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New and Noteworthy: Making Every Hour Count

Librarians and Time Management

Jennifer A. Bartlett

Most library managers are accustomed to managing a barrage of daily information arriving in the form of endless e-mails, telephone calls, meetings, journal articles and conversations, all in the service of managing library collections, facilities, budgets, and personnel. Ironically, one thing that many librarians have problems managing is their own time. Who among us doesn't feel overwhelmed occasionally?

The problem, of course, is not that we don't have enough time. The issue may be that our time is not used as effectively as it might be. Bookstore shelves are packed with sources about productivity and time management. A basic Internet search for "time management" will produce thousands of results. Luckily, professionals working in library and information fields are fortunate to have colleagues who have taken a more targeted look at this vexing issue.

A good introduction to the issues concerning time management and productivity in general may be found in the recent book *Productivity for Librarians: How to Get More Done in Less Time*, part of the Chandos Information Professional Series and written by Samantha Hines, an academic librarian at the University of Montana - Missoula.¹ Hines' main thesis involves an emphasis of the importance of life balance over work output (quality, not quantity, in other words). In order to be the most productive, professionals must consider first what productivity really means to them, not only at work, but at home as well. There is no "one size fits all" approach to time management; Hines provides useful self-assessments to help readers determine their own approach to productivity. The book offers separate chapters on time management and the issue of procrastination, both of which contain helpful suggestions. Particularly useful is an annotated guide to online productivity tools, articles, and other materials, including discussions of popular systems such as Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and David Allen's *Getting Things Done* (popularly known as "GTD").² A relatively quick read, *Productivity for Librarians* is a good source for practical advice and tips, self-assessment tools, and outside resources, for the most part targeted towards professionals working in information fields.

Another general book geared towards librarians is *Time Management, Planning, and Prioritization for Librarians*.³ Author Judith Siess, an expert on one-person librarianship, is well-qualified to discuss this topic; surely solo librarians occupy a special place in any discussion of the importance of time management!

Siess brings up an important point that is an issue for all of us: burnout. Library budgets are shrinking, staff who leave are not being replaced as quickly (or at all), and everyone is being asked to do more with fewer resources. Faced with slim budgets and the desire to help our patrons, we gradually accept more and more work without having our original work reassigned. This chronic overwork, Siess emphasizes, is one of the primary causes of burnout.

To help control the dangers of overwork, Siess writes about such topics as the difference between efficiency and effectiveness, procrastination, organizing your work space, creating a strategic plan, and even making the most of your conference time. Although the examples throughout the book are perhaps most applicable to special (i.e., corporate, hospital, law, government) and solo librarians, they can be applied to various library settings. In addition, the appendices provide excellent tools including sample time logs, forms and worksheets that can help professionals put Siess' observations into immediate practice.

Although there are several good general titles on time management in libraries,⁴ librarians working in specific areas have their own specific issues. School librarianship particularly springs to mind when thinking about time management. *Dewey Need to Get Organized?: A Time Management and Organization Guide for School Librarians* by J'aimé L. Foust is a conversational, practical handbook for busy school librarians who are feeling overwhelmed.⁵ Foust suggests activities such as putting together a master list, schedule and daily planner to help get a bigger picture of the day, and then offers a method to put tasks on a grid to prioritize them. Also included are chapters about keeping work areas and storage spaces organized (helping to save precious time), and maintaining clear budgeting and purchasing files.

Librarians in college and university settings also face unique time pressures. Especially in institutions that offer tenure to its librarians, professionals are expected to excel not only in job duties, but also in research and service. In her 2001 article "Time and the Academic Librarian," architecture studies librarian Jeanne M. Brown emphasizes the value of a daily time log to accurately track how much time is being spent on various responsibilities.⁶ An in-depth analysis of time studies in library settings revealed to Brown that the amount of time spent on various professional activities varied widely depending on the librarian; this paper describes the process of keeping a time log over a period of seven years. Accumulation of such a deep well of data exposed patterns of work that helped Brown synthesize the three bases of her job: primary responsibility,

service and research, into a unified whole. As Brown states, “We do have time: not enough to do everything we’d like to do, but time nonetheless to allocate as we see fit” (68).

