

IN PRACTICE

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In this issue:

- 3 ARRS-SIRM Focus Session at ARRS 2013 Annual Meeting: Opportunities and Barriers to Imaging-Based Cancer Screening
- 6 The Art of Productivity: A Radiologist's Primer for Getting Stuff Done
- 14 Q&A: Merkel Cell Carcinoma

The Art of Productivity: A Radiologist's Primer for Getting Stuff Done

Productivity is never an accident. It is always the result of a commitment to excellence, intelligent planning, and focused effort.—Paul J. Meyer, Founder, Success Motivation Institute



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What does productivity mean to you? It's about getting stuff done *but* it is also about simplifying your life, organizing your thoughts, and removing the unwanted distractions that prevent you from completing your important tasks in a timely manner. Being more organized and productive frees up more time for family and people who matter. At work, it helps to cope with the ever-increasing pressure to perform both clinically and academically. It's not that some people are naturally productive and others are not. Productivity is a skill like any other that can be learned and honed through constant practice.

Where Do You Start?

Educate yourself! A good starting point is the book *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* by David Allen, arguably the world's leading efficiency guru. His methodology by the same name, or "GTD" for those in the know, can help transform your fast-paced, overwhelming, overcommitted life into one that is balanced, integrated, and relaxed, and one that has more successful outcomes. The Internet is full of blogs, articles, videos, and software, all derivatives of this idea. Although it is impossible for a single approach to guarantee productivity for everyone, understanding your personal productivity needs and experimenting with different techniques is crucial to coming up with a unique system with which you can work. The process will be slow and the results might take time. However, the "validated personal learning" will ultimately help you to lead a more productive life.

Select a System That Works for You BUT Keep It Simple

Using the GTD system as a model, a personal workflow management framework should include the following basic principles:

1. Collect and process
2. Plan and organize
3. Do
4. Review

Collect and Process

This basic GTD principle recommends moving tasks out of the mind by recording them externally, freeing the mind from everything that needs to be done to concentrate on actually performing those tasks. This helps to gather all of the "incompletes" and includes anything personal or professional that has some type of "to-do" attached to it (e.g., emails, meeting appointments, tasks, projects, errands, and goals). Once you have everything listed, here are the essential five options (5 D's):

- **Delete it**—If you don't need it, delete it!
- **Do it**—If it can be done quickly (< 2 minutes), do it **NOW**.
- **Delegate it**—Often an ignored strategy!
- **Deposit it**—Create an easily accessible and organized archiving system.
- **Defer it**—If it is going to take more than a few minutes. Develop a reliable system to schedule and track these tasks.

The 2-minute email strategy is brilliant! If a task will take 2 minutes or less to complete, doing it immediately eliminates the need for further processing, which would likely take more time than just getting it done now and out of the way. Processing these smaller tasks also provides you with a caffeine-like hit of accomplishment.

"Strategic delegation" is a key concept. Work with the right people with the appropriate attitude and aptitude, develop a struc-

"Productivity techniques help me keep pace with ever-increasing clinical, research, mentorship, and editorial responsibilities. The reason I learned these techniques in the first place was to balance my family life and to avoid having to constantly choose between spending precious time with my family and with pursuing my work commitments."

—Puneet Bhargava

tured approach for identifying and delegating tasks, impart skills and mentor colleagues to accomplish these tasks, be flexible, be aware of the limitations of your team members, set personal examples along the way, and be proactive to achieve deadlines.

An email inbox often represents unprocessed items that need some decision. An overflowing inbox can compromise focus and efficiency, silently drain your energy, and distract you from the task at hand. You need to understand that achieving “Inbox Nirvana” (Inboxzero) is not a relentless pursuit but rather a state of mind. Learning the “process” of regularly prioritizing incoming information can dramatically improve your productivity.

There are several high- and low-tech tools available to “get things out of your head.” Random ideas can be jotted in a notebook or captured in a voice memo. A physical bin can be useful for collecting incoming paperwork or “snail” mail. Evernote (Evernote Corporation) is one of the most widely used productivity applications available, designed for electronic note taking and archiving. A “note” can be a piece of formatted text, a full webpage or webpage excerpt, a photograph, a voice memo, or even a handwritten note (a premium paid feature). These notes can be tagged based on actions and contexts (e.g., use a tickler file folder tool), searched for easy retrieval, and shared.

