Return on Time Investment: Productivity Resources

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When I was in 4th or 5th grade, my favorite book was *Cheaper by the Dozen*, the semi-autobiographical novel by two of the dozen children raised by their efficiency expert parents.¹ The authors tell hilarious tales of being raised in a household that served as a sort of laboratory to test their parent’s educational and efficiency ideas. Of course, the stories must have entertained me, but their ideas of efficiency made a major impression on my young brain. As a result, to this day I will eagerly turn my attention to any method, device, or app that promises to help me do a job better. Let’s admit it—we all wish we had more hours in a day, but we don’t!
The fact remains that in this day of amazing digital resources that are designed to help us save and manage time more efficiently, we still need to learn how to use them. Following on the previous two articles in this series you need to consider your personal “return on time investment” (ROTI) to decide if any of the myriad productivity tools that are on the market are going to work for you. While many of these programs are intuitive—a digital calendar looks like a paper calendar, for example—they all have quirks and a learning curve. So the question remains: what is the ROTI and is it worth your time and energy to learn to use one or more of these applications? The sections that follow describe three categories of productivity apps (with specific examples) to consider. You may want to refer back to the decision-making algorithm presented in Return on Time Investment: Research Resources to help you think through the pros and cons and why you might, or might not, consider adopting one or more of these for your writing and scholarly life.

**INTERACTIVE DIGITAL CALENDAR**

Many among us who are digital immigrants—that is, those of us who have not grown up using digital tools for our entire lives—find that one of the hardest things to give up from the paper environment is our calendar or daily diary. Like a physical book it feels familiar, allows “thumbing through” to quickly scan for events, and has a notation system that satisfies a sense of pattern and order. Shifting to a digital calendar is perhaps one of the most difficult changes to make and at first glance may not appear to be much of an efficiency tool. But there are many advantages, some of them “baked in” for work environments, so that a paper calendar or diary might already be a thing of the past for you.

Many office suites come with a calendar application by default: Google Business, Microsoft Office, and Apple iOS all have calendar programs built-in. Many work environments use Outlook for email for their employees and automatically insert
all organizational events that appear on everyone’s calendar making sure you never a miss a meeting. Google Calendar is also popular and used by many schools, community organizations, and businesses, with the option for students or employees to share selected calendars. For Mac users, the Apple iOS software comes with a calendar—this same calendar is also present on iPhones and iPads. As noted in the previous articles, if your work environment is providing you with a business suite and associated calendar, then you should think long and hard about “bucking the trend” and using something else. Events can be scheduled by colleagues and supervisors and if your calendar is not on the network—or doesn’t synchronize with the network—you may miss important notifications and meetings.

So, why transition from paper? One major advantage is that a digital calendar allows you to move things around easily when dates change. Most calendars can include geographic information such as the address and link to a map showing you how to get to events that require travel. It is also easy to set up recurring meetings, meaning that you can set up a year’s worth of board or committee meetings with just a few clicks. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us are living a remote life, attending meetings via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Google Meet. With a digital calendar, when you accept an invitation to an electronic meeting, all the details are automatically included with the event. When the time comes for the meeting, all you have to do is click on the link in your calendar to join.

Digital calendars give you the option to set up several calendars that serve different purposes—color coded so that you see which events fit into a certain category. For example, on my calendars, social activities show up in yellow, work events are red, personal appointments are blue, and travel itineraries are orange. Each calendar item can be shared with someone in your household or work
environment—I share my travel calendar with everyone in my family and my social activities with my partner. Once I enter an event in these shared calendars, the event automatically appears on the calendar of the people who are sharing that particular calendar with me.

One of the standard features that work environments use is the ability to schedule and invite individuals to a planned meeting. Once an invitee (you) accepts the invitation, the event is automatically entered on your calendar, along with meeting details and information about the other attendees. This works (for the most part) for people who use different digital calendars because the invitations issued from a calendar can “talk” to any other calendar. One important hint: if you are meeting with people in different time zones, then make sure to set your calendar to your correct time zone. That way, if you issue an invitation to others, the event will show the correct time on their calendar. Most calendars have many other settings that can be customized but from an ROTI point-of-view, start with the basics and learn the more advanced features later.

