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The faculty series: Top 10 tips on managing your time as a PI

25 Jan 2016 | 12:00 GMT | Posted by Jack Leeming | Category: Faculty, Research, Tenure

Good lab organisation is the best way to keep your research output up, and your stress levels down.

Becoming a new faculty member is, as we've discussed in this series, hard. You have to demonstrate a cornucopia of scientific, interpersonal, organisational and management skills, and plan out high-level research regularly. Good science is the ultimate goal of this, and for your lab to produce good science, you have to make sure that all of the cogs in your research machine are turning smoothly.

With that in mind, here are ten tips that will help your lab stay organised, so you can focus on the research. That's why you're in academia, after all.

1. Keep a detailed calendar and stick to it
A good calendar will be the single most important thing to you when it comes to time management – keep it updated regularly, and share it with your colleagues so they know your availability. If you want some time for 'open' work – reading or writing or data analysis – make sure to schedule this on your calendar as well.

2. Standardise every group member's output
Make templates for documents like progress or experiment reports, and encourage the entire lab to use them. It may take you a while initially, but it will save everyone in your lab a lot of time once they're all working off of the same documents.

3. Use a shared, organised filing system
Instead of everyone shooting emails back and forth asking for this or that piece of information, encourage your lab to use a shared filing system that everyone knows how to use. Keeping it organised is just as important as actually having the system in place, so spend some time working out the best way to structure everything with your lab members.

4. Keep your meetings short and schedule them together
Meetings in the middle of your other work have been proven to throw you off balance, and will reduce your output

enormously. Try to organise your meetings in one block, so you can spend the rest of your time focussing on specific tasks. This won't be possible for every meeting, but even a slight reshuffling will increase your output.

5. Revisit your schedule mid-week
Spend some time midweek moving meetings and other commitments around if you can, or you'll end up trapped by your own calendar when you should be working on something with a higher priority.

6. Set aside time for reading the latest research
This is something that's all too often missed out by faculty members, which often results in frantic catching up in the evenings or at weekends. Make time in your schedule for reading and research – it's part of your job.

7. Plan high-level meetings once a month
This is normally regular enough to be fresh in everyone's mind, but spaced out enough to not waste your entire group's time. High-level concept meetings are important, and something that the whole group will benefit from, so treat this meeting with respect and ask everyone to prepare notes beforehand.

8. Be available for those who need it
Your undergraduate and PhD students will need regular guidance on the theory and practicalities of their science, and sometimes it's impractical to expect them to book a meeting in advance for a question that will take you a minute to answer. They will be the ones doing the science on the ground, so make sure to accommodate them whenever you can.

9. Leave time aside for things you've missed
However well you plan, there will always be something you've forgotten. Don't overbook yourself to the point where you're unable to take anything else on at the end of the week – you will need some flexibility in your schedule.

10. Make a system that works for you
All of the advice we give here will not be as valuable as a system that works for you – ignore, break or outright contradict any of this advice in favour of designing something that will help you and your lab organise properly. This is the most important point – it's your science, your schedule and you know what works for you.

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