Keep these 50 expert tips handy

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Time Management Tactics for PIs

How often have you thought: “I surely could use another hour in this day?” The trick is to make small changes that can help you save that hour and even more. Here are 50 quick-and-easy suggestions:

1. Create a “To Do” list that prioritizes your tasks. Label them as follows:
   - A — most crucial tasks
   - B — important tasks
   - C — tasks with minimal value
   - D — tasks with absolutely not value

Choose A tasks over B tasks, and try to get rid of all D tasks. Do the C tasks only if you have enough time.

2. Do the “Quickie” items — those that take less than a minute to do. Do them to pare down your To Do list.

3. Set aside time each night to plan for the next day. Knowing what you need to do tomorrow means you’ll sleep better tonight. Planning the night before will help you be more rested and focused the following day.

4. Work with a clean desk and a clean work environment. Working in a messy environment you will spend 60-90 minutes each day looking for things or being distracted. Dealing with a messy environment can rob vital time and energy from important work.

5. Schedule the time you will clean up your work area to enhance your focus.

6. Limit the constant flow of paper, by removing yourself from unneeded distribution, report and junk-mail lists. Then you won’t have to deal with that paper in the first place.

7. Screen the paper so that only the important items end up on your desk. If you don’t have someone to do it, you can accomplish the same thing through self-screening teams. Appoint four other people to help you. On Monday, you can screen the incoming paperwork for everyone in the group. On Tuesday, the second person does it for the group. And so on. Rotating the responsibility through the rest of the week among the group members will keep the task light for everyone.

8. Take work in bites. For example, you have a big written proposal that's going to take about three hours to prepare. So break up that time into segments. Use the first 20 minutes to create an outline and a list of resources. Then write down the next portion the next day. It might take you four or five days, but you can complete the task one bite at a time.

9. Eat the crust. Have something unpleasant to do? Schedule it for later in the day — just as you might save the crust of the pie for last. Don’t give yourself all day to think of reasons not to do it, and allow yourself to procrastinate.

10. Assign deadlines. Give a task a deadline, and you'll get it done. Those tasks scheduled for “as soon as possible” wind up in the “as soon as possible” pile and then you procrastinate. Set deadlines realistically, and add on a buffer of time.

11. Avoid crisis management mode. If you wait until the deadline is near, you’ll just have to deal with added stress of rushing and cutting corners to get things done. And you’ll only have to go back and redo them. If you find yourself in that mode a lot, it probably has less to do with your day-to-day responsibilities and more to do with a lack of anticipation.

12. Make a deal with yourself to read the first page only. If you have something long and tedious to read like lab data results or a long scientific article, agree to read the first page only in five minutes. Before you know it you’ll have it all finished.

13. Don’t shoot for perfection. It’s a play on that 20/80 rule where you put in 20 percent of your time and achieve 80 percent of your result, and then move on. If you suffer the curse of perfectionism, 80 percent isn’t enough; you want your result to be perfect. But it might cost another 80 percent of the time you have left to get that extra 20 percent of result, making it 16 times more expensive.

14. Delegate work. If you want it to get done, you don’t always have to do it yourself, especially if you’re pressed for time. Hand some things off to your staff members.

15. Be reasonable when you delegate. That means limiting the size of the mess that could result from a complete meltdown. Don’t try to delegate getting tenure or writing the grant that you absolutely need to land, or working well with the PIs in adjacent labs.

16. Let go of a task you like to control. Give it to the right person, and give him the tools to do it as well as the support he needs. Allow him to make decisions and errors, offering feedback to maximize the results.

17. Hire someone who has professional expertise to get certain jobs done. Get a professional to prepare your tax return, pay for the lawn service, engage a professional resume preparation service, etc. Look at all your To Do list, appointments and scheduled events and ask yourself, “Is this the best use of my time?” If not, try to delegate it.

18. Don’t waste time on unnecessary meetings. Ask yourself whether you’re needed at a particular meeting. What you’ll likely get out of it, and what you can contribute.

19. Create a meeting agenda. If a meeting is absolutely critical, then create an agenda with times, and stick to it. Develop action items from the meeting, and determine who’s going to monitor their progress so you’re not rehashing things month after month.

20. Assign time for each item on the agenda. If there are 10 agenda items, and the meeting is to last two hours but the first item takes an hour and 45 minutes — set a time frame. For example: “2-2:20 New lab-task rotations: 2:20-2:45 Change in security procedures: 2:45-3:15.” This will tighten up the discussion.

21. Set up outside meetings at the appropriate locations. If you have a meeting with a lab vendor but don’t want to spend a lot of time with them, for example, suggest meeting at a fast-food spot. But if you want the meeting to last some time, choose a nice cushy restaurant. Just by the choice of the venue, you can affect the time and quality of the meeting.

22. Log your interruptions. Interruptions are both good and bad. In fact, you’re paid to handle many of the A and B variety, but the C and D interruptions can cut into your valuable time and cause problems.

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23. Don’t wait to log your interruptions. Logging interruptions may seem like a pain in the neck, but it only takes a few seconds. If you wait until the end of the day to fill out the log, you won’t remember. So take the time after each interruption.

24. Create two logs — one for “In Person” interruptions and another for “Telephone Interruptions.” Separate logs are necessary because they measure different things.

25. Run the logs for three to five days, which will give you a more accurate picture of your average day. Note who or what interrupted you, what it was about, how long it took to handle, and whether it was an A, B, C or D. Try to avoid as many of the C and D interruptions as possible.

26. Don’t answer the telephone. It’s important, they will call back. Of course, if you are waiting for an important call, answer the phone. But most calls are going to be Ds, and you can let the phone ring. You teach people how to treat you by the way you allow them to treat you. If you make yourself available for every call, you teach people to call at all times.