One of these basic calendars may be all you need. Because they are so ubiquitous, their parent companies are constantly adding features and upgrading their products, to ensure that they integrate with other applications and sync among all your devices. But you may have a specialized need beyond what is routinely available. In that case, again, look at what is available and assess the ROTI. Is the need worth the effort to learn and use a product that may be less mainstream?

In my case, after doing quite a bit of research, I said “yes” to Fantastical (https://flexibits.com/fantastical). A drawback is that it works only with the Apple iOS—and for some reason, the Windowslookalikes aren’t very good. However, if you are a “half-Apple, half-Windows” person (ie, you have an iPhone or iPad, but Windows computer) then you can install Fantastical on your iOS device. It will sync with your other calendars, including those on your non-iOS machine. For
me, I use the Apple Calendar (because everyone in my family uses it), Google calendar (because it interfaces easily with all of the other Google apps and with Chrome, which is my browser of choice), and Fantastical. Fantastical is where I keep everything together and the calendar I use to manage all of the other calendars (which happens automatically).

On my Mac, Fantastical shows up as an icon in my menu bar, so regardless of what I am working on, I always see the icon and can pull down the calendar to not only view, but also to add, edit, or delete events. As soon as I make any changes, all of the changes show up on my Apple calendar and selected events also show up on my Google calendars. On my Apple watch and iPhone, I find that Fantastical is easier to use to add and edit events than the other calendars I use.

Fantastical isn’t free—it costs about $40/year, although it does have a free two-week trial. It also requires time to learn and become familiar with all of its features. But for me, once I discovered Fantastical, the ROTI was worth the time and money since it has so many useful features that other calendars don’t provide.

This complicated profile of digital calendars is probably more than you can even contemplate! Never fear—this happens gradually, almost without even recognizing what has now become part of your everyday life. The truth is that this challenge of new digital tools is a constant feature of our virtual reality—there is always another resource that appears on your radar, tempting you to give it a try, or evoking an immediate “leave me alone” response. Your decision: what is the ROTI? Is this worth my time and effort? When it comes to calendars, I believe that everyone should using something digital, even if they back it up with a paper schedule. But you need to assess if you will be satisfied with the calendar that is presented to you through an office suite or your employer, or if you need something a bit more sophisticated to meet your needs.
“Task management and productivity” is just a fancy way of saying “to-do list.” The time-honored scrap of paper jotted with what you need to accomplish in the next hour, day, or week might be serving you well, and a digital to-do list may not be worth your time to learn and set up. If, however, you find that you are missing deadlines, forgetting about something you promised to pull together for your co-author, or suddenly realizing that a meeting is tomorrow—and you are not prepared—these are all clues that you need help and that it might be worth learning a new digital resource to keep track of things. Look at your daily workflow and consider what you do—if you are a “multi-tasker” (and aren’t we all?) then a to-do list may be an essential resource for you.

Similar to the calendar programs previously discussed, most office suites come with some sort of reminder list function. In Google it is “My Tasks”; Microsoft calls their version “To-Do” and iOS has “Notes” and “Reminders.” Again, because one or more of these programs might be sitting right there on your desktop (or in the case of Google, it shows up on the right in its email program), you may as well dive in and give them a try.

Beyond the basics, there are dozens of productivity apps available, ranging in price from free to annual subscriptions of approximately $100. Many have cute names (“Remember the Milk”; “TeuxDeux”) and feature sets that vary widely. Some may be iOS only while others run on all platforms and machines. It is important to make sure that whatever program you opt for, it synchronizes among all your devices. What’s the point of having a to-do list if it resides only on your desktop computer?

The productivity tool that I used is called “Toodledo” (yes, another cute name). Toodledo is very intuitive (meaning you don’t need to read a user manual to learn
to use it!), and you can start with the simplest features and build from there as you get more familiar with the app.

