

Managing Your Time as an Intern

Time management is often a problem that plagues interns. There is never enough time in the day to do all that is expected. First of all, due to inexperience, it will usually take an intern longer to perform most administrative tasks than it would a seasoned administrator. Obviously, time in the position is the only remedy for inexperience and the only way to become accustomed to the responsibilities. There are, however, some general suggestions which will help interns to better use their time.

An intern's day, like that of a principal, often consists of many tasks and encounters of short duration. Thus, an intern might face as many as fifteen to twenty encounters per hour. To handle this type of workload, interns must learn to analyze problems and identify solutions quickly, to think on their feet, and to shift gears often. Obviously, organization, time management, and coping skills become quite important if you are to keep up with the pace and the fragmentation (bits and pieces of information that do not come in all at once). The constant interruptions and obstacles, if you are not careful, can consume too much of the day (see www.nacsp.org for more information for aspiring principals.)

TIME SAVERS

Most everyone expects to put in extra hours sometime. However, are you working late or longer than expected almost every day of the week? If your working day is consistently too short, then time management skills may help. Of course, some of the big time-robbers are procrastination and preoccupation, which create a lack of focus. Also, there may be obvious improvements, such as increasing your reading and typing speed. Here are some suggestions from time management experts (Jones, 1993; Laken, 1973; Mackenzie, 1990; Whipp, Adams, & Sabelis, 2002) to help you to gain control of your life and time:

1. *The nature of time.* Is time your ally or enemy? Are you always wishing you had more time? Time is the stuff that life is made of. When you make time your friend and learn to relate to it properly, you will learn to master your life. Remember that time stays, we go. You cannot save time. Each of us has been given exactly twenty-four hours a day. Time cannot be expanded or banked for later use, only used more wisely. It is irreversible and irreplaceable. This is not to suggest that you be preoccupied with time, but you should want to use it wisely. For example, don't be a perfectionist on an insignificant task. Make time your friend.
2. *Organizing and setting priorities.* Do not allow the urgent to take priority over the important. Determine the importance of each of your tasks and schedule

work in terms of priorities. You will want to start with some kind of a daily planner that includes the most current list of your work tasks. There is a fine line between over and under planning, which you must find for yourself. However, you will be much less efficient, or effective, for that matter, without a plan. You often cannot do everything there is to do; therefore, you need to establish priorities.

There is a simple system in which you make a list of things that require your attention and assign A, B, and C priorities along with estimated time to complete the A and B tasks. In this system, A = high importance (value), B = medium importance, and C = low importance or priority. Make a daily To Do list. Schedule the A items first (prioritize the A items), the B items second, and put the C items off to the end of the month. If no one is looking for C items by the end of the month, eliminate C items and refocus on A items. Do your priority or A items early in the day or when you have the most energy.

3. *Dealing with time wasters.* A time waster is anything that interferes with you achieving your most important objectives, your A items. Time wasters can include meetings, ineffective delegation, ineffective communication, lack of planning, confusion, shifting priorities, unclear objectives, disorganization, and lack of courage. Some ways to avoid time wasters are:
 - a. Set priorities for the day each morning (see No. 2, organizing and setting priorities, above).
 - b. Save up trivial matters for only one day a month.
 - c. Delegate work to others and follow up.
 - d. Generate as little paper work as possible.
 - e. After initial grouping and prioritizing, handle paper only once (if you pick it up, don't put it down until it has been completed. See No. 4, below).
 - f. Don't focus on things you have no control over.
 - g. Avoid regret, guilt, second-guessing, and behaviors that sap energy.
 - h. Don't do things that are very unimportant or unproductive.
 - i. Set deadlines.
 - j. Be organized and have a good filing system so you can find things quickly.
4. *Handling your in-box.* You will experience a hail of faxes, e-mails, voice mail, letters, memos, notes, reports, documents, cell phone messages, walkie-talkie messages, subpoenas, human interactions, and many, many more. You can end up as road kill on the information highway. Here is a process for handling the information overload:
 - a. *Require written (not verbal) requests.* To enable your in-box processing to be effective and efficient, all messages must be written—e-mail or paper.
 - b. *Process periodically.* Set aside one or two times a day to process all messages.
 - c. *Group messages.* Go through your messages the first time very quickly to group (place in file) or paper clip messages that are related.
 - d. *Prioritize messages.* Go through the groups (or files) to prioritize messages as to their importance (ABC priority).
 - e. *Delegate.* Determine which messages you must respond to and assign all others to subordinates.
 - f. *Record.* Record all major groups, who they were assigned to, a date by which the individual will get documentation back on how they were handled, and their present status.
 - g. *Follow up.* Review records periodically to insure that all grouped messages have been dealt with appropriately and they have come to a logical and hopefully positive conclusion. Determine if any followup is needed, docu-

ment it, and, if needed, go back to the delegate stage and loop through again.

- h. *Discard.* Throw away or place messages in a historical file once they have been dealt with.
- 5. *Replying to messages.* Set aside a specific time each day to get back to people. Make sure you protect this time. There is some danger in responding in writing; however, some messages may not be able to be handled in any other way, particularly e-mail. Just remember that whatever you write or e-mail back to a staff member or parent can very easily be made available to the rest of the world. Anything that is put in writing to a single person or group of persons, must be written as if it was going out to the world. This "publishing for the world" concern is nowhere near as great when you reply by phone or meet with the person. There is, of course, a trade-off of efficiency in all of this.

MANAGING INTERRUPTIONS

Interruptions often keep you from getting your own work done. They include telephone/e-mail interruptions, drop-in visitors, crises, and unexpected meetings or events. Voice mail, cell phones, and the internet have made this more complex, with 24-hour access. Remember, more people will want some of your time than you will have available. That means, whether you like it or not, you will be setting priorities on how you direct your time. You want to limit interruptions, but you don't want people to go away without a response. Some ways to reduce the length of time involved during an interruption include:

- a. Set a time limit and stick to it ("I have five minutes.")
- b. Stay standing with drop-ins, and have material on spare seats
- c. Meet in the other person's office ("I'll drop-by later.")
- d. Avoid small talk and explain that you are very busy
- e. Get people to the point, don't interrupt, don't bring up side points, and give undivided attention
- f. Tell them with whom they might discuss the issue and to get back to you on the status and when completed
- g. Ask them to put it all in writing and get back to you
- h. Encourage weekly or morning staff meetings (or newsletters) to keep everyone current
- i. Be less accessible and/or have a secretary screen calls/e-mails/visitors, control interruptions, prioritize and delegate inquiries
- j. Relinquish control and allow staff to be responsive
- k. Don't use voice machines; have a secretary write your messages from telephone conversations
- l. Have standard response forms that can be easily modified to reply to e-mails, letters, memos, and so on

Remember, greater control of your time means greater freedom. Find ideas that work best for you. Most of all, be an organization with a focus on vision and mission and not one that focuses on problem solving.