

Work Smarter, Not Harder

Residents, fellows, and pharmacists in the workplace are tasked with numerous duties and responsibilities; however, there are only so many hours in the day. Finding time to be successful in a career while meeting personal obligations is tough and challenging, but critical to achieving a successful work-life balance. By “working smarter, not harder,” individuals can find an ideal work-life balance and experience improved health and well-being, increased productivity, positive job satisfaction, and meaningful relationships.

Before I dive into tips on how to work smarter, not harder, I would like to highlight that my interest in this topic stems from the growing attention on burnout among health care professionals. As the U.S. health care system rapidly changes with the integration of technology, metrics, and new payment and delivery approaches to optimize patient care and outcomes, health care providers are right at the front lines of this movement and being forced to keep up. Burnout among health care providers is of concern because this affects quality and safety of care, patient satisfaction, and turnover rates, leading to increased health care costs. It is no surprise that work hours, night or weekend call, and time spent at home on work-related tasks have been correlated with higher burnout rates.¹

Although some work responsibilities and conditions are nonnegotiable, taking the initiative to work smarter, not harder is within one’s control and can make a difference. As an avid reader, I turned to books such as *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, *The ONE Thing*, and *Manage Your Day-to-Day* to find secrets to success, as detailed below²⁻⁴:

- Recognize that the demands in our lives exceed our capacity. On average, our brains can only remain focused for 90 minutes and require at least 15 minutes of rest. With the shift in the health care system and adoption of digital technology, information and requests are coming to us faster and relentlessly. However, instead of working in a linear fashion and burning through our energy tank, it is better to work in chunks of time with breaks to recharge. One popular analogy demonstrating this is a woodcutter who keeps cutting down trees; as time passes, his saw becomes blunter. However, had the woodcutter stopped sawing to sharpen his saw and then resumed cutting the tree, he would have saved time and effort in the long run.
- The availability of e-mails and messaging systems creates a “reactionary workflow.” Instead of focusing on the tasks at hand, we become distracted by responding and reacting in real-time to messages. To minimize this, set designated times to check your inbox and disable e-mail alerts. Ask colleagues to call you or stop by your desk to discuss pertinent time-sensitive issues.
- Schedule blocks of time in your calendar for focused and uninterrupted time to spend on projects and tasks.
- Use the time management matrix to categorize your tasks. Is the task urgent and important, not urgent but still important, urgent but not important, or neither urgent nor important? If possible, complete the tasks that rank highest in urgency and importance first. Also try to dedicate time for tasks that require more focus early in the day because self-control and ability to resist distractions decreases throughout the day.
- Ask yourself every day, “What is the ONE thing I can do such that by doing it everything else will be easier or unnecessary?” Dedicate time to that task and avoid stretching yourself too thin by multitasking.

With the above tips, you will hopefully be able to work smarter, not harder during your residency, fellowship, or current position.

About the author: Shubha Bhat is a second-year ambulatory care outcomes research fellow at the University of Colorado Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences in Aurora, Colorado. She is currently trying to optimize her work-life balance through many self-help books, so be sure to let her know if you have any recommendations. Besides providing patient care, conducting research, and teaching the future generation of pharmacists, Shubha enjoys photography adventures and spending time with her puppy.

References:

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