Getting it done on time

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this contribution is to focus on an essential issue in all workplace settings where the emphasis is on productivity, time management and creativity: getting innovative, high quality work completed in time according to tight schedules – often facing serious staff shortages. The intention is not to offer an ultimate answer, but to take a different look at the issues that might bring us closer to answers, or that might inspire research projects in the "*own*" circles of libraries and information services. What does it take to get quality work completed in time?

Design/methodology/approach – The contribution will be written against the background of research from time management, productivity, learning styles, information behaviour and collaborative work.

Findings – There might be simplistic solutions on offer to get work done on time such as the use of productivity and time management tools. When the aim is high quality, creativity and innovative work (done on time), there might be a need to consider more issues such as learning styles and whole brain learning; information seeking skills, writing skills and streamlining cognitive skills; a focus on productivity; brain health and maintaining a balanced life style; perceptions of stimulating creativity; recognition of the need to compliment human weaknesses with collaborative strengths; and the need for flow as argued by Csikszentmihalyi (1996, 1997).

Originality/value – Although many publications have appeared on time management, productivity, software to support time management and other individual issues noted in this paper, I am not aware of work (at least not in the field of Library and Information Science) that combine these with the need to consider learning styles, whole brain learning, acknowledging the limitations of mind and body, and addiction to adrenaline that *might* stimulate inspiration and creativity – amongst many things that might impact on time management.

Keywords – LIS professionals, Productivity, Time management, Creativity, Collaboration

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

Library and information (LIS) professionals, like many others, have been faced with numerous calls to increase their productivity, to take a serious look at improving their time management, and to be more creative and innovative. Mancini's (2007) *Time management: 24 techniques to make each minute count at work*, and Allen's (2005) *Time management for event planners…* are amongst many publications aimed at a general audience. Many research and opinion papers have reported on aspects of increasing productivity and timely completion of tasks. Cooperman (2010) and Heyd (2011) both review a book by Hines on productivity for librarians focussing on how to get more done in less time. It seems like a

book worth reading. Often reports on productivity and time management are tied to some form of technology (Axford, 2012). Vakkari (2008) discusses the perceived influence of the use of electronic information resources on scholarly work and publication productivity, while Ezeala and Nwalo (2011) consider a link between productivity and using the library.

This paper will look at more than just tools and software that can save time and energy; it, acknowledges the complexity of working in a mechanistic way, dealing with the realities of a tired mind and physique, personality, preferences of how to learn and work, perceptions of stimulating creativity, etc. The following will thus be covered: a brief review of the literature within library and information science on productivity and time management, an overview of some supportive tools and applications, and a reminder to take a more holistic look of issues at stake. Apart from sharing ideas, there is no attempt at offering solutions – that is, apart from Table 2 at the end of the paper, depicting issues to acknowledge and address.

Literature review

Various reports have appeared in the library and information science (LIS) literature on productivity. Axford (2012) reports on productivity tools for personal knowledge management and Heinrichs (2008) on public library directors' perceptions of such tools. In conclusion, Heinrichs (2008, p. 331) stresses the importance of skills in the use of productivity tools: "LIS educational programs should consider offering software productivity tool training as a core component to their curriculum to meet the changing profession and requirements of library directors. This educational endeavor could be in the form of certification for presently employed librarians and/or incorporated into the instruction of students at various levels in the program". Bearman, Guynup and Milevski (1985) reflect on information and productivity. This is also the slant taken by Heyd (2011), Knox (2012) and Owoeyo (2011) respectively reporting on how to increase and enhance productivity, and ICT as a predictor of lawyers' productivity. Ugah's (2008) paper reflects on motivation and productivity in libraries.

ICT developments bring new opportunities and challenges; it needs to be mastered in terms of how to use the new tools and it needs to be put to the most effective use. And before even realising that this is what needs to be done, something new is already on the market again. (Perhaps this is an excellent opportunity for collaboration, sharing information and exploring zones of development (Fourie, 2011, 2012, 2013)). Jewell (2011) reports on productivity via mobile phones and the use of smartphones in smart ways and Larsson (2003) on improving productivity with a personal digital assistant (PDA). Often there is, however, fear that it might take more time to set up or install technological applications than in the time being saved, or that it might inhibit an individual's style of doing things.

