about this column

Column: Ask Marta

Dear Marta,

I'm a graduate student who is having trouble managing his time. Could you ask some of the faculty at UCSD how they make efficient use of their time and balance the demands of research, teaching, and administration while still maintaining a personal life?

Finitely yours,
Too much to do

Dear *too much to do*,

Modern day life and certainly our profession is such that most us feel that we have more things to do than time to do them - i.e., that "we feel pressed for time always". And, sad to say, this perception is valid; "this seems to be the nature of the job". WE DO NOT HAVE ENOUGH TIME. Thus, we do have to (learn to) manage it...now and forever.

As with the answer to so many questions, individual differences matter. What works for one person may or may not work for another. One must know oneself and one's goals and priorities when deciding what to do, what not to do, and with what speed, with what quality, and by when whatever the official deadlines, if any. That said as requested I asked various faculty how they managed their time and have taken the liberty of combining and editing some of their tips with my own for your consideration. In no particular order:

Accept the fact there is never enough time.

Read Steven Covey's *First Things First*. It's got very good advice about time management even if it is a self-help book.

Make lists and prioritize rather than keeping it all in your head and if you like to cross things out as they get done. Better on paper than in your head and better still on a calendar or some other consistent planner.

But don't just make lists of priorities, make schedules. A list lets you know what needs to be done but not when you are going to do any of them. If long term projects with deadlines that may be years away (e.g., dissertations) always get low priorities relative to short term projects with closer deadlines,

stuff toward the bottom of the list never gets done. So while it is ok to start with a list, it is essential to plan *when* each item will be done.

Be reasonable in your scheduling -- there are only so many minutes/hours/days/weeks/months you have available to schedule and only so much you can do in the time available. Neither ambition nor wishing creates time. Literally tally exactly how much time you have to schedule to do whatever it is you aim to achieve whether in a day, a week, a month, a quarter, a year, or a graduate career (e.g., for a week, take a calendar, cross out time for sleeping, eating, personal hygiene, moving from one location to another assuming it takes all your attention, etc. - i.e., all the time that is not available for scheduling); then plan. Don't just estimate and don't just work it out in your head! This should be an eye-opener on the path to setting reasonable goals, and better time allocation.

Schedule items from your list as if they were appointments (you have to pay for) or classes you have to teach (TA), flights you have to take (i.e., commitments). Include not only activities that can be done in one sitting, but things that may take weeks (e.g., writing a paper, working on a grant, reviewing papers). Allocate time for thinking and creativity as well as for doing. Then resist the temptation to schedule over them if something comes up later: they need to be treated as if they were just as real any other obligation. The natural tendency is to meet easy or pleasant, short term goals often for others and to make excuses for harder, longer-term often personal goals. This may make you more popular and appreciated, but it will not help you achieve your goals (unless that's all they are).

At least one faculty member "also tries to NOT schedule at least one or two days a week... then (to) use those days as "free form days" to catch up on things (including student-generated prose and particularly personal matters) that I let slide, because teaching and administration always seem more imminently important/crucial."

Respect yourself and your time. "The list should include things that are for your personal life. Those are just as important (if not more) than anything else. " One faculty member said: " I put family time first. I didn't do this when I was young and ambitious, but I do it now. I am willing to think about my research any time, but I really try to keep teaching and especially administration away from my home. By design I am not able to access my university email account from home." In fact, all faculty who responded believe in some form of the "maxim that all work and no play makes John/Joan a dull boy/girl, not to mention making you impossible for others to deal with: colleagues, superiors, students, and loved ones. Therefore, best to make sure that your basic sanity is intact before you take on yet one more thing to do. That said, you DO have to expect to spend significant portions of your weekends and your evenings catching up on work at least some of the time," so if you have a partner who can't handle that, troubled times are ahead.

"Distinguish what's *important* from what's *urgent*". It's very easy to get side-tracked and loose time because you're responding to things that seem urgent - a telephone call, a knock at the door, an incoming email. But what's urgent isn't always important. You have to write a dissertation. That's important. But is it urgent? No... you may work on it over several years. Consider letting voice mail take the call, not answering a knock, turning off your email messages and/or letting people know you only read email at certain times of the day. "Many urgent things can be ignored, particularly if you're working on something that's important but non-urgent."

