



Get more time out of your day

by Debbie Jordan

*“There can’t be a crisis next week—my schedule is already full”
Henry Kissinger (US Secretary of State), June 1969*

How many of you read the quote above and agreed with it? I suspect most of us! For the most part (with the obvious exception of protocols), medical writers seem to find themselves at the end of the clinical development process, and, as such, any delays during the clinical trial are compacted, because as we all know, the final end date is unmovable. Therefore we are constantly under pressure to complete a task within a shortened timeframe. Contrary to popular belief though, we are not miracle workers and we cannot create more hours in a day, so the only solution is for us to try to manage our time effectively. Unfortunately, magic wands and fairy godmothers only exist in fairytales, so we have to come up with some more realistic ways of managing our time.

Realistic timelines

The first part of this process is to have a realistic idea of how long a task normally takes you and how much ‘real’ working time you have in a day. Too many medical writers work on the principle that to write the first draft of a Clinical Study Report (CSR) will take them 70 hours, therefore, based on a 35-hour working week, the first draft will take them 2 weeks to write. Is this achievable?

Firstly, where does this number of 70 hours for a first draft come from? Is it backed-up by proper data? The best way of finding this out is to look at the actual time you spent working on several CSRs and then calculate the average number of hours that are applicable to YOU. We all work at different speeds, so it is important you know your own timings, not those of your colleagues or some ‘company standard’. Most of us have to keep timesheets at work (and if you don’t you should do this anyway so that you know how your time is spent). Finding out this information is therefore a relatively easy process—and a worthwhile one. I think you will be surprised at the actual time it takes you to write and update various documents...

Secondly, it is naïve to assume that you will spend all of your working day on project work. Once again, this is where timesheets come in useful: how many hours a day do you actually spend on project work, versus time in meetings, dealing with e-mails and telephone calls etc? In the EMWA Time Management workshop, we routinely see that people only have half of the working day available for project work—which comes as a bit of a shock to some!

Thus a project that needs 70 hours will realistically take you about 4 weeks to complete, and not 2 weeks.

Once you know the above 2 numbers, then you can realistically estimate how long a project will take you. There is no guarantee that a project manager will allow you the time you need, but if you can back up your request with numbers, it certainly helps. Also, if the worst comes to the worst and your timelines are shortened, then if they are shortened from realistic timelines you might still achieve the goal and retain your sanity, but if timelines are shortened from already unachievable timelines, you are either going to fail, or be so overworked and tired that you will produce a poor quality document.

Planning the year

The first thing to consider in planning your work is to look at the big picture. It is very important to plan your work and your home life together, because too often home life takes a back seat. Remember we work in order to live—not the other way around! I always think it is a good starting point at the beginning of the year to look at when you want time off for holidays or family events and put these in first. That way they won’t get squeezed out when you find that there is no suitable time left to take holiday because you were too busy with project work. Remember everyone needs time off, and it helps you to work better if you can unwind and have a break from it all. Once you have these periods blocked out then you can fill in the months in-between with project work. If you have worked out your timings based on the above points, then you will know how long you need to write each document and you can get a rough idea of how many projects you can take on over the year. For example: if you have worked out that it takes you 6 weeks to write a CSR (4 weeks to write the first draft and 2 weeks to deal with meetings, several rounds of revisions, quality control checks etc.) and you have 6 weeks of holiday planned during the year, 1 week of public holidays, and 1 week away at the EMWA conference (essential for all medical writers!) then you are looking at having time for a maximum of 7 CSRs per year. If you then keep this number in your head it should help you to avoid taking on too many projects.

Planning your week

Once you have a rough outline of the projects you are working on each month throughout the year, then you can start looking at your projects on a weekly basis. The first

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step in this process is to have a goal for the end of the week. For example, if your goal for the month is to write the first draft of a CSR, your goal for the first week might be to write the methods section. The goal for the second week might then be to write the demography and efficacy sections, for the third week to write the safety section, and for the fourth week to write the discussion, synopsis and re-read and check the document before issuing the first draft. By breaking the task down into chunks it becomes manageable and allows you to focus on attainable goals. Importantly, it also allows you to be more aware if you start getting behind on a task. If you get to the end of the first week and you still haven't written the methods section of the CSR, you can correct the situation in the following weeks. If you only plan on a monthly basis it could get near to the end of the month before you realise you are behind, and then you could end up working long hours and at the weekends to try to catch up.

However, when setting the weekly goal, it is again important to balance your work and home life. Are there particular evenings during the week when you can't work late due to social events or evening classes, for example? Are there days in the week when you are involved in meetings that may take up part of a day? Do you need to build in travel time to meetings? All these things need to be built into your weekly plan so you can see if the goal for the week is achievable.

Planning your day

Once you have your yearly and monthly schedule roughly mapped out, how do you go about ensuring that you maximise the amount of time you have each day? After all, it is all too easy to find yourself at the end of a day having done very little of what you planned to do because you have been dealing with e-mails, other people's problems and emergencies that have come up. So how do you deal with these issues and leave enough time for project work?

The 2-hour rule: A good rule to follow for planning your day is the '2-hour' rule. This is where you block out 2-hour periods to concentrate on project work and avoid all other interruptions. This can also help you deal with projects that you don't like and have been putting off because if you have your 2-hour blocks planned in, it helps you to stay focussed on the task rather than looking for distractions to avoid doing it.