Another issue that has featured in the LIS literature is time management. In a two part article on time management Firsimmons (2008a, b) argues for goal setting as a planning tool as well as the use of action plans. Gothberg and Riggs (1988) focus on time management in academic libraries. They did a survey with managers/directors of libraries and made an important point that managers set the standard for others to follow. With regard to time management, Holcomb (2005) asks: "Time management oxymoron: or trainable skill?", noting amongst other things the importance of awards as motivators for changing behaviour. Although much can be learned from these valuable contributions it has also often been noted in passing that nobody can really manage time; we can only manage our own behaviour.

Collaboration has been noted as a means to improve productivity and creativity (Trexler, 2008). Collaboration might be able to cut down on the time taken to complete a task, but if not managed well, it might add in a considerable manner to the time required to complete a task. In this regard, Ynalvez and Shrum (2011) explore professional networks, scientific collaboration and publication productivity in resource-constrained research institutions in a

developing country. Even more interesting is the report by Central Desktop on an industry survey revealing that forty present of creative agencies are losing business due to a lack of proper collaboration tools. They are trying to address the issue (Central Desktop, 2012). A research report by Research and Markets promotes “Make Space” a tool developed based on work at the Stanford University d.school at its Environments Collaborative to support the design of creative collaborative spaces.

There are also many non-technological issues that may impact on time management and productivity. Dauncey (2012), focusing on the importance of brain health, reports on recent advances in nutrition, genes and brain health. (Tests on brain health can even be taken: http://www.lumosity.com/brain-grade/test/diet). Streamlining cognitive processes such as idea generation can also benefit from cutting on time required by using mind maps and other tools. Mindtools (www.mindtools.com) for example offers a variety of tools for idea generation such as random input, metaphorical thinking, provocation, attribute listing and reframing matrixes. Mahatody, Sagar and Kolski (2010) report on the state of the art on the cognitive walkthrough method, and Mililtello and Hutton (1998) on applied task analysis (ACTA): a practitioner’s toolkit for understanding cognitive task demands. De Boer, Bothma and Du Toit (2011) argue for enhancing information literacy training through the application of whole brain strategies. Whole brain learning requires knowledge of preferences in thinking and getting tasks done, and can help to draw on the strengths of participants with different profiles. This links closely to personality styles and time management (Williams *et al*., 1995). Personality styles are aligned with inclinations for procrastination, being perpetually late, being a perfectionist, getting easily distracted, trying to do-it-all, and insistence on “don’t tell me what to do” (www.41Q.com). The Myers Biggs personality test has also often been reported (Zhang, 2004).

What strikes us here is that although the focus of this paper is on time management – getting it done on time – the perception is actually that it should not be done at the cost of productivity, that is, taking on less work and responsibilities so that due dates can be met without pressure. Perhaps this is why much more is at stake than just finding the right tool to keep track of what you are doing, to plan ahead, to remind you about finishing on time, and to spot shortcuts to save time.

3 Some tools and applications

In this section a selection of tools and applications are noted to show a small part of the spectrum of issues we can consider in trying to get things done “in time”. It is not intended as a comprehensive list, and although verified, these were not tested (the intention of the paper is not to make recommendations on tools and applications), but to reflect the spectrum of what can be considered. Most of what is noted here is aimed at time and task management and saving time. Often the tools and applications come with promising claims: “increased productivity”, “stress-free productivity”, users will “feel easy when faced with bulks of complicated projects”, and it will help to get things out of one’s head into a trusted system that will allow one to drill effortlessly down to what should be done at a specific point in time. The word “effortlessly” features frequently. Tools and applications that are available cover the full spectrum of life: from work to travel to adventure. There are even applications for specific groups such as journalists (http://www.scoop.it/t/mobile-journalism-apps). It is proclaimed that using these tools and applications is like “having the perfect companion for everything you want to achieve in life”; “every minute you spend working that goes unaccounted for is like giving away your product for free”. The golden words are “Getting Things Done” – even with an acronym of its own: GTD. Fascinating names are noted: Nirvana, Wunderlist, Nozbe, and Maniac Tome. In selecting a tool or application, a choice is made between ease of use and powerful features. Seldom there is mention of taking a holistic look at all the factors influencing time management and productivity. As noted, there

