Business Faculty Time Management: Lessons Learned From The Trenches

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ABSTRACT

Teaching, research, and service expectations of the academic profession may sometimes seem overwhelming. Although much has been written about time management in general, there has not been much written about time management in the academic professions and even less written about time management for academics in the business disciplines. This paper will provide a review of the literature about time management for faculty. In addition, this paper will provide practical methods for you to plan and organize your time to better meet your teaching, research and service expectations. Finally, this paper will help you develop a strategy to avoid the "top ten" time wasters for faculty.

Keywords: Time management, Job satisfaction, Job productivity, Prioritizing tasks

INTRODUCTION

Being a business professor may be one the greatest jobs of all. Most of us have about twenty designated hours during the week for the varied duties of classes, office hours and committee meetings, leaving the use of the rest of the work hours largely to our discretion. Of course, we are (supposed to use) many of those hours are used to prepare for classes, do service activities, consult with students, and to fulfill our research requirements. Most business professors are very self-motivated and understand the value of time. However, we may at times feel the need to take control of our time and to use the time we have more efficiently. There is much literature on time management techniques in non-academic settings. It focuses on management techniques and on how psychological well-being is influenced by time management skills. Our review of the literature found only one article that discussed time management in the academic setting. This article provided suggestions on teaching, research, and service time management for professors working in a tier one type research university (Ailamaki and Gehrke, 2003). More discussion about time management in the academic setting is warranted. This paper adds to the discussion. We provide a review of the existing time management literature, and since it is directed mostly to managers in business settings, we make linkages in applications to the academic setting. We first discuss the benefits of time management. Then we discuss methods used to assess current situations and approaches to setting up a time management program. Finally, we discuss specific time management techniques and strategies to fight the classic "time wasters".

BENEFITS OF TIME MANAGEMENT

Productivity Benefits

Much of the interest in time management focuses on the association between it and outputs or productivity on the job. Stack (2005) suggests that we can measure our work success and our job satisfaction by our productivity. The two ways that we can increase productivity is to find ways to work faster at the activities that we normally do and by eliminating activities that waste time. A working definition of wasted time is time spent to achieve no output or output of low value. Benjamin Franklin said that time is money. This makes sense in business. On the other hand, as academics we are paid up front, and unless we add more paying activities, we are mainly required to earn our pay by fulfilling our teaching, research and service requirements. Time management is important to academics

in that we want to obtain the highest quality teaching, research and service outputs within a manageable amount of time.

Psychological Benefits

Psychological benefits provide another motivation to be interested in improving our time management. Job satisfaction, Stack (2005) suggests, happens when there is a connection between productivity on the job and job security. In addition, having the feeling that we, not others or random circumstances, are controlling our time, should give us a feeling of contentment. People who are good time managers are desirable as employees. A survey performed by the *Sacramento Bee* (Osterman, 2005) on 145 area companies found that employers are very much concerned about employee's "soft" skills, such as being well organized and on time. In fact, they rated soft skills higher than technical skills. Of course as professors, both soft and technical skills are needed along with the ability to use them together in varied daily activities. We will be gratified if our time management efforts help us to keep up with the literature, research programs, classes, and service activities. We also feel good when we believe that we are achieving maximum outputs.

ASSESSING THE SITUATION

The time management literature suggests that we assess our situation before we adopt any new techniques (i.e., identify the problem). Boice (2000) suggests that we discuss time management with a colleague. Often times it is much easier for others to identify our time wasters than it is for us to identify them. He also suggests additional meetings with colleagues to lay out time management plans and strategies. This should help with time management skills and increase collegiality.

Grid (2000) identifies that assessment is the first step in developing an effective time management for new college students. He advises that you need to know how you spend your time now in order to develop a good time management plan. This model is very simply having two columns for each day of the week. A planned column and actual column is used with rows of hourly blocks that start at 6:00 am, and end at 12:00 pm. Before the beginning of the week you fill in the entire planned columns with your activities for all the days of the week. At the end of each day you write in the activity you actually did during the time blocks. At the end of the week, you have a very sobering picture of how much time you planned to use for weekly productivity. You have a picture of how much time you actually used on the tasks you planned. Perhaps, even more helpful, you have the reasons why you were not as productive as you planned by reviewing the hour blocks where you did something different than what was planned. Now you are ready to repeat the process for the next week with the wisdom of the previous weeks' experience.