Plan and Organize (BUT Keep It Simple)

Once you have collected and processed your tasks (> 2-minute actionable items) it is important to change all “to-do’s” into “next actions.” For example, instead of having “work on research project” on your to-do list, you should change it to a series of smaller more granular actions, such as “rewrite introduction in a way that will generate more interest.” Actions that are date-, day-, or time-specific should go on your calendar.

To be efficient, to-do lists should be set for part of your day and prioritized effectively: Deal with the most difficult task first,

employ time blocks, and address small items in a batch. There are innumerable to-do list managers available as software and smart phone applications. An advantage to using both a web-based calendar and to-do list manager is the ability to synchronize and, therefore, streamline your efforts.

Going paperless is a potential life-changing event! It involves collecting years worth of paper data and inputting the data into a computer, organizing a digital workflow, and using technology for generating less paper overall. Multi-sheet-fed scanners (we use Fujitsu ScanSnap) and document organizational software such as Papers2 (Mekentosj B.V.) equipped with optical character recognition are invaluable tools in this process. Although the process of going paperless can be slow, it offers the advantages of increased productivity, decreased cost, ease of transportation, ease of sharing, better security (physical theft and destruction from fire or flood), improved planning, decreased stress, and “enhancement of your brand.” After some experimentation, you will realize how much technology you feel comfortable with to keep yourself organized.

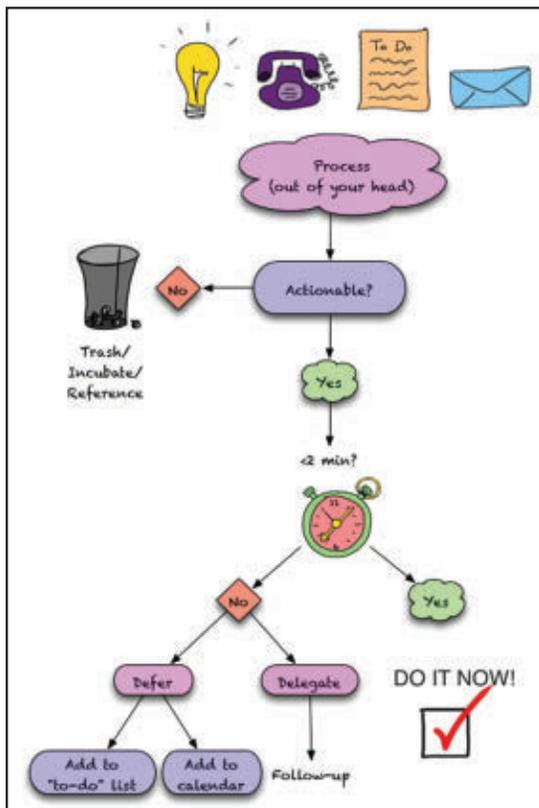
Do

Do you feel the need to tackle multiple tasks simultaneously? Multitasking might sound like a good idea, and has even been celebrated in the past, but conclusive research shows that this method actually wastes more time than it saves and causes more errors due to insufficient concentration. The Pomodoro Technique, rooted in principles of serial monotasking, aims to reduce the impact of internal and external interruptions on focus and flow. This method involves using a timer to work in 25-minute bursts with short rest intervals as a way to maximize mental agility. Your intuition should guide you to use your most productive times of the day for work that requires the most fresh, creative mental energy and is of highest priority, or to tackle your least desirable tasks, which you may otherwise put off.

