

# Managing Your Time in a Digital World

By Lori Fiessinger, MD

I've learned many valuable lessons in my first year of practice, but none have been more important than time management. Physician burn out is a real problem that we all will likely face at one time or another. I've attended many lectures on burn out, and while I did feel solidarity in hearing that others were having similar experiences, I was always left wanting more practical tips on how to avoid being overwhelmed by professional and personal obligations. As women in medicine, we are incredibly busy. There are a limited number of hours in the day, and making the most of those hours is key.

## Productivity

I tackled this topic like I would any scientific question and began researching productivity. The best source I found is the book "Getting Things Done, The Art of Stress-Free Productivity" by David Allen. This is an old book, but its themes are timeless. If you find yourself absolutely overwhelmed by the chaos of daily living and have no idea where to even begin, start with this book. It takes you step-by-step through organizing every aspect of your life and is full of practical tips on how to improve day-to-day efficiency. All of my tips and tricks outlined below are derived from the basics set out by David Allen. If you are fairly organized but looking for a few tips on how to maximum your productivity, I have found several things that work for me that I'd love to share.

## Emails

Let's start with emails. If you are anything like me, you get an overwhelming amount of email in a day. I used to find myself mindlessly flipping through my emails in between patients. I, of course, did not have time to respond to any important emails, so I would just leave the important ones in my inbox so I would remember to come back to them later. This system did not work for me. I did not remember to come back to the important, time-sensitive emails, and they quickly became buried between mounds of junk email. As a result, I found myself missing deadlines.

## Avoid Email Pitfalls

I have found that the trick to avoiding this pitfall is to keep your inbox clear, rather than using it to store important items. I try to take time once a day to go through my email box and keep it manageable. Make sure you have enough time set aside to complete this task before getting started (in between patients is not enough time!).

## Organize by Action

I look through each email and decide if it is something that needs action. If it does, I then decide if that action will take two minutes or less. If so, I do it right then. If not, I move it into a folder for emails that need action so that I can go back to them when I have more time. I label this

folder \*ACTION in Gmail so it falls at the top of my folders. I try to make sure my \*ACTION folder is cleaned up at least weekly. If the email does not need action, I decide if it's trash or something I want to save for later reference, and file it away appropriately.

I also have a folder labeled \*WAITING in my inbox. This is where I put email threads in which I am waiting for an important response, which I have found to be particularly helpful for research projects. I check on the \*WAITING folder weekly, which prompts me to send a reminder email if I haven't received a response.

### **Helpful Apps**

After you have conquered your email, consider downloading some applications (apps) that can help you become a more organized and productive person: I recommend a calendar app, to do list app, and note storage app. You want to look for apps with both desktop and mobile versions so that you always have access, no matter where you are.

#### *Calendar Apps*

The calendar is for day-to-day planning in addition to visualizing the big picture. Be sure to keep everything in one calendar. I have both personal and work calendars, but both are displayed simultaneously in my calendar app, Google calendar. Trying to manage multiple calendars is a recipe for disaster if you must rely on yourself to flip between them. Be sure to schedule everything, including your normal office hours, appointments, exercise, coffee with friends, dinner dates, etc. Some people even like to schedule their sleep time. Seeing everything laid out lets you figure out where you have time to spare, and which days are under more of a time-crunch. When it's on your calendar, you are much less likely to forget about it and more likely to give the task the priority it deserves. You should also place any upcoming deadlines in your calendar. Before your week starts, take time to review the entire week. I also like to check out what I have planned at the beginning of each new month so that I know upfront if I have any lectures I need to make, travel planning to do, etc.

#### *To Do List Apps*

For my to do list app, I use Todoist. I was a big fan of the Post It to do list prior to finding this app. The problem with the Post It to do list is that you can lose it or not have it accessible when you need it. Todoist has both a webpage interface and a downloadable app for your phone, so you will never be without your list! There is a wonderful 'inbox' space where I quickly capture any ideas floating in my head. There is nothing worse than trying to focus on a task when mundane life things keep popping up in your head and distracting you from your current purpose. When this happens, I quickly jot down what I need to do (i.e. return library books) in the inbox which allows me to mentally move on. Once the thought is safely stored away from my brain, I can focus on what I need to do ... at least until the next distracting thought comes!

Once a day, I go into the inbox and follow the two-minute rule again. If something can be done within two minutes, I do it right away. If it's going to take longer than two minutes, I file it away under its appropriate folder. I keep separate folders for work, personal, travel, and research

projects to keep myself organized. This is where you should monitor the nitty gritty. Keep track of the progress of all of your projects so that you always know what the next step is. Are you waiting to hear back from someone? Put a reminder in here. Do you need to do a literature review to move forward? Here's where to keep that info.

### *Note Storage Apps*

The last necessity is a note storing app. I use Evernote. This is one of the only apps that I think paying for the upgrade is worth it because it allows you to have access across multiple devices. If you are anything like me, you have a large laptop or desktop computer for most of your work, a smaller and more portable laptop, a tablet, and a cell phone. You want your note taking app to be available to you wherever you are. That's the point of taking those good notes at conferences – so you can reference them later when you see a challenging clinic case!

I store pictures of journal articles or important digital files in my Evernote whenever I think it might be something I need to reference in the future. Evernote also has a wonderful 'clip' feature that allows you to send an entire webpage or a selected screenshot of a webpage directly to an 'inbox.' I use this when I am researching a new topic, but do not have time to review something in depth right away. Weekly, I organize whatever has ended up in the inbox by either reading it in depth or storing it in its appropriate 'notebook' if I think I will need to come back to it someday. I highly recommend organizing your 'notebooks' into similar subject headings as your to do list (work, personal, research, etc).

I am amazed by my colleagues in the WDS and all you manage to accomplish. I hope my tips and tricks on how to manage your time better in a digital world will help to make you feel a little less anxious about your obligations and be even more productive in the future.