A WORK IN PROGRESS

REACHING OUR GOALS EFFECTIVELY –
methods to suit our own work situation.
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taken by project managers and business leaders who advise us on “time

eureka moment is much more likely if we can focus
the way of an elusive “eureka” moment. In fact, the
artists avoid time management just in case it gets in
unique solution. In turn, this makes many scien-
problems, and might not have a defi nitive or
lems that can be hard to defi ne, have many input
As researchers, we commonly take a circuitous path
full potential, which is, after all, what we get paid for.
health and work environments. In ineffective use of time also limits our
I deal with this insane world?” It negatively affects our relationships,
poor time investment tends to foster an attitude of, “Poor me, how do

TECHNIQUES FOR DECIDING WHAT TO DO
A simple place to start is to decide what you need to do on a given
day. Covey (2013) breaks daily tasks into categories of important, not
urgent, and important (see Table). The “not important” row includes
time-sapping tasks that do not add to an overall goal. The “important” row includes urgent tasks that need to be done now
(“fires”); non-urgent tasks are those that move us forward towards our
goals. Covey (2013) argues that maximizing the time spent on
important, non-urgent (quality) tasks allows us to better reach our goals and
be more creative.


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REFERENCES

TO PRIORITIZE TASKS (Following Covey 2013).

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Try using bursts of time (e.g. pomodorotechnique.com or 3030.binaryhammer.
com), mini-deadlines throughout the day, and electronic task tracking (e.g. cul-
turedcode.com/things), or apply peer pressure by working with a group (e.g. a
writing group). Batch similar tasks together to work more effi ciently (e.g. attempt
to complete e-mail in one or two sittings).

Make sure you factor in time for “important” interruptions, and try scheduling “interruptions” by providing
office hours when you are available. Also, schedule time to write, complete specific tasks (e.g. lab work), answer
e-mails, and return phone calls. Turn off social media sites and e-mail when you don’t need them.

Tame that e-mail box! Prioritize messages that align with your responsibilities and goals. Recognize more compli-
cated e-mail issues may warrant a phone call or may be
listed as a task on its own. Establish a system for fi ling and storing e-mails so you can find them easily; consider using
folders organized by topic or date or using one folder and the search function. Decide on how you will flag e-mails
that need to be followed up.

With regard to meetings, decide what you hope to achieve and set an agenda, fi nish on time, and, after meetings,
summarize the results. If you have no valuable contribu-
tion to make, then why are you there?

When you complete a task, make a point of noticing. There
can be a lot of satisfaction in ticking things off a list and throwing it away, or
rewarding yourself when you reach a goal.

Don’t underestimate the usefulness of taking a break before revisiting a problem.
Many creative moments happen at the beach, the supermarket, during exercise,
or after a good sleep.

IN THE END
Everyone has a busy life. Make it less busy by avoiding worry! It is inevi-
table that life’s complications may wreck your best laid plans and make
you late. One strategy is to confess and try to fi gure out a reasonable
deadline. Also, recognize that it is not possible to always have days with
highly creative and intelligent thought, but that it is still important to
be moving forward; use those days for other types of useful, if mindless,
progress. Above all, enjoy what you are doing and it will all work out!

SO, HOW ABOUT STARTING HERE?
Once your goals are clearer, it is easier to use time more effec-
tively by following some simple tips. Balance your goals across all areas of your life: career, family, personal, physical
and mental. Create a daily plan with small tasks to help keep track of commit-
ments and expect Murphy’s Law to rule (i.e. if something can go wrong, it will).

When you have urgent tasks due, use a “do not disturb” sign or work in a
secluded location.

ACHIEVING OUR GOALS
Successfully reaching our goals starts with having “the end in mind”
(Covey 2013). If you are working towards an important goal that is
satisfying and interesting then you are more likely
to be engaged in the process. Experts recommend
planning where you can use your strengths to
reach long-term goals. This topic fi lls the shelves
career and personal psychology books (e.g. Rath
2007; Bolles 2014).

As researchers, we commonly take a circuitous path
to reach a goal because we deal with complex prob-
lems that can be hard to define, have many input
parameters, and might not have a defi nitive or
unique solution. In turn, this makes many scienti-
ists avoid time management just in case it gets in
the way of an elusive “eureka” moment. In fact, the
eureka moment is much more likely if we can focus
on our research, having ensured that we have the
time to do it. A scientist’s work trajectory is gener-
ally quite different from the sequential pathway
taken by project managers and business leaders who advise us on “time
management”. Standard workfl ow methods are not necessarily appli-
cable for researchers, where our goals are deifi ned and change as we go
along. Therefore, we need to modify mainstream “time management”
methods to suit our own work situation.

“Is it fundamentally
the confusion between
effectiveness and efficiency
that stands between doing
the right things and doing
things right. There is surely
nothing quite so useless as
doing with great effi ciency
what should not be done at
all. (Drucker 1963)”