is more at stake than just using an application for to-do-lists, reminders, note taking, task management, customising filters to sort and prioritize workload, delegating tasks to others, and synchronising calendars to stay in touch from multiple devices. The tools and applications can run on computers, smartphones, or tablets; thus synchronisation is very important. Table 1 portrays a selection of tools and applications we considered worth noting.

Table 1: Tools and applications that might make a difference in getting things done in time and being productive

Title	Web address	Description
To-do-lists and checklists		
Google Tasks	https://mail.google.com/mail/help/tasks/	Keep track of tasks to complete, due dates, notes
Toodledo	www.toodledo.com	Task and note manager, for iPhone's and iPad's; can support collaboration
Nirvana	https://www.nirvanahq.com/	To-do-lists
Checklist Wrangler	www.Buckaroosoftware.com/ChecklistWrangler.html	Creating and using checklists
Todoist	www.todoist.com	To-do lists; completing bigger tasks, by managing smaller tasks
Wunderlist	www.wunderlist.com	To-do-lists
TeuxDeux	www.teuxdeux	To-do-lists
Task managers		
Doit.im HD	www.doit.im	Task manager
EasyTask Manager	www.easytaskmanager.net	Task manager
Things	www.culturedcode/com/things	Task manager
OmniFocus for iPhone	www.omnigroup.com/omnifocus	Task manager
Remember The Milk	www.rememberthemilk.com	Organising tasks and synchronising tracking of task completion
MyLifeOrganized	http://www.mylifeorganized.net/	Task manager
GTD	http://www.davidco.com/about-gtd	Work-life management
Note-taking		
Awesome Note (+To-do/Calendar)	www.birdworks.com/anote/en/main/index.php	An all-inclusive application allowing for note-taking memo's, diaries, must-remember information, to-do lists, shopping lists, travel journals and on-going projects
TaskAnt	http://taskant.com/	To-do lists and tracking of task completion
Evernote	http://evernote.com/	Capturing ideas, notes, etc.
Time management		
RescueTime	https://www.rescuetime.com/	Time management and analytics tool; "Am I really spending my days the way I want to?"
Toggl	https://www.toggl.com/	Time tracking tool which tracks and analyses time while working on different projects
Klok	http://www.getklok.com	Shows time entries as blocks that fill up days very much like a calendaring application. By having this information, one can identify inefficiencies that might be totally lost if not tracking this level of detail.

Manic Time	http://www.manictime.com/	Tags and analyses daily work. A day is represented by three time lines: activity (either on the computer or off), applications (which were open), and tags (personal annotations to work flow). Shows work patterns.
SlimTimer	http://slimtimer.com/	Tracking of tasks and time management
Nozbe	http://www.nozbe.com/	Supports time management, communication on tasks, connecting with favourite apps, synchronising projects
Achieve Planner	http://www.effexis.com/achieve/planner.htm	Time management
Mind maps and managing of ideas		
MindNode	www.mindnode.com	Mind mapping application that can streamline brainstorming and organizing various facets of everyday life; mind maps can be stored in iCloud and Dropbox
Mind42	http://mind42.com/	Managing of ideas (individual as well as group work)
Mindtools	http://www.mindtools.com	Wide selection of tools for idea generation (e.g. random input, metaphorical thinking)
Collaboration, sharing, tracking		
Producteev	http://www.producteev.com/	Offers a selection of organisational tools such as labels, reminders, file sharing, real-time tracking tools, support for collaborative work, and awareness of developments in collaborative work.
Flow	http://www.getflow.com/	Collaborative work, managing and delegating tasks
ActiveCollab	https://www.activecollab.com/index.html	Collaborative work
Rule	https://www.rule.fm/	Collaborative work
Miscellaneous		
Launchy	http://www.launchy.net/about.php	Free cross-platform utility designed to help launch documents, project files, folders, and bookmarks while side-stepping the start menu.
Managing physical issues		
Workrave	http://www.workrave.org/	Assists in the recovery and prevention of Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI). The program frequently sends alerts on taking micro-pauses, rest breaks and it sets a daily limit.
Brain health test	http://www.lumosity.com/braingrade/test/diet	Test for brain health and nutrition
Personality styles		
Personality Net	http://www.personalitybook.com	Personality test
41	http://www.41.com	Personality test
Personality testing	http://personality-testing.info/	List of personality tests

