



Thinkstock

CAREER FOCUS

How to Work More Efficiently

Jean-luc Doumont provides a framework for making the best use of your limited time.

When asked to discuss how to work efficiently at the IONS-13 conference in Zurich last January, I wondered what advice I could pass on that Ph.D. students could not find themselves via Google. I have no secrets to share, no miracles to sell—I cannot squeeze more than 24 hours in a day. One thing I might be able to offer, however, is a framework to make sense of the hundreds of otherwise valuable tips returned by a Web search.

My model is one you know well if you ever had statistics in school: The expected gain is the value we could get multiplied by the probability that we actually get it. When looking to work more efficiently, you can reason in terms of what is desirable (the value) but also of what is achievable (the probability), then manage your time and space to make it happen.

What is desirable

Perhaps the first step towards setting your priorities for the day is to question the value of every item on your to-do list. For example, what would happen if you did *not* go to the meeting? Can you find a more time-effective way to reach the desired result, such as express your views or learn about decisions? In other words, stop thinking that every task is equally valuable or that you should always be the one carrying it out: Learn to say no and to delegate when appropriate. Along this line, consider opting out of less critical mailing lists or discussion groups.

If you are the procrastinating type, you likely need to make tasks appear more desirable. One way to do so is to “think big:” While a given task may not bring you instant gratification, remind yourself of

its benefits in the broad picture or long run. In other words, have a vision of what you want to become in life. A more down-to-earth way is to reward yourself for what you carry out, even if it's just symbolic. When editing your paper for conciseness, for example, indulge in a peanut every time you manage to remove so many words.

What is achievable

Even with a potentially valuable outcome, an endeavor may seem pointless if you feel that it “won’t work” or that you “can’t do it.” If that is the case, learn to manage your expectations.

Being a perfectionist allows you to do great things, no doubt (I would not want it any other way myself), but it is obviously counterproductive when it becomes paralyzing. Instead of *perfect*, strive for *fit for purpose*: Evaluate your performance against your objectives, not against ideals. Yes, you will probably forget to mention some details during your next talk—so what? Your audience does not know what you had planned to include; they judge only what they do see and hear. Choose your battles wisely, too: Do not waste time and effort trying to change something you cannot. Instead, optimize under constraints.

Stop thinking that every task is equally valuable or that you should always be the one carrying it out: Learn to say no and to delegate when appropriate.

Success is largely about believing. If you see yourself failing miserably when thinking of the talk you will give next week, part of your brain will try to prove you right. Instead, visualize yourself doing well. If the task is too daunting, make it achievable by breaking it into simpler steps; take one at a time, getting help as needed. Recognize what you have done and not just what you still need to do. At the end of the day, write down three meaningful things

MAXIMIZING RETURN

Expected gain

The value we could get

$$E = \sum_i (p_i \times x_i)$$

The probability that we will get it

To maximize the return on the time you invest, consider what is desirable (the value you could get) but also what is achievable (the probability that you will get it).

you have accomplished, no matter how insignificant they may seem.