The practice of how to minimize distractions is best illustrated with email. Techniques to minimize the potential distraction of email are to:

- Use it sparingly
- Avoid unnecessary cc’s and bcc’s
- Not answer every email
- Use template services such as TextExpander (Smile Software)
- Centralize your emails into 1 or 2 accounts
- Use auto-responders
- Set up strong filters
- Unsubscribe from messages you no longer wish to receive
- Turn off automatic email notification
- Plan email-free times during the day
- Only check emails during two to three predesignated times per day
- Regularly clean out your inbox

Emails are notorious for derailing productivity, but can be used as a productivity tool. An email containing five or fewer sentences can be perceived as abrupt or rude, while more than five sentences can waste time. A good email should have a single focus, a compelling and actionable subject line, quickly get to the point, and have a context without excessive details. It should answer the following five questions:



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1. Who are you?
2. What do you want?
3. Why are you asking me?
4. Why should I do what you are asking?
5. What is the next step?

Most people need this information to make a decision. One-on-one communication often is a more efficient “personal” way to get work done, especially with regard to difficult issues, and it causes fewer misunderstandings, allows for last minute changes, permits real-time feedback, and is more persuasive.

Truth be told, working smarter does not replace hard work, but it allows us to get more done in the limited time we have. The “do” portion of the GTD model is the most difficult part of being productive, and the importance of staying motivated, being healthy, and achieving work/life balance cannot be overemphasized.

Review

A weekly review is the most critical and potentially rewarding step in any workflow management system. It is a time to update your lists, process all of your “stuff,” complete the last steps of some tasks, and evaluate goals achieved. Set your goals **SMARTly**—Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time bound. It is also a good time to reflect upon which productivity techniques and tools are working or *not* working for you. When assigning your daily tasks, attempt to focus your energy on the most important activities. The much-quoted 80/20 rule states that 80% of the value you create in a day will come from the 20% of the activities you do. This means that completing 20%—the most important tasks—daily will help you accomplish much more than if you completed the rest of the tasks. Long-term goals should also be periodically reviewed (a separate “someday/maybe” list).

To conclude, productivity is a skill that can be learned. Efficiency techniques need to be incorporated in your daily workflow to get optimal results. Take the time to explore, experiment, and ultimately build your own simple and reliable productivity system. It can transform you into a productivity powerhouse. *Give it a shot!* ■

Suggested Reading:

1. Allen D. *Getting things done: the art of stress-free productivity*. New York, NY: Penguin Group (USA), Inc., 2002:288 pages.
2. www.sujanpatel.com/productivity/getting-shit-done/
3. www.businessexpertwebinars.com/content/view/1012/29/
4. Bhargava P, Shin D, Moshiri M, Iyer RS. The art of collaboration in radiology. *InPractice* 2013; 7(1):8–11
5. www.entrepreneur.com/article/226581
6. www.sujanpatel.com/productivity/101-ways-to-get-motivated/
7. Multiple presentations on www.slideshare.net/
8. www.lifeoptimizer.org/2010/09/16/work-more-efficiently/

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My Top 10 Productivity Tools for Radiology Workflow Management

1. **Reference managers:** My personal favorite is Papers2. Other notable references managers are DEVONthink Pro, Mendeley, EndNote, RefWorks, Zotero, and Bookends.
2. **Password managers:** I use 1Password. Other useful password managers include LastPass 2.0, mSecure, Password Genie, RoboForm, Kaspersky, Password Manager, and SplashID Safe.
3. **Cloud storage applications:** Dropbox rules the roost currently. Other similar programs are SkyDrive, SugarSync, Amazon Cloud Drive, and Box.net.
4. **Note-taking applications:** Evernote takes the cake! Others applications include Springpad, MS OneNote, and Simplenote.
5. **Remote meeting tools:** We use GoToMeeting at work. Join.me is my personal favorite. Other notable tools are Infinite Conferencing, Watchitoo, and Elluminate.
6. **Text expansion applications:** Textexpander (Mac only) has saved me about 500,000 characters thus far and growing every day! PhaseExpress and Breevy (Windows only) are equivalents.
7. **Speech recognition software:** Dragon NaturallySpeaking.
8. **Sheet-fed scanners:** My personal favorite is Fujitsu ScanSnap. Other very useful scanners are Doxie and IRIScan.
9. **Screencasting:** I found ScreenFlow easy to learn. Other useful programs are Camtasia, Adobe Captivate, and Snagit.
10. **Backup programs:** Backblaze, Crashplan, and Carbonite are similar. Also check out Drobo devices for expandable, redundant data protection.