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From the Career Files: Getting Your Work Done (Part One)

By JOSHUA STEIN

Ed. note: This is the latest installment in a series of posts from the ATL Career Center's team of expert contributors. Today, in the first of a two-part series, Joshua Stein gives some practical advice on how manage your workflow.

As your work piles up, you will often feel as if you can't possibly finish it. Each project seems overwhelming when you think about it in the abstract. And as soon as you start work on a new project, and figure out what it will actually require, it can become even more overwhelming.

This article and its sequel share a few techniques I use to help gain some control over my workflow. Few of these ideas are original, but I've included my own variations and suggestions.

A. *Managing Everything*. You will feel less overwhelmed if you protect yourself from feeling physically overwhelmed by the projects on your plate. For example, don't cover your desk with piles of active tasks. For each active task, collect the various pieces of paper in a folder. Put all your folders away. Keep a "to-do" list of all your active tasks — every one of them — without writing other reminders to yourself anywhere else. Your to-do list should include everything. My own to-do list consists of a Word document with three columns: client work; other work; and personal projects. First priority tasks go to the top of each list. Some people use Outlook or even dedicated software. In any case, keep track of what you need to do and your priorities in a way that you don't unintentionally leave anything behind. You should, however, also stay flexible in reordering and adjusting the list as you go. Regardless of format, a to-do list will help you feel more in control of your agenda, inviting you to set priorities and take each job one at a time. It's far better than living with a chaotic physical mess that constantly taunts you about what you haven't done….

B. *The Email Deluge*. To gain some control over your email, apply to your email inbox techniques like those suggested above for your pending paper projects. Don't let email messages pile up in your inbox, where they will just torment you. Instead, create a folder within your email software for messages that demand action or a response. You might create multiple such folders for various categories and priorities, but don't get carried away. If you can't handle an "email task" immediately, you should probably add it to your to-do list, so your to-do list gives you a complete

snapshot of what you need to do. Again, you want to avoid having a deluge of email staring you in the face at all times and making you crazy. But you don't want to lose track of it either.

C. *Beyond Your Control.* Some parts of any project may lie beyond your control. You may need to deal with information or documents you need from other people; a review process that involves someone else; or some other part of the project that someone else is supposed to handle. Although you can't control these pieces, you can manage them. First, identify them as early as possible, as one of the first things you do when you start a project. Second, figure out how much time these pieces of your project will reasonably take. Plan accordingly, adding a reasonable (or unreasonable) cushion if you can. Third, when these pieces involve other people, work with those other people in advance to make sure they can do their part when needed. Give them lead time and let them know what's coming. Recognize that when you turn to them they may have other things going on, so they won't be able to jump on your project immediately. Your project may take center stage for you, but you can't assume other people will feel the same way.

D. *Obstacle-Busting.* In your head, what obstacles, real or imagined, have you set up to prevent yourself from starting this project and then carrying it through to completion? Identify them. Decide whether they're real. If not, ignore them — they're just excuses. As one easy example, sometimes you might fixate on how awful and unpleasant a particular project will be. Because you know it's going to be awful and unpleasant, you put it off. Usually, you will produce better results by setting aside your obstacles or issues and just digging into the project. Stop waiting. The awful and unpleasant project won't get any more appealing with the passage of time.

E. *Smaller Pieces.* If you can, break your project into smaller and manageable pieces. Give yourself a reward as you finish each piece. Don't stop working until you earn the next reward. Your reward might be something as simple as checking your email, browsing all the interesting stories and archives at Above the Law, calling a friend, or getting up and getting some water. Except for those earned breaks, try to keep working. Resist the temptation to take random breaks to browse around online, or to get a snack. Just continue your work, like a diesel truck going up a hill. If that truck stops, it loses all its momentum. The same applies to you.

F. *Priorities.* Figure out how to set priorities among your projects. Then remember those priorities. Emergencies will still often go to the head of the line, but you should otherwise try rather hard to apply your priorities.