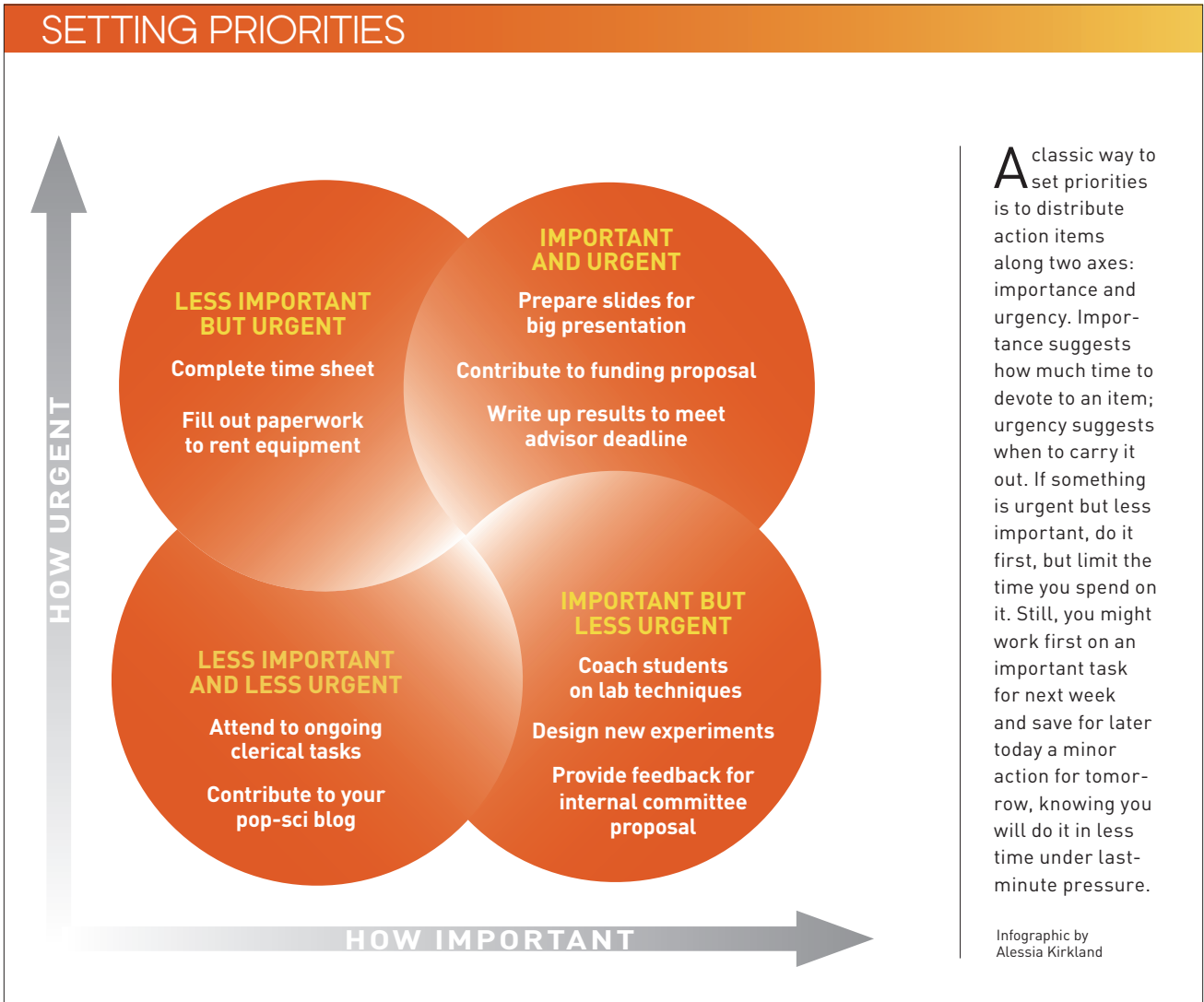
Making it happen

Beyond focusing your efforts on what is desirable and achievable (or making tasks more desirable or achievable), manage your activities both in time and in space.

Plan your activities well. Sort, batch and prioritize them. Make a battle plan in terms of sequence and duration for each. Identify your prime work time (early morning for me) and reserve it for what requires you to be at your best. Allow yourself to focus: Avoid interruptions (consider a not-to-do list for time-wasting activities such as compulsively checking email) and manage pressure.

Lower the entry barrier. I used to insist on completing the task at hand before allowing myself to get lunch, until I noticed that an entirely new task was not so easy to face right after lunch. Now I leave a few loose ends for after lunch as a way to get back into things.

Try to recoup lost moments. Take something to read (email, perhaps?) to the dentist’s waiting room, listen to language-learning podcasts on your way to work, rehearse the introduction to your next talk in the shower. Pull the plug on what is wasting your time, whether it is TV, Facebook, or video games.



A classic way to set priorities is to distribute action items along two axes: importance and urgency. Importance suggests how much time to devote to an item; urgency suggests when to carry it out. If something is urgent but less important, do it first, but limit the time you spend on it. Still, you might work first on an important task for next week and save for later today a minor action for tomorrow, knowing you will do it in less time under last-minute pressure.

Infographic by Alessia Kirkland

Organize your desk, office and documents. Consider going somewhere else for some tasks, to avoid interruptions or to change perspectives. (Ever notice how you get new ideas when traveling?) Do the same in your virtual workspace. Clean up your laptop. Use software tools if you find they help—I still prefer to create my own, visually structured to-do list from a blank page.

All of the above may require changes in your life, of course. If you're an underconfident

At the end of the day, write down three meaningful things you have accomplished, no matter how insignificant they may seem.

overachiever, recognize your achievements. If you're a procrastinator, find what stirs your blood: Everything

is easier when you do what you love and love what you do. When I started dating the woman who is now my wife, well-intentioned friends warned her that I was someone with an overfull schedule. She wasn't worried, though: She knew that you always find time when you're in love. **OPN**

Jean-luc Doumont (jl@principiae.be) holds a Ph.D. in applied physics from Stanford University. He now devotes his time and energy to training researchers and others in effective communication. He is a traveling lecturer for OSA.