27. Don’t worry about recapturing all the lost interruption time. Typically, people spend half their workdays getting interrupted. Recapturing just an hour and one-half per day, or seven and one-half hours per week, means you’ve recaptured nine work weeks in one year.

28. Identify how much of your time you spend on the things you do best. And then, through adjustments, find more time in your day to do those things, which, in essence, significantly increases your results and personal productivity.

29. Continue to search for better ways to do things. If you really want to use your time better and are aware of how you’re using it now, you’ll be able to recognize faster and more efficient ways of handling all your daily tasks.

30. Create balance. Having too much to do and not enough time to do it leads to stress, frustration, and can put you in crisis-management mode. Learn to balance the seven areas of your life: health, family, finances, intellectual, social, research career and spiritual. If one is out of balance, it will upset the balance of the other areas. Don’t let your health or your family, or your research dominate your time.

31. Don’t allocate your time based on what demands it most. Rather, allocate based on who deserves it. But don’t be negative or arrogant as if to imply, “You don’t deserve my time.” Don’t let the demands for your time far outstrip your supply.

32. Use a calendar tool to prioritize your time. Take it with you everywhere, to the lab and to social and family engagements. The starting point of control is writing things down rather than trying to remember them.

33. Keep all your appointments and scheduled events — work and personal — in one location. That way you won’t risk scheduling a work responsibility at the same time as a personal commitment.

34. Don’t be late. Do be early. If you’re late, you increase your tendency to procrastinate.

35. Don’t procrastinate to avoid doing the As and Bs. To get a handle on procrastination, create enough pain for not doing something or, preferably, enough pleasure to do it. Make it a game — reward yourself at the end for doing it.

36. Chain yourself to the task. Perhaps it is 2 p.m., and you have to work on that long, tedious, tissue experiment. You want to leave at 5, but you waste nearly an hour and a half looking for some supplies, getting coffee, etc. Then you think, “Well, it’s too late to start on this.” Instead, chain yourself to the experiment area, and tell yourself you cannot move until the work is done. Give yourself a positive treat or reward at the end.

37. Don’t say, “I want to get it all done.” Substitute, “I want to get the most important things done.” That will cause you to focus on quality rather than quantity.

38. Don’t fall victim to “stuff.” Stuff is everything in that bottomless bucket of demands and responsibilities you can never complete. Throughout your day you didn’t get the important things done because you got caught up in “stuff.” The only way to get more time is to take it.

39. Don’t base your productivity on what you left on the table. Base it on what you accomplished. As long as the items you did were more important than the ones you didn’t, you’ve had a productive day.

40. Don’t take all your unfinished items and just roll them over to the next day. Instead, move them forward to the next appropriate day for completion — a day when you know you have time to get them done.

41. Plan around interruptions. Maybe most of your interruptions occur early in the day and early in the week. That means if you plan to get a big crucial project done first thing Monday morning, you’re buying frustration because you no sooner get started and the phone rings or a lab tech comes in. Plan your major projects for later in the day and later in the week, when you likely have fewer interruptions.

42. Avoid burnout. PIs often say, “I’ll do whatever it takes to accomplish this project.” That’s a commendable work ethic. But if you burn out and then leave, no one gains. Your institution has to recruit your replacement and loses the value of your experience, and you have to start over. Changing jobs to enhance opportunity and for advancement is sometimes a good move. But to abandon a position because of burnout only to go to a new job and burn out again is self-defeating.

43. Schedule yourself for an event that relates to what’s going on around it. Say a fellow researcher in New York City wants to set an appointment on Sept. 26 to discuss collaborating with you, but you realize you’re going to be in the city on Sept. 29. Combine both appointments on the same day to save time.

44. Don’t let the sun set on your anger. Don’t load up on negativity just before bedtime. Skip the late nightly news. Instead, watch a re-run of your favorite comedy show, read a light novel or have a pleasant conversation with that special person. You’ll sleep better and wake up feeling great.

45. Get enough sleep. Studies show that about 75 percent of the population is tired almost any time of the day, mostly because of the way they run their days. Many people experience such highly stressful days because they don’t plan and they are always reacting to the “stuff” thrown at them. Then they will not get quality sleep. Without a good night’s rest, you won’t be at your best.

46. Get up an hour earlier. We all need a wake-up hour. Take advantage of this concept by getting up one hour earlier than usual each day to set the stage for the day. Focus on positive events in your life, do positive visualization. Block the negative messages. Read something positive or uplifting. Take a walk, exercise, have breakfast, shower. Take control of your mind, body and environment.

47. Decide if you’re a racehorse or a tortoise. A racehorse is someone who thrives on the overload. Having lots to do is what really gets a racehorse’s adrenaline pumping. A tortoise is someone who functions best at a more measured pace. Racehorses and tortoises accomplish just as much in this world. They just do it differently. If you’re a racehorse, bunch as many staff meetings together as possible. But if you’re a tortoise, you should spread them out.

48. Have a goal. If you don’t know where you’re going, you’ll never know when you get there. Don’t get caught in the “have-tos,” doing the things you have to do. You won’t ever live a fully satisfying life unless you devote some time to the “want-tos.”

49. Write down the specific action steps to realize your dreams and goals. Do it each night in your daily planning. For example, perhaps when you go to the lab each day you always park close to the door. So make a point to park on the other side of the parking lot and walk for a little extra exercise. Or maybe instead of taking the elevator to the third floor, you walk up the stairs.

50. Make some time to just kick back. You don’t have to be productive 100 percent of the time. One of the greatest values of learning better time management is that you usually end up with more time for yourself. You need it.