It is also a good idea to determine our own strengths and weaknesses so that we can focus on activities where we can use our strengths. Begley (2005) discusses time management in a law office. He suggests that individuals determine the tasks that they are good at, which he calls "unique" abilities. In assessing the situation we should plan to focus on unique ability activities and delegate as many of the activities that do not use our unique activities to others. When grading exams that are objective it is very convenient to use scantron sheets and have those questions machine graded. Using a grading rubric allows a faculty member to really focus an assignment by outlining the assignments' solution (the grading rubric) before the assignment is distributed. This process allows for very easy grading and feedback for your students if you return the completed rubric with the graded assignments. The authors have used this approach for on-line course- case assessments and assessment of tax research memorandums.

We can also determine which tasks are most important by imagining what we would do if we had nothing to do or all the time in the world (Management Today, 2005). This approach is like zero-based budgeting. It allows you to redefine what is important in your work environment. Indirectly, previous assumptions about your priorities are easily dashed aside in favor of your new priorities.

Another way to assess the situation is to think of our job as a process or as a set of processes that we examine to find weaknesses that hurt productivity. Courtney (2005) suggests using the waste reduction programs

that many of us teach in our classes. For example, Total Quality Management, Six Sigma, and Process Reengineering are just a few of the techniques. He reminds us that the act of analysis, itself, helps us to see where we are wasting time. Courtney, suggests that an adequate amount of information can be obtained by sampling work times using random number tables.

TIME MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Giving Ourselves Permission

The first thing we may need to do is to convince ourselves that we are allowed to manage our time. We should believe that our time belongs to us and even though we have considerable output requirements, we are still able to make decisions about what we do, and how and when we work. Courtney (2005) suggests that we befriend people at work that seem to have good time management skills. We can also learn to continue to delegate jobs that do not require our special expertise (Hospitality Design, 2005; Begley, 2005). We can give ourselves permission to take charge of committee meetings that go off track (Courtney, 2005). We should also realize that we do not have to be busy all of the time. We can take time to relax (Ward, 2005) and to think (Pollack, 2005) about how to use creativity to improve our efficiency, research, and the environment in which we work. This is especially true after we have completed a major project, we may be tempted to start something else right away that has little or no value, and we should resist that temptation. Management Today (2005) suggests that we have ongoing projects handy that we can pick up during down times. This should keep us from rushing to a job that has no value and that will waste our time. For academics, that may be an article or two we are reading for a literature review, a handout of our PowerPoint slides to edit for our next class or conference presentation or a printout of data analysis for a research project.

Begley's (2005) unique abilities have already been discussed. Shaw (2005) mentions the characteristics of successful people that we may want to develop and encourage in ourselves:

- not easily distracted
- focus on the outcome
- devote time to the purpose
- have driving ambition
- dedicated
- singularity of purpose

Begley (2005) suggests that you prepare one month ahead. Designate some days as free days when you will do no work, focus when you spend at least 80% of your time doing activities that require your "unique abilities", and buffer days when you plan for focus days. Having a month long calendar that explains your activities also provides backup when you need to decline to take on another job or project. You can show the person requesting your help that your time is already full.

Management Today (2005) suggests that we take a "pick your battles" approach to saying no. Decide that the task is not right for you; be polite about saying no, offer alternative suggestions and stick to your no.

Ailamaki and Gherke (2003) provide the following questions for professors to use to determine whether a task is worthwhile. They say that, within reason, we should only add tasks that provide favorable answers to the questions.

- How will this help my research program?
- Will this improve my standing in my department or my community?
- How long will this take?
- What is the deadline?
- How busy am I during the period when I must devote time to this task?
- Will this be fun to do?

Making Lists

Most of the time management literature agrees that making daily, weekly or even monthly lists are helpful to time management. They help you to plan, make you aware of what you need to do and you can use them to show people who need your help what your plans are and when you can help them. Begley (2005) suggests that we list all items whose outcomes are our responsibility. We can then select the items that require our unique abilities and delegate the rest. Sequencing your activities on your list can also help. You may want to write the list in order of importance or use a letter scheme for each item that denotes urgency (e.g., A= must do today, B= today or tomorrow, etc.). Some of the experts suggest making a list at the end of each day taking satisfaction in the items you have achieved and can now cross out while developing a list that you can start on immediately at the beginning of the next day.

