basic planning
  - Plan the project
  - Create tasks and organizes per definition documents
  - Identify risks and estimate durations
  - Identify resources and assign to tasks
  - Land resources and get them off from management
  - Conduct project work andX
  - Conduct work cycle 1
  - Reserve team quality 1

IS THAT A SENSIBLE WAY TO USE MONEY?

idea
doing
• **Projects** are not *doable* by themselves!
  ✓ Must have a clear definition of success from the get go
  ✓ Must be broken up in **tasks**
    o Tasks can be parallel or sequential
    o Tasks can sometimes **be delegated**!
A task is the smallest actionable steps to accomplish a larger body work i.e. a project.

- Write a scientific paper is not a task
- Writing a grant is not a task
- ... Climbing Mount Everest is not a task
Doing – Day to Day = Tasks

• Getting Things Done (GTD),
• Kanban,
• SCRUM,
• Agile,
• Eisenhower Matrix,
• ...
GTD Approach

Hard deadlines only!

From David Allan
4 D’s of Productivity

Delete (incl. all your NO’s)
Delegate
Defer
Do

These are the decisions/actions you need to take for each input you receive
Limited # of containers...and tools

• Calendar = **hard deadlines**, incl. events/meetings
  o Tickler/eTickler (43 folders): documents needed at specific dates

• Folders (paper or digital): documentations for projects and references
  ✓ Scientific literature: Zotero, Mendeley, Paperpiles, ReadCube Papers, EndNotes...
  o Document managers: Evernote, OneNote (Mac/Win), DevonThink Pro (Mac), ...

• E-mails: Outlook, Apple Mail, Spark, ...
  ▪ New *stuff* -> action items
  ▪ Reference materials

• Note taking tools: pens+papers and apps
  o OneNote, Apple Notes, ...
Missing Key Container: a Task Manager!

• **Task Manager** = trusted system for all of your tasks

• Email apps are *very poor* task manager
  ✓ Communication/exchange tool
  ✓ Reference/support materials to projects and tasks

• Post-it are visual (Kanban!) but
  ✓ Not scalable to a large number of projects/tasks

• **Paper lists work very nicely**
  ✓ High upkeep cost
  ✓ Not readily searchable, rearrangeable, no automation
A good Task Manager ...

• Must allow for projects (folders of tasks)
• Must allow for groups/folders of projects (areas of responsibility)
• Must allow for repeating and scheduling of tasks
• Able to build template for repetitive projects (e.g. new students)
• Have contexts/tags for each task (tools, energy, time, location…)
• Integration with other apps (e-mail, ...) – across all your devices

• Nice to have:
  ✓ Possible to have sub-tasks (mini-projects with a project)
  ✓ Automatic location base task suggestions (and other automations)
  ✓ Parallel vs sequential tasks
  ✓ Scripting (power users)
  ✓ Delegate tasks electronically (collaborative) from the software…
Task Manager – Which One?

Free and good enough

- Microsoft To-Do
- PC/Mac/iOS/Android/Web (Formerly: Wunderlist)

Paying...and the best on the market

- todoist
- All platforms (Including Linux)
- OmniFocus
- Mac/iOS Only
- Things

Outlook or OneNote are not true, scalable task managers
**Task Manager**

- Your task manager (and calendar) is the **cornerstone** of your **day-to-day** productivity
  - ✓ You need to be able to **thrust** that you will put everything in it
    - o You need to love it and want to use it (otherwise, it won’t work)
    - o It needs to be efficient (work with it not on it!)

  ➢ Do not hesitate to pay for a quality app if it help!
How much time to set-up?

• To set-up a complete first dump of what’s in your head (and accumulated papers, post-it, e-mails, ...): all inboxes from all sources!

✓ At least 2 days following (religiously) the GTD book
  ○ More if you also want to go 100% digital (yes I am getting that old...)

✓ ~ 2h/week thereafter for maintenance
  ○ Reserve time with yourself in your Agenda!
Maintenance = Weekly Review

- **Mandatory**: reserve **1.5 to 2h weekly** to review all new inputs (incl. potential projects) and past projects/tasks
  
  ✓ Decide what to do with them (actionable? 4D's!)
  
  ✓ Did you miss something (any projects with no next step/task defined?)
  
  ✓ What should have your attention next week?
  
  ✓ Do you have the bandwidth to start new things?
    - **Yes**: let’s look at my list of *sleeping ideas / backburner*!
Stick to it for 3-4 months!

- This investment will pay off...
  - ✓ Make it an automatism
  - ✓ Do a *braindump/review* anytime you start feeling nervous/anxious about work
Task Manager ➔ Doing

EISENHOWER MATRIX

**Urgent**
- **Important**
  - **DO**
    - Do It Now
- **Not Important**
  - **DECIDE**
    - Do It Now

**Not Urgent**
- **Important**
  - **DELEGATE**
    - Who Can Do It for You?
- **Not Important**
  - **DELETE**
    - Eliminate it

Morning / evening routine
- Calendar
- Task Manager
  - *Can be a recurring task...*

A few minutes at most!
Highlight - #4

• Chosing to do something (now) or take on new stuff (later), you are:
  ✓ Negotiating with yourself about your time
  ✓ Taking into account all of your must do tasks

• If you always do only must do tasks
  ✓ No control of your schedule → You will drop the ball
Conclusion

• Adopt a true task manager
  ✓ Use tools that you love, do not hesitate to pay for a good one

• Give your task manager the task to hold all of your ideas and tasks.
  ✓ Use your brain for productive things!

• Projects must be broken down and success identified

• Be ruthless -> delete!
Remember!

Do not be afraid to say a positive NO

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Choosing when to drop the ball!