A common feature of all of these apps is that you can rank items by priority, schedule tasks for a particular day (even several years in the future), set up “repeat” dates and frequencies, and group tasks by category. The category feature is particularly helpful. When I want to know what tasks are on my list related to managing a website, I can quickly look at just the tasks for that category to see where I am in the larger project. In Toodledo, there are two features that I depend on as vital to keeping things organized and efficient:

- Each task accommodates detailed information in the “notes” section, including URLs for web information that is important to the task; and
- Files can be uploaded and attached to a task.

Here is an example: when I accept a request for review of a manuscript, I immediately download the manuscript and attach it to the task, note the due date of the review in the “task title,” copy the journal URL in the task details, and schedule the date for completing the review several days before the review is due. This takes a few minutes to set up, but when the time comes to tackle the review, all the details I need are there to finish the job.

One other indispensable feature: when an email comes to my inbox that needs a response other than an on-the-spot “reply,” I forward the email to Toodledo. Automatically, the program creates a task with the email subject as the task title, and the body of the email in the task details.

You might be wondering about the efficiency of keeping a task list separate from a calendar. The way I think about it is that tasks are things that I have to get done—they might have a day deadline, but that do not have a specific commitment for a
time of day. I can work these tasks in and among my calendar events—the things that demand my physical or virtual presence at a particular time. This way, calendar events show me a visual of what my day is like, without the clutter of all the to-do list of things that I need to squeeze into my free blocks of time.

**To-Do List Rabbit Hole**

While editing this manuscript and getting it ready for publication, I was busy researching and testing many of the programs that are mentioned. In the process, I found myself falling into a “rabbit hole” of to-do list programs specific to groceries. The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered the shopping patterns in our home: my husband is the one going to the grocery store 100% of the time. Meanwhile, I was acting as the Quartermaster, busy with inventory management. It was a source of frustration when I would say, “We need coconut,” multiple times but it never appeared in our kitchen. I solved this problem by ordering things from Amazon, but when I realized we had 10 pounds of organic oatmeal, 2 cases of cream of mushroom soup, and 8 bottles of barbecue sauce (among lots of other stuff), I decided that bulk purchasing might not be the best approach!

This set me on a quest to find a grocery to-do list that would work for us. After reading many reviews, we have been putting “Our Groceries+” through its paces. Some of the features that are particularly appealing are:

- It is very easy to add and delete items from your list.
- Common items are automatically categorized; for those that aren’t, it is easy to assign them to a category which the app remembers for the future.
- There is a preset list of categories (dairy, bakery, meat, etc.) and it is easy to create new ones. Oddly, there wasn’t a “seafood” category, which is essential for those of us in New England!
- You can add pictures, to make sure the shopper gets the exact item you want.
- It has a barcode scanner, so when you take the last of an item out of your pantry, you can scan it and add to the shopping list. According to the developer, OurGroceries+ has a database of 17 million products and their barcodes (UPC).
• You can use voice-activated devices, such as Amazon Alexa, Google Assistant, Google Home, and Siri to add items to your shopping list.

Using the app among multiple devices is easy. You create a master account under one email address, and then install the app on the various devices in your household. It syncs every 20 seconds so if necessary, you can add items while the shopper is at the store and they will appear on the list. The basic program is free; having pictures and barcodes are premium features that require a subscription ($6/year or $10 for a lifetime membership). There is also a recipe feature which I haven’t spent too much time with—that’s on my “to-do” list.

—Leslie H. Nicoll, Editor-in-Chief

**TASK MANAGEMENT AND PRODUCTIVITY: FOR TEAMS**

To-do lists are great, but what about if you need to organize more than yourself? Then you may want to consider a team-based productivity app. This is where it starts to get complicated and you really need to balance your ROTI against what the program does and how valuable it will be to you. Recognize that teams have different priorities depending on job at hand: tasks, projects, time, communication, or collaboration. You might not find an all-in-one solution—in fact, you might decide that many of these programs are not worth your time and effort to learn. On the other hand, you may be working with others who are using them and you will need to have a working knowledge to be part of the team. For example, Dropbox, Box, OneDrive, and Google Drive are all widely used to share files among team members, rather than emailing various versions back and forth. Using a central storage area helps the team leader manage version control. On a multi-author project, it is very frustrating when one person makes extensive edits on the wrong or early version of a manuscript. Therefore, even if you are still using a thumb drive to save your files (and back them up), if the team is using cloud-based storage then you need to know how to find, retrieve, and save files from whatever application that is being used.
Table 1 shows different programs that tackle different components of team-based work. A discussion of all of them is beyond the scope of this article, so you will need to do some research. Note that prices range from free to several hundred dollars per year, depending on the number of collaborators on an account. As has been noted repeatedly in this series of articles: if your workplace is using one (or more) of these programs, then you may want to investigate those first before you venture further afield to learn about others.

