

Pencil In Productivity: Time Management for Professional Editors

Wendy Call • www.wendycall.com • October 2010

“As a freelancer, if you don’t look out for your career, neither will anyone else.”

Amy Einsohn, author of *The Copyeditors’ Handbook*



The first step in successful time management is creating a work plan. Don’t have time to make one, you say? You will free up more time, guaranteed, if you devote a few hours each month to developing an overall plan. Yes, it *does* take time to manage your time. If you do it rigorously, it will probably take you an hour and a half every week. Actually, that’s an average of what it will take over the month. It takes me four hours at the beginning of each month to put together my monthly work plan, and then about half an hour each week to manage and monitor it.

The first step in the creation of a work plan is to **break down your goals**. Many projects seem overwhelming until they are broken into bite-sized pieces. Even projects that seem daunting – a substantive edit of an 800-page manuscript that should be 400 pages, or changing one’s work from proofreading to developmental editing, to give just two examples – can be broken into small steps. Each step can be placed on a timeline.

Think in terms of daily goals, weekly goals, monthly goals, and annual goals. Ask yourself:

- Where do you want to be five years from now?
- One year from now?
- What do you need to do next month to get there?

You are the only one who can answer that question. You are, when it comes right down to it, the one who cares most (and perhaps the only one who cares at all) about the answer to that question.

For that reason, **be sure you set goals that are actually under your control** (more or less). For example, set a goal for the number of potential clients you will approach in the next year, rather than for the number of new clients you will have by the end of that year.

Check in regularly on progress toward your goals. **Don’t add anything to your work plan without knowing why you are adding it.** Which goal does it serve? This will help you decide what to cut when you run short on time. (When push comes to shove, you cut the task that relates to a lower priority goal, rather than the task you least want to complete.)

A work plan is *not* the same thing as a To Do list. A To Do list is far less useful than a well-organized work plan because the former is not in priority order. When tasks are listed in no particular order on a To Do list, it’s easy to lose sight of the long-term goals behind the tasks, and too easy to cut out the most difficult task, rather than the lowest-priority one.

Keep your work plan where you can see it. Get in the habit of referring to it at the beginning and end of every work day. (This is harder than it sounds.) The key to effective work plan management is *getting in the habit*. This requires commitment and focus, but it is possible.

If you really want to delve into successful time management, keep track of how long it takes you to accomplish each task. If you do this for long enough, you will eventually be able to predict, very accurately, how long it will take you to do just about anything.

In addition to carving out the time to transform your To Do list into a true work plan, it is also worth the time required to develop good time-management systems. The upfront investment of time will pay for itself. Here are a few questions to ask yourself as you begin to set up your systems:

- Are your paper files organized and easy to navigate?
- Are your computer files equally logical and navigable?
- Do you have a recent, complete back up of all computer files?
- How do you keep track of project ideas, possible clients, recommended books?

When you begin to set up a work plan, make sure to include all aspects of your work. Each editor's list will be different, but here is a sample:

- Editing
- Responding to client needs
- Seeking new clients
- Negotiating contracts and invoicing
- Promoting your work on and offline
- Learning to use new software

Give yourself whatever you need to keep yourself motivated to face the page, move toward your goals, and supersede the (inevitable) setbacks along the way. Use whatever sort of incentive you need to reward yourself.

Finally, and most importantly, **make sure your goals are SMART:**

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Results-oriented
- Time-bound

Each time you set a goal for your work life, revise it until it meets these five criteria.

There is no need to try and do all of this at once! Take control of your time little by little, step by step.

Brief Explanation of the Template of the Excel Work Plan Template

Just FYI, this may or may not be of any use to you at all. I encourage you to develop your own system. :)

The chart totals work hours for each day (vertically) and also for each task and each category of tasks (horizontally). Each day I fill in one column, noting (in quarter-hour increments) how much time I devoted to each project / task. You can of course change the categories to whatever you wish, so that you know how much time is going into different types of work. (I realize this method of tracking time is, for many people, overkill.)

Online Resources for Goal Setting and Time Management

http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_87.htm

More on SMART goals.

http://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_HTE.htm

Resources on time management from the “Mind Tools” website.

<http://wishful.fileburst.com/creativetime.pdf>

This free mini-e-book, by Mark McGuinness, is useful for artists just starting to think about time management.

<http://www.businessofdesignonline.com/time-management-resources/>

Lots of links to lots of writing by lots of people who want to help you get lots more done in much less time.

<http://www.43folders.com/>

Merlin Mann has received much attention for his blog/website on how to make time for one’s creative work.

Books that Can Help with Goal Setting and Time Management

Ditzler, Jenny. *Your Best Year Yet! Ten Questions for Making the Next Twelve Months Your Most Successful Ever* (Grand Central, 2000)

Recommended by Washington writer Ruby Murray: “She does a good job of being positive, encouraging review (and letting go of lackluster performance) and explaining why we’d want to use goals and how they move us forward. She encourages balancing the parts of your life and being realistic”

Fitzgerald, Waverly. *Recovering the Natural Rhythm of Life* (Priestess of Swords / Lulu Press, 2007)

This delightful book -- by a long-time NWIEG member! -- will help you discover, evaluate, reconsider, and even transform your relationship to time. Offers an excellent three-month program for making peace with the clock and the calendar. Very good bibliography of other resources, as well.

Gladwell, Malcolm. *Outliers: The Story of Success* (Little, Brown, 2008)

Learn about the 10,000 hours concept here – it’s just not about managing your time, it’s about managing your career and your creative and professional development.

Goodman, Michelle. *The Anti 9-to-5 Guide: Practical Career Advice for Women who Think Outside the Cube* (Seal Press, 2006) and anti9to5guide.org

It’s a book; it’s a blog; it’s a compendium of essential work-related information – from doing your taxes to writing query letters. Maintained by Seattle-based writer and editor Michelle Goodman.

Goodman, Michelle. *My So-Called Freelance Life: How to Survive and Thrive as a Creative Professional for Hire* (Seal Press, 2008)

Focused on freelancing, an excellent follow-up to the most excellent *The Anti-9-to-5 Guide*. Though it does not focus specifically on time management, her section on creating a business plan is excellent.

Time Management Software

There are many, many time management and calendar programs. Which one is best for you depends enormously on what kind of editing (and other work) you do, and what you want your time management program to do for you. I have not yet found a program that works better for me than my smartphone calendar and my Excel file, but I'm really hoping to find one soon! Here are resources for more information about time-management programs:

<http://freelancefolder.com/10-free-project-management-applications/>

<http://freelancefolder.com/open-thread-what-project-management-software-do-you-use/>

<http://www.effexis.com/>

<http://www.getontracks.org/>

<http://www.todolistsoft.com/>

<http://www.taskmerlin.com/>

<http://www.taskmanagementguide.com/>

<http://freelanceswitch.com/productivity/8-simple-online-time-management-tools-for-freelancers/>

<http://freelanceswitch.com/productivity/6-cool-tools-to-track-your-time/>

<http://www.priacta.com/trog/>

https://www.smartsheet.com/task-management-template?s=8&c=60&m=1200&a=002&k=task%20management&gclid=CO3r09yo_aECFQgSawodLSHcGg

<http://theadventurouswriter.com/blogwriting/freelance-writing/tips-for-time-management-software-for-writers/>

<http://mashable.com/2009/01/29/getting-things-done/>



If you find resources that are useful to you, I would love to know about them (wlc@wendycall.com). Thanks!