The reason the rule is set at 2 hours is because this is deemed to be the maximum time you can work efficiently on a single topic before you lose momentum and concentration. However, you need to make sure you are interrupted as little as possible in the 2-hour project block you have established. Did you know that it takes 10 minutes after an interruption to get back to the point where you were before the interruption happened? If you are in an open-plan office, try to go to a quiet room where you won't be disturbed. If you have to stay at your desk, turn your e-mail

notification off, forward your phone to voicemail, and then put a note on your door, or on a nearby partition if you are in an open-plan office, saying you are busy and don't want to be disturbed but you will be available at a certain time. The important thing here is to let people know when you will be free again so they don't waste time constantly checking to see if you have finished, or, worse still, they interrupt you anyway. This also applies if you go to a different room to work, so leave a note by your own desk telling any visitors what time you will return, which will hopefully then stop them hunting you down. After 2 hours you need to take a break or switch to an unrelated task (e.g. responding to e-mails or returning phone calls that occurred while you were doing your project work) to give yourself time to relax and refocus.

E-mails: One of the biggest problems these days: e-mails constantly arrive in your inbox and you feel obliged to answer them immediately. The first step to deal with this problem is to switch off your e-mail notification so you are not distracted by e-mails arriving. Then allocate set times during the day to deal with them: maybe first thing in the morning, just after lunch, and then at the end of the day. During these periods you then need to deal with each e-mail only once. You read it and then do one of the following:

- delete it
- if it is a short task (e.g. replying to a straightforward query or responding to a meeting invitation), then deal with the task straight away, respond to the person who sent you the e-mail, and then file it or delete it
- if it is a larger task (e.g. review of a document someone else has written, or a series of questions that is going to need you to do some research) then assign it the status of a project and plan when you are going to deal with it (this will depend on its priority versus the priority of other work you have). The important thing in this case is to allocate a specific time you will deal with it and then you must inform the person that sent you the e-mail of the timelines you have set, otherwise they will chase you

If you follow the above rules you will take control and manage your e-mails to fit in with your plan, rather than letting your e-mails plan your time.

Meetings: Meetings can take up a large part of your day, and if you are not careful you can spend most of the day in meetings without achieving a lot. The first thing to do is to ask for the meeting agenda. This will not only encourage the person organising the meeting to structure it if they haven't already done so, but will also allow you to see if it really is relevant for you to attend. A lot of meetings are routine project meetings that cover all aspects of a clinical trial. It may therefore not be necessary for you to attend the whole meeting; you could just join in for the medical writing sections. If you don't attend, or only attend for part of the meeting, then make sure the rest of the team knows that you are doing this (otherwise they may waste time waiting

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for you!) and then make sure the meeting minutes are written up and you are sent a copy so you know what is going on with the project as a whole.

Chatty colleagues: Although it is nice to have a chat, and I am by no means suggesting you should avoid being friendly and building relationships with colleagues, sometimes it can interfere significantly with your day if someone pops in for a quick chat and then spends an hour telling you all their problems. Once again, the key here is for you to take control and plan in this time as much as you can. If someone pops in unexpectedly and you are in the middle of something, then tell them straight away that you are really busy, but why don't the two of you meet for coffee or lunch later (defining a set time) and you can chat then. That way you are in control and are planning a time that suits you. You also get a break from your work and a bit of downtime at the end of your 2-hour project block, and your colleague feels that you are taking time out for them and taking their issues seriously—a win-win solution!

Emergencies: Emergencies, or unplanned work, can really disrupt your day and can cause a big problem if they are not managed properly. If you find you are constantly dealing with emergencies or unplanned work that starts to adversely affect your planned work then you might want to consider actually building these in as 'projects' and allocating time for them. If you have a 2-hour block booked out for emergencies every few days then you have the time built in if they happen. If they don't, then you have some extra project time or even a 2-hour slot for catching up on all those other things you never have time for, e.g. filing, reading up on a new topic or tidying your desk!

Is plain English plain enough for product labels?

Misread labels on pharmaceutical products result in around one in five incidences of drugs taken at the wrong dose or time. Examples from a survey of approximately 2,000 people questioned for Lloydspharmacy included a man who sprayed his cat with his asthma inhaler to cure his cat allergy. Another patient had problems with his inhaler because he had not removed the cap. The palette of drugs taken by older patients also leads to confusion. One old lady was found to be taking her sleeping tablet first thing in the morning.

Source: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7536728.stm>

Thanks to **Adam Jacobs** (ajacobs@dianthus.co.uk) for this contribution

Emergency work or unplanned work should always be questioned: just how important is it really and what are the consequences if it isn't done immediately? A good way to visualise this is to use the grid in the Box below.

		URGENT	
		Yes	No
IMPORTANT	Yes	Do now	Plan in work
	No	Query: is this really needed?	Query: is this really needed?

Planning your next day: A good habit to get into is planning the next day at the end of the current day. This means getting straight in your mind what your tasks for the next day are and getting things ready that you might need. For example, if tomorrow you have a meeting in the morning, then print off the agenda and put it in a folder, along with some spare paper, a pen and any reference documents you may need for the meeting. That way in the morning you have everything ready to start the day afresh. It can also help you feel more mentally prepared for the next day and can help you to switch off and relax when you get home because you have everything organised for the following day.

So, in summary, there is no 'quick-fix' to managing your time, but I hope the above has given you some ideas to think about and some tools to manage your time more effectively. Good luck with your time management, and in the words of the poem below, make the most of the time you have...

*This is the beginning of a new day.
I have been given this day to use as I will.
I can waste it or use it for good.
What I do today is important, because
I am exchanging a day of my life for it.
When tomorrow comes,
this day will be gone forever,
leaving in its place something
that I have traded for it.
I want it to be gain, not loss;
good not evil; success not failure;
in order that I shall not regret
the price I paid for it.*

(Author Unknown)

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