The next installment of this article will offer a few more suggestions on how to get your work done.

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From the Career Files: Getting Your Work Done (Part Two)

By JOSHUA STEIN

Ed. note: This is the latest installment in a series of posts from the ATL Career Center's team of expert contributors. Today, in the second installment of a two-part series (you can read the first part here), Joshua Stein gives some practical advice on how manage your workflow.

When your work feels overwhelming, you can take some specific steps to help break through the panic and get it all finished. The first installment of this article offered about a half dozen techniques. This installment completes the list.

A. *Start.* If you feel like you have too much on your plate – spilling over onto the table and the floor — sometimes you respond by freezing, not knowing where to start. Or you do know where to start, but you aren't quite ready. You think about problems that might arise. You keep postponing the pain. But your best strategy will often consist of just starting the job. Even if you're not quite ready and even if it's not all lined up nicely, just dig into it. Start anywhere. Of all the suggestions in this two-part article, this one seems the most obvious. But the obvious suggestions are also the ones most likely to get forgotten when you get overwhelmed.

B. *The Blank Screen.* If you will produce written work, then you don't need to start writing at the very beginning. That's often intimidating. Instead, start with your second or third paragraph or a list of the bullet points you intend to cover. Fill out your memo, report, or other project and then go back to the beginning….

C. *Delegation.* Maybe you're wrong when you assume you need to do all your pending projects yourself. Can someone else help you? If so, it's all the more important to schedule your project to allow time for that other person to do their work and then give yourself time to review it. If you don't plan ahead and give that other person a reasonable time to do their work, you will end up doing it yourself as a last-minute emergency. Looking ahead, one of your first career strategies should consist of becoming a delegator rather than a delegatee as soon as you can. Life is more pleasant that way, and you will feel less overwhelmed by your work.

D. *Do You Really Need to Do It All?* Keep in mind the possibility that some of the projects on your platter shouldn't be there at all. Yes, you never want to shirk work, particularly when you are the most junior person on the team, but if

you just aren't the right person to do something, or to take responsibility for getting it done, consider whether you can gracefully transition the work to someone who more appropriately ought to do it. If you plan to do that, do it in a discreet and tasteful way, long before any deadline, and with an eye toward protecting your flank from accusations of laziness. Your first candidates for this treatment should probably consist of whatever projects you most dislike, as those will often be the same projects on which you will do the worst job.

E. *Revision and Editing.* I often find myself distracted by the temptation to revise and edit whatever I'm writing before I've finished the first draft. I find editing easier than writing. But that's not an efficient way to revise and edit, because you won't really know how to revise and edit your work until you've finished that first draft. Then you can approach the project of revision and editing as a single whole, which may change your overall approach.

F. *Multi-Tasking.* If you keep interrupting one project to work on another, you will delay completion of all your tasks and lose a lot of time mobilizing, demobilizing, and remobilizing (picking up where you left off) for each project again and again. Usually you'll get more done in less time if you work on one project and finish it; then turn to the next one. That approach runs totally counter to the modern workplace, in which every incoming email message invites an interruption of an interruption of an interruption, until you end up chasing your tail all day and getting nothing done. Resist the natural temptation to do that. Unfortunately, that temptation is also all too often an imperative. You can't do much about it except get good at it, or go hide somewhere.

G. *Taking a Break.* When you do take a break, leave your work in a condition so that you can easily restart it later. For example, you may pick up the writing process much more easily if you stopped work in the middle of a sentence or after you've fully fleshed out several bullet points and jotted down brief reminders of the next two. The best breaks often don't involve food or drink. A walk around the block, or somewhere else outdoors, can totally alter your views and refresh you.

Most of the techniques offered in this two-part article are tried and true, or perhaps trite and true, but they work. One tends to forget them under the pressure of the moment. So the final suggestion is simply this: Apply what you already know about how to manage what's on your plate, including the suggestions in these articles. You probably know what you need to do; the challenge lies in doing it.

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