Mary Whisner, a reference librarian at Marian Gould Gallagher Law Library at the University of Washington School of Law, gives several practice tips for law librarians in a recent article in *Law Library Journal*.⁷ In addition to trying to find extra pockets of time, asking for help, and adjusting due dates, librarians should consider “cutting corners,” that is, not striving to be perfect in every task (an occupational hazard for some librarians!). For example, it is acceptable in many cases to do a bit more improvisation when teaching class sessions, or sending a patron partial results rather than spending hours on compiling citations that the patron may not need. Most importantly, Whisner encourages us to “take a deep breath and take heart; there are ways to cope” (151).

Lastly, a recent piece by Shirley K. Baker offers a fascinating insight into the daily life of a busy university library administrator. Baker is the former Vice Chancellor for Scholarly Resources and Dean of Libraries at Washington University in St. Louis. While not about time management per se, “Leading a Full Life: Reflections on Several Decades of Work, Family and Accomplishment” brings us back to the issue of why we are concerned about our time in the first place.⁸ What do we want to accomplish at work and at home? How will we structure our work to achieve balance? In a personal, conversational style, Baker relates practical advice useful to managers at any stages in a career: learn to delegate, avoid micromanaging, know your people, and “go shopping for a hat,” or take some time just for yourself. She also offers useful tips for making the most of your travel time and (something that is often overlooked in the literature), managing your home and family effectively.

If we don’t manage our time, it will certainly manage us!

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References

¹ Samantha Hines, *Productivity for Librarians: How to Get More Done in Less Time* (Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2010). The author's personal website for the book may be found at <http://www.libraryproductivity.blogspot.com/>.

² A vast number of self-help books, websites, and workshops have sprung up over the last two decades in the area of time and workflow management. At the top of the list in popularity include David Allen, *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* (New York: Viking, 2001); Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989); Julie Morgenstern, *Time Management from the Inside Out: The Foolproof System for Taking Control of Your Schedule and Your Life*, 2nd ed. (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2004); and Brian Tracy, *Time Power: A Proven System for Getting More Done in Less Time Than You Ever Thought Possible* (New York: AMACOM, 2004).

³ Judith A. Siess. *Time Management, Planning, and Prioritization for Librarians* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2002).

⁴ Other titles specifically about time management include: J. Wesley Cochran. *Time Management Handbook for Librarians* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992); Ailsa Masterton. *Getting Results with Time Management* (London: Library Association Pub., 1997); and Dian Walster. *Managing Time: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1993). Also note that many general library career management titles often include chapters on time management, for example: Priscilla Shontz. *The Librarian's Career Guidebook* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2004) and Carol Smallwood. *Library Management Tips That Work* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2011).

⁵ J'aimé L. Foust. *Dewey Need to Get Organized?: A Time Management and Organization Guide for School Librarians* (Worthington, Oh.: Linworth Publishing, 2002).

⁶ Jeanne M. Brown, "Time and the Academic Librarian," *portal: Libraries & the Academy*, 1.1 (2001): 59-70. Available at: http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/lib_articles/82.

⁷ Mary Whisner, "Work Crunch," *Law Library Journal* 103.1 (2011): 147-151.

⁸ Shirley K. Baker, "Leading a Full Life: Reflections on Several Decades of Work, Family, and Accomplishment," *Research Library Issues: A Quarterly Report from ARL, CNI, and SPARC* 278 (March 2012): 2-7. <http://publications.arl.org/rli278/>. The article is from a draft of Baker's upcoming book on leadership; more excerpts may be found at the author's blog at <http://www.shirleykbaker.com>.