

# Success Skills

## Working efficiently

**D**o you keep up with your professional e-mails or are you buried in them most of the time? Do you feel behind at work? Are you able to retrieve the information you need readily? Do you forget to attend or are you late to meetings or other scheduled activities? Do you feel rushed most of the time? Working efficiently comes from being organized and handling your time wisely. It is interesting that we find time for the things we want to do, and time is the one thing that is equal for everyone. When faced with a new request, is it always a question of “What’s the best use of my time right now?” Many of the techniques presented in this article are as applicable to your personal life as they are to your work life.

**Determine the cost of your time.** Calculate how much an hour of your time is worth to your organization. Di-

vide your annual salary by 2080 hours (52 weeks × 40 hours/wk). For a pharmacist making \$100,000, it is \$48 per hour. Benefits can add an additional 30–40%, which takes the rate to over \$60 per hour. Thus, it is critical that you constantly make the best use of your time.

**Understand your responsibilities.** Make sure you clearly understand what your supervisor expects from you (e.g., results, deadlines), what resources are available to you (e.g., secretarial time, computer, PDA, Internet access, drug information sources), and whose work you are responsible for (e.g., pharmacy technicians, students, residents, new pharmacists). Do not make assumptions.

**Log your activities.** To see how you currently use your time, keep a time log for several days. Make a list of your major daily activities, such as entering orders, verifying orders, participating in patient care rounds, processing e-mails, and attending meetings, and number each one.

Carry cards or pieces of paper in your pocket that are divided into 30-minute blocks of time, and frequently note which activity you spent your time doing. Do not spend a lot of time on this log as it does not need to be perfect; it should just be as close to reality as possible. Analyze your time logs for patterns and to approximate what percentage of your work shift you spend on your major activities. How do you use the first hour of your shift? Do you review and prioritize the demands on your time for the day, or do you visit with friends and colleagues? What is your biggest time waster? (Remember that you cost the organization over \$60 per hour.) Can you eliminate, shorten, or delegate any of your activities to a pharmacy technician, student, or resident? Are there activities that you could combine or batch to save time? Are your tasks sequenced to minimize the amount of time it takes to accomplish them? Does your use of time match your major job expectations?

**Plan for productive time.** Think about the time of day in which you are the most productive and can concentrate, focus, and do those things that require your best efforts during this time. Try and accomplish something tangible that generates real results every day. Make a habit of finishing what you start and do not jump from one thing to another, leaving a string of unfinished tasks. Do only one thing when thought is required and two or more only when your full at-

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*The Success Skills column provides practical advice to help pharmacists become more effective in their professional and personal lives. Installments are contributed by and reflect the views of Sara J. White, M.S., FASHP, Pharmacy Leadership Coach, Mountain View, CA.*

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tention is not required. Take time to do the task correctly the first time to avoid rework. Stay focused on results—not just on activities. Be decisive. A lot of mental energy is wasted by indecision and the anxiety it produces.

**Avoid time-wasting behavior.** Procrastination, preoccupation, and seeking perfection are serious time wasters. Procrastination is putting off everything that can be delayed and some things that should not be. People procrastinate for two reasons: they think they might fail or the task is difficult or distasteful. We tend to “productively procrastinate” rather than do something that we find uncomfortable; instead, we do a task that we have already mastered. Recognize that procrastination is a habit; it is learned, it is repeated, and it is probably unconscious. Everyone procrastinates to some extent. Preoccupation occurs when your attention is diverted from the place it needs to be, and seeking perfection is spending the time to achieve perfect quality at the expense of the quantity of tasks accomplished. To overcome procrastination, imagine what your situation will be a year from now if you do not perform the action you are postponing. Actually visualize the negative consequences. These consequences will give you a sense of urgency and the energy to get started. Choose a first step that will be a win for you. Start with something that you can control and then complete it successfully. To overcome preoccupation, change the routines that can lead you into preoccupation or that are an inefficient use of your time, such as visiting. Cultivate the habit of being observant and always make notes. Practice picking up quickly on what is going on around you. Ask yourself questions: “What is the real agenda, and who will be affected?” To minimize seeking perfection, acknowledge that a lot of nondrug-related tasks do not require 100% perfection. In fact, it is the quantity of accomplishments, not excellence, that generally is rewarded. Do not revise again and again in the name of perfection. When you find yourself

searching for perfection, ask where is the point of diminishing returns? Is there a simpler way to accomplish this? Will I be giving short shrift to other important tasks because of the time required to achieve perfection? Will my perfectionism result in missed deadlines or serious delays?

**Develop reminders.** You need to use a planning system to keep track of meetings, commitments, and your written to-do list. Do not simply rely on your memory, as it is a waste of your intellect. It does not matter if your system is paper or electronic as long as it handles day, month, and year and has space for a to-do list. It is important that the system is user-friendly so you will use it. When selecting a system, you might consider that you will need to have it with you at all times; you will want to capture items without having to write them on a piece of paper or trying to remember them, which will require transcribing them later. Use this system as a tickler or reminder for recurring activities, such as monthly patient-unit reviews, student or resident evaluations, and staff meetings. For tasks or activities that you do not need to do daily, consider developing a written checklist that you can refer to to ensure that you do not miss any information or have to rely on your memory.

