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Short Subjects: Time Management for Archivists

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TIME MANAGEMENT FOR ARCHIVISTS

Practically everyone writing on the subject of time management believes that the key to good management of work time is doing the most important job now. Some managers spend much energy on low-priority jobs, leaving little or no time for the really essential ones. Beginning to regain control of work time, therefore, requires an appreciation of what Alex MacKenzie has called "time wasters."¹ Three time wasters that are at or near the top of many lists of the most notorious--telephone use, meetings, and mail handling procedures--can be defeated using simple methods.

Telephone calls rank as the Number One time waster on almost every list, because they can so easily destroy the one thing most needed in order to be productive--large blocks of uninterrupted time. There are ways of controlling these interruptions, however:

1. Establish a quiet hour for answering mail or working on important projects. Guard this time jealously. Do not take calls.
2. Establish a time or times in the day to make and return calls.
3. Instruct the person who will be answering the telephone to tell callers when to expect a return call. Be punctual in returning the call.

Meetings can also waste time, for three reasons:

1. inadequate preparation,
2. lack of an agenda, and
3. tendency to be overly long and inconclusive.

These negative habits can be reduced or eliminated by applying a few simple techniques:

1. Prepare for each meeting by circulating a memorandum that states at least three pieces of information: the purpose of the meeting, an agenda for the meeting; and the starting %and% ending times of the meeting.
2. Conduct meetings applying these techniques:
 - a. include in the meeting only those persons whose presence is essential,
 - b. limit and control discussions,
 - c. do not let old projects vanish without a trace. Begin the meeting by following up on projects decided upon in previous meetings, and
 - d. see that each participant leaves the meeting with a clear idea of what is to be done, by whom, and when.
3. Do not overlook the importance of the followup. Minutes of the meeting need to be prepared immediately and distributed to all participants and to any others who will benefit from knowing what transpired. The minutes should succinctly restate both the relative importance of the projects' agreed to in the meeting and the projected dates of completion.

Thoughtless mail handling procedures is a third "time waster." Good practice in this area can be summarized in five principles:

1. Develop the habit of first reading mail while standing (This principle is based on research done by the direct mail industry showing that over seventy-five percent of all mail is indeed read by people as they walk toward the nearest trash can. Be a member of this smart majority.)
2. Sort mail into two categories: material requiring immediate attention and everything else that can wait.
3. Direct all other mail either to a staff member for action or throw it away.
4. Schedule a definite period or periods during the day to answer important correspondence. Protect this time and use it to give complete attention

to the most urgent requests that come in the mail. Do not allow interruptions during this period.

If these procedures are followed, two major requirements of this aspect of time management will be satisfied:

- a. correspondence should not come to rest permanently on the desk; and
- b. each piece of mail should be handled only once.

These basic time management techniques are needed by the majority of archivists, regardless of their institutional circumstances. Committee meetings, the telephone, and unexpected visitors plague everyone, and it is important to strive to compartmentalize the manner in which such distractions are handled. The aim in doing so, of course, is to gain more time to address the primary concerns of archival work, such as records management, collection processing, reference service, or conservation. To enhance the time spent on these primary areas, archival time management solutions may prove to be of some benefit.

If an archivist is employed by an institution that has previously given only passing thought to records management, it will be most important to assert some control over records flow and thereby eliminate the chaos such a situation produces. In the long-term, it obviously will be essential to formulate a comprehensive records management plan, but this will take many hours and do little to relieve the immediate dilemma caused by the large influx of unannounced records. A viable short-term solution is to concentrate educational efforts on frequent donors and emphasize to them the critical role that each office plays in efficient records management. An excellent way to begin this education is to devise a brief "acquisition statement" called a records transferral form. The explanatory section of the form should contain clear and concise instructions about records transferral and stress the following points:

1. The originating office must notify the archivist prior to any transferral of records.
2. All incoming material must be properly packaged and accompanied by complete inventories.
3. Issues of a confidential nature should be so specified.
4. Upon arrival at the archives, all material will be appraised for its historical value and unsuitable portions will be destroyed.

Although apparently a simplistic device--and certainly no substitute for a comprehensive records management plan--such a mechanism will give the archivist some breathing space and greatly reduce the amount of time lost in the re-packing and inventorying of the records.

Two things are of crucial importance in making the most of time spent in actually processing historical collections. First, and most immediately, a clear order of processing priority should be devised so that incoming collections may be ranked during the accessioning process according to their importance. The actual mechanics of the scale may be of the archivist's own choosing but should clearly reflect both the prime needs of the institution and the demands of the repository's research clientele. The second critical factor in efficient collection processing is the human element, and this is clearly the one with which many archivists have the greatest difficulty. Getting the most from staff members is always a challenge for a supervisor and particularly for those who have most processing done by student assistants or part-time workers. When formulating the mental guidelines necessary for the care and feeding of such assistants, the following axioms may be recommended:

1. Never hire a student assistant or part-time worker in whom one does not have the fullest confidence.
2. Attempt to match an individual's area of interest and background with a relevant collection.

3. Continually demonstrate interest in the staff's efforts and the importance of their accomplishments to the repository as a whole.
4. Occasionally vary the processors to keep them from becoming bored by repetition.
5. Dismiss a problem worker immediately if a mistake has been made in hiring.

Automation is yet another viable method of improving efficiency in the primary areas of archival endeavor and is now a much more affordable option, given the advent of the microcomputer. A variety of hardware and software packages are available which are well suited to archival purposes. With the appropriate software, personal computers can help to maintain accession records, create inventories and finding aids, print folder labels, store acquisition records, handle correspondence files, and chart fiscal responsibilities. Micro-automation will be of inestimable help in centralizing administrative and archival information. The ability of many data base packages to search and compare large amounts of material will be another key benefit and spell a belated end to many of the extended manual searches that were formerly so characteristic of the profession.

If a repository is or is planning to operate a limited conservation facility, two things will be of prime importance in the context of time management. First, since conservation work is an archival function which can be adversely affected by interruption, the scheduling of work is crucial. If possible, conservation services should be performed in the off-hours when office and research activity is at a minimum. Evenings and weekends are perhaps the very best times for conservation work, a fact which will make the implementation of a flexible schedule for the conservator essential. Apart from simple scheduling, staff commitment is of even greater importance. Most conservation operations require large amounts of time, and the individual in charge of the lab should be forewarned that the dedication

of considerable time may be necessary if the techniques are to be learned and executed properly.

Even if only limited success is achieved in streamlining the various activities discussed in this article, the cumulative gain in work efficiency could be considerable. Since missions and aspirations will inevitably run far ahead of budgets, even modest achievements in work efficiency should be pursued and will inevitably pay dividends in terms of greater productivity and personal fulfillment.

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NOTES

¹ Alex MacKenzie, New Time Management Methods for You and Your Staff (Chicago: Dartnell, 1975), 67.