Conclusion

There might be some solutions that contribute to getting things done on time such as to-do-lists, reminders, and managing and prioritising tasks. There might be ways to monitor how one spends time and there are many shortcuts that can save time. In similar fashion there are tools that can support idea generation and reaching higher levels of creativity and innovation – also by collaborating with others. Along with these it helps to understand your personality and shortcomings – and to work on these, or to identify people with whom you can collaborate to make up for such shortcomings. It is furthermore important to maintain a healthy life style and "brain health". Above all flow, as argued by Csikszentmihalyi (1996, 1997), is necessary, where flow refers to the mental state of a person performing an activity in which he/she is fully immersed in a feeling of energised focus. There is full involvement and enjoyment in the process(es) of the activity.

In trying to be highly productive e.g. in the academic world where research output, h-indexes (of citations) and research impact are the golden words, it seems as if the only way to ensure that the use of the tools and applications noted here is making a difference to the timely completion of tasks, might be to take on less work, and less challenges… and thus to be less creative and productive. Alternatively a deliberate strategy might be developed to take a holistic look on how the issues raised in this paper and the tools and applications depicted in Table 1(or similar ones) might be employed in working towards high levels of productivity and creativity as well as good time management. This might even turn into an action research project between collaborators. Taking a holistic look, some issues that might help in finding solutions are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: An holistic view at addressing issues of time management as well as striving for increased productivity and creativity

Collaborator(s) strong in support of knowledge of personality types, learning styles and whole brain learning	Before embarking on the project all collaborators' personality types, learning styles and whole brain profiles need to be known, and aligned in terms of obtaining the best result.
Technical minded collaborator(s)	Identifying, selection and installing a selection of tools and applications (such as noted in Table 1), and ensuring that all collaborators are not only briefed in how to use these, but also with consideration of their levels of self-efficacy and attitude in using these.
Collaborator(s) who is interested in the processes of collaboration and the supporting tools	Not only tools to streamline collaboration, but also research findings on collaboration need to be monitored.
Collaborator(s) with a personality type that thrives on managing task completion and detail	Implementing and managing tools for task management, delegation of tasks, communication, and collaboration. (Probably need a good knowledge of the personality styles of other collaborators.)
Collaborator(s) with a flair for creativity and streamlining processes of creative thinking	Exploring applications and tools that support idea generation.
Collaborator(s) with skills in managing people and their perceptions of what aids creativity e.g. that one can only be really creative when working under the pressure of a	A specialist in industrial psychology or psychology might perhaps be useful in this regard.

deadline that has actually passed.	
Collaborator(s) with good language and writing skills	
Collaborator(s) with good skills in information seeking and information management (such as personal information management; PIM)	
Collaborator(s) strong on maintaining a healthy work balance and healthy nutrition	
Collaborator(s) that understands the need for *flow* as argued by Csikzentmihalyi (1996, 1997)	

None of the issues mentioned here will on their own make a difference, but if combined in a planned strategy, and if studied in terms of the difference made (i.e. action research) it might perhaps be possible to make some progress towards better time management as well as increased productivity.

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