Ordering Your Time

We can make lists of jobs to do, and we can also arrange the lists hour by hour. Begley (2005) suggests that we organize our work by months into three categories of days. Free days are days when we do no work. Free days can be holidays or vacation days. For professors they can be the day after classes or days after a major project is finished. Focus days are the days that we do our most work, such as teaching days and, research and writing days. Buffer days, are days when we complete focus day activities, and when we plan for future focus days.

Osterman (2005) suggests that we order our time by periods, for example, what will we do on Saturday afternoon? This approach does provide for broader period of time that may be helpful when large blocks of time are desired for research projects. Or a group of activities that are scheduled for a certain afternoon might be another opportunity.

STRATEGIES TO FIGHT THE "CLASSIC" TIME WASTERS

Classic Time Waster	Fighting Strategy
E- Mail- from the "you have mail" beep, to the flood of messages can be a big time sponge.	By opening and responding to e-mail once a day, at your lowest productivity time, you can provide 24-hour response time and a professional image.
Internet- may be the greatest modern time waster for some. With all the news, items, etc. it can be very hard to resist.	Set a certain time limit and goal for any internet use.
Phone- can create a load of work to return calls or play phone tag.	Let calls go to your answering machine and respond to them once a day during your lowest productivity time. Eliminate phone call returns and tag by converting calls to e-mail.
Informal visit from colleagues- you know what I mean!	Three minute peeks or huddles are OK. Anything longer may require a sudden trip to the mailroom, copyroom, or restroom.
Same question from many students. This is very prevalent in on-line courses.	Course management systems provide automatic e-mail to all your students. Type the answer once and when you get the second student asking -- cut and paste your original answer to e-mail all your students.
Grading- exams and papers can really add to your heavy work load	Plan your course to provide meaningful assignments due on days you can grade them. Consider machine graded multiple choice, group papers, and group class presentations. Grading rubrics can focus assignments and save grading time.
Playing computer games like solitaire, hearts, minesweeper, etc.	Use them only as a brief (timed) reward upon completion of undesirable tasks.
Procrastination- not just for students anymore.	Some folks thrive on the last minute prep. While some of us prefer the peacefulness planning provides.
Looking for things you need- is your office "tornado central"?	Make descriptive file names and folders for paper and computer documents. Handle things only once, file it or throw it away. Annual cleaning should dispose of anything you have not used this year.
Survey requests, FW: and FYI	Vaporize! Short or second request for surveys may have merit.

Wise use of time can involve knowing when to do certain things. Courtney suggests that we do difficult jobs when you are the most alert (Courtney, 2005; Management Today, 2005). Tracy (2002) suggests that we rank our list of jobs from most difficult to least difficult. We should do the most difficult jobs first because the most difficult jobs, for example, research, generally provide the biggest payoff.   Lubin (2005) suggests that we do easy things, such as sorting our notebooks, sorting papers to read, or entering grades, when our concentration is weak.

Considering actually completing tasks, Tracy (2005), suggests that we work on a job until it is completed. He is speaking about difficult jobs that we would most likely put off. For longer term tasks, such as research and putting together exams, Boice (2000) suggests that we work on them for a short time each day until they are completed. He indicates that the job will stay fresh in our minds, the thought that we will only be working for a short time should keep us from trying to put the job off. Krucoff (2005) suggests that we do only one thing at a time. Multi-tasking makes it impossible to concentrate. We should also not assume that gadgets will save time (Shaw, 2005). We should consider setup time and future benefits when we incorporate some new item of hardware into our lives. True story: Walking documents around for signatures takes much less time than electronic submission when the electronic submission gets lost in the receiver's inbox. Consider using money to buy time.

SUMMARY

Time management for academics is an area that could use more discussion. Most of the literature on time management comes from businesses and a management perspective. This paper provides a discussion of the productivity and psychological benefits of time management for business professors. It explored and applied the literature for assessing business professors' current time management while describing approaches to setting up a time management program. Time management techniques are applied to the academic profession complete with a listing of the classic "time wasters" and strategies to minimize their effect.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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<u>NOTES</u>