**Prioritize your goals.** Take a convenient time period, a month, several months, or six months, and make a list of everything you want to accomplish. In reviewing your list divide the items into A, B, or C categories. A items are the items that will give you the strongest sense of accomplishment. A items are the important and urgent ones that only you can do. Do not consider how much time an item may take to accomplish, but consider its value when accomplished. B items are those that would be nice to accomplish but are not urgent. C items are to do only if time is available. Take your A category items and prioritize them as A-1, A-2, A-3, and so forth. This will become your to-do list. The A-1 is your top priority with the greatest payoff so only work on your A-1 item. If the A-1 will require a lot of time, use the Swiss

cheese method, which is to divide the A-1 into smaller manageable tasks, and do one each day. Do not wait for a block of time to work on your A-1. Do it piece by piece, but complete it. Be careful not to do B or C items because it feels good to cross them off your to-do list, as you have determined that they are of lower value. In fact, C items should be on a separate list that is reviewed weekly rather than daily. As part of this planning process, consider and list the “roles” you have, such as pharmacist, clerkship or resident preceptor, trainer for new staff, pharmacy representative on XY Committee, and mentor.

**Assign times for your tasks.** You need to formally schedule your tasks. Think about your next week and month, and consider your A items, your roles, and your meetings, and determine when you can devote some time to each. You must say no to time demands that are not directly related to your major job responsibilities, A-1 items, or roles. Just say “I am not able to do . . . but thanks for thinking of me and keep me in mind in the future.” Always set yourself a time limit and stick to it for the completion of each task to avoid spending more time that it actually requires. Do not put off the difficult things as the anticipation, anxiety, or worry eats up your emotional energy, and rarely are they as difficult as you imagine. Even if they are, you will have them behind you. Put your A-1 items, roles, and job responsibilities first on your schedule as “big rocks” or must-dos. Then fill in your other tasks and roles around the big rocks as you would with sand. Always look ahead at least three to six months, and do not leave things to the last minute because unforeseen demands may make you miss your deadlines. It might be useful to lay out the next year, month by month, particularly for annual activities, such as performance evaluations, collecting regulatory data, and writing reference letters.

**Manage your e-mail.** What does your e-mail inbox look like at work? Is it cluttered with e-mail that you have read and meant to answer, print, or file? Working efficiently means handling e-mails like

handling paper. Try to handle them only once. Set up a few folders in which to save important e-mails such as for a project you are working on. Once opened, try to file, delete, or answer your e-mails. Rarely keep an e-mail to deal with later as this may lead to an overwhelming amount and wasted time rereading them. If you work at a computer terminal, do not have your system send a notification each time you receive a new e-mail or you will be constantly interrupted. Handling your e-mails in batches is more efficient. Check your e-mails only a couple of times daily, and keep your current e-mail inbox clean. Think of your e-mail inbox as a mailbox: You would not store your bills in your mailbox. If applicable, have a follow-up folder and set aside time once a week to clean it out. Use all of the features of the e-mail system. Some systems allow you to use color codes to distinguish the people who send you e-mails. Using color codes for your superior or department director will allow them to stand out the minute you look at your inbox. Be sure you know how long any saved e-mails will remain on your system. If there are groups of people you regularly communicate with, set up distribution lists. When you are going to be away, use the "out of office" feature, which will put an auto-reply so that people will know you have not read the e-mail. If your organization will support a wireless e-mail device such as a Blackberry or another PDA, request one so you will be able to keep your e-mail moving without the need to be at a terminal. These mobile devices allow you to use spare minutes such as those when waiting for elevators and waiting for meetings to start. Keep a list of items

that you can accomplish in those spare minutes.

Recognize that while you can delete e-mails, they are always retrievable, so do not put anything in an e-mail that you would be embarrassed to see published verbatim in the local newspaper. Keep your e-mails short and concise. Use shorthand such as NRN (no response needed) or FYI (for your information). If the subject line contains all of your message, include the abbreviation EOM (end of message) to save the reader from having to open it. Never immediately send an e-mail you wrote while emotionally upset or frustrated. Save it and reread it 24 hours before sending it. Use the same approach when you are tempted to send an e-mail to the entire pharmacy staff or work group. Think about the appropriate way to voice your concern to achieve the result you want. "Blast" e-mails are rarely effective and may backfire on you.

**Manage the clutter.** Use these same techniques to keep your voice mail, pager, or work space (routing area) organized. Use the concept of a C drawer or space (for the C category items mentioned above) where you can put items to get them out of sight versus filing each item that you may need later. When the C drawer or space fills up just throw away from the bottom. Try not to stack paper, journals, and newsletters, because you will rarely get back to them and seeing them will make you feel guilty. Decide what you need to read thoroughly, what can be scanned, or what can be retrieved electronically when you need it.

**Manage retrieval of information.** Decide what and how you are going to

proactively keep up professionally or whether you are going to retrieve information as you need it. Most professional organizations have gratis push news services and listservers, which are an excellent way to keep up and ask questions of colleagues across the country. Since these are e-mail-based, handle them as you do your other e-mails.

**Time savers.** For recommendations, evaluations, meeting minutes, pharmacy and therapeutics committee write-ups, and other activities you have to perform on a continuing basis, develop and save templates. Templates allow you to copy and paste repeated sections. Be sure you read used templates to ensure they are accurate. Also consider voice recognition software, which requires very little training and can be used for e-mails.

**Conclusion.** Making efficient use of your time takes planning and discipline and requires an honest assessment of how your time is best spent.

#### Suggested readings

- Covey S. *First things first*. New York: Simon Schuster; 1994.  
 Laken A. *How to get control of your time and your life*. NY: New American Library; 1989.  
 Morgenstern J. *Time management from the inside out*. NY: Henry Holt; 2004.

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