Assume things will NOT go smoothly. Schedule some time for the unknown and unexpected; they are greedy creatures with voracious appetites. So, whenever possible set a deadline for yourself that is earlier than the actual one.

Create your own incentives rather than depending on externally-imposed deadlines.

Learn to know when things are finished; everything can always be better, but at some point you must be able to stop. Everything need not be perfect.

Consider no amount of time as too short to accomplish something. Always be ready to use whatever time you have available. "Prior to (having a baby), I

thought I could only write if I had a big unbroken chunk of hours ahead of me. Now I can work on a paper if I have 15 minutes between meetings. There is no secret here, I just open the document, go back to where I left off, and just do what I know I have to do (note: if you're new at this, it works best for methods and results, less well for conceptual aspects like the intro and conclusion).

"Organize -- take time for organization" so you spend your time *doing* rather than searching for things or trying to figure out what needs to be done.

"Stop dithering, stop complaining, just do it!" Going somewhere to work where there will be no interruptions is a strategy that sometimes helps to get into the just-do-it mode. "I've found that a large part of my problem is simply worrying. When I take the worrying portion of the problem out and simply do the tasks that need to be done somehow there is always time. " Well, I can't promise that's the case, but worrying less will save some time! So, be focussed and force yourself to get started and continue to do what was planned "... during the scheduled time to build good habits." That said, if you find that you *really* cannot get anywhere on some scheduled task and feel that you are spinning wheels, and you *do* have some slack in your schedule, then do not bang your head against a wall, switch tasks. Get something done; all days are *not* the same.

Be in the moment and be effective. Whatever it is you are doing, do it with all your mind and make sure you have what you need to do it right. "I find it really useful to compartmentalize my time..(to) allocate certain periods for administration or for teaching preparation, and try hard not to think about those things when I am doing other things. I try to work effectively. Don Norman advised me, "Never pick up a piece of paper more than once." That means, if you are going to read your mail, set aside time and be in a place where you can do something about it. To read it once to see what's there and another time because you have to do something about it is a waste of effort." That said, I often take a quick look at a paper I need to review in order to decide how much time it will take since quality of writing and topic matter are more important for the estimate than its length. However, whenever possible do do the "easy" tasks immediately - whether it is reviewing a paper, answering email, writing a letter of recommendation - for if everything you need is there and you can just do it, you save time that you would spend bookkeeping, dealing with reminders, fretting, and mental and/or physical reloading of the materials.

Ultimately, you will have to decide what is important to you and hand in hand with that learn to say no (wisely and respectfully) -- to yourself and to others. "It is important to think about the big picture and use that when making decisions about what to do. I get dozens of invitations to go to workshops, contribute papers, write recommendations, review papers and proposals etc. I could not possibly do all of the things I am invited to do. So I have grown picky over the years. I only accept invitations that will be useful to me or to the field, or that somehow move things in a direction that matters to me. I also try to make those decisions promptly..(rather than) waste time dithering. I try to be writing about the ideas that interest me all of the time. I used to accept a commission to write a paper for a book or a special issue of a journal and use that pressure to force myself to write. That ...is not fun, and the product that emerges is often not excellent. Now, I try to keep several writing projects going. I'm not so worried about how many publications I have as I am concerned about writing really excellent stuff. I generally have a nearly complete draft of a paper before I start thinking about where it should be published."

Don't regret time spent, rather learn from the consequences of your choices about how you spent your time, what you accomplished, how long things took, how you feel, etc. Time management is a skill one learns and can fine tune.

Keep asking others how they manage their time and share what you learn with colleagues (write in if you have hints).

Assume responsibility for your choices. It is your life. It is your time. But do "cut yourself a break -- when you can't make a deadline or keep a promise, be honest with yourself and others and move on; just don't let it become a habit."

In this section of *Cognitive Science Online*, UCSD Professor Marta Kutas answers questions from our readers. If you have any questions you'd like to ask Marta, please **contact the editors**. While personal questions relating to life in academia or graduate school may be appropriate, please keep in mind that this column mainly serves to provide advice and guidance on professional matters such as teaching and academic issues. Also keep in mind that this is an *advice* column and neither Dr. Kutas nor the journal will assume any responsibility regarding the consequences of following or disregarding the advice provided. Take advice responsibly!