*Table 1. Examples of Programs for Team-Based Work*

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<th>Dimension of Work</th>
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<td>Tasks</td>
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<td>· Flow</td>
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<td>· Airtable (note that Airtable has automations built-in)</td>
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<td>Time Management</td>
<td>· Toggl:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>· Clockify</td>
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· Chanty  
· Google Meet  
· Microsoft Teams  
· Zoom |
| Collaboration | · Dropbox  
· Box  
· Google Drive  
· OneDrive  
· Endnote (for managing references; special use case)  
· Paperpile (for managing references; special use case)  
· Zotero (for managing references; special use case)  
· Mendeley (for managing references; special use case) |
| Automation | · Zapier  
· IFTTT |
With that caveat in mind, I want to highlight two programs that I use frequently: Trello and Airtable. I use Trello to organize projects. It uses the concept of a Kanban board, which was first developed by Japanese manufacturers to efficiently pass along information on a production line as to what steps are needed next to complete a task. The concept is also used in work environments where a white board has sticky notes pasted on it. These notes can easily be moved around as various project tasks are completed. As an interesting historical aside, the *American Journal of Nursing* used “The Board” to plan out issues. It was essentially a Kanban board with cards that were accessed and moved by everyone involved in the production of the journal. Although it is no longer in use, it still hangs on the wall at the AJN office.

Trello uses boards, cards, and lists to organize information. You can set up a project using any conceptual approach that works for you. If your project has a completion date, for example, you can organize the tasks on a timeline, showing what tasks need to be finished and when. The board can be shared by everyone who is working on the project, and each task (shown as a “card” on a list) can be assigned to a particular team member. Trello is criticized by many because of its simplicity—which is why I like it! It is also remarkably versatile. At the Portland Community Free Clinic, my colleague developed a scheduling system back in 2014. It is still working well with very few modifications, 7 years later. Although I find Trello to be intuitive, I have gotten pushback from colleagues that I have invited to Trello boards for project management, such as the workflow I use for the journal I edit, *Advances in Nursing Science*. That said, if you have a team and can get everyone “on board,” Trello can be extremely effective.

Another program I use for collaboration is Airtable, which has been described as a database for people who are used to spreadsheets. The Directory of Nursing Journals, which is a collaborative effort between the International Academy of
Nursing Editors and *Nurse Author & Editor* is maintained in Airtable. [Click here to see it.](#) This is a “Gallery” view in Airtable. The behind-the-scenes database in Airtable maintains all journal information which is linked among various tables. Thus if a journal editor retires, the name of the new editor only needs to be typed in one place and it will update throughout the system, including the Directory.

A recently added feature of Airtable is automations (see Table 1) which allows repetitive tasks to be completed in just a few steps. With this, it is easy to send a mass email to all journal editors in the Directory asking them to review and update their journal information which will be recorded automatically in the database. The City of Portland (Maine) has recently adopted a COVID screening tool for city employees that allows them to enter their temperature and presence (or absence) of COVID symptoms when they come to work. For employees whose answers fall outside of a specified range, an automated alert is sent to their supervisor for immediate follow-up. The screen that is shown to employees is simple and uncluttered (see Figure 1) and can be accessed on a smartphone, tablet, or computer. The application is

*Figure 1. Entry Form for Airtable*
built on three tables, one form, and an automation and was developed by city employees.

Airtable also includes mathematical functions and graphs, so it can be used in a rudimentary way for research applications—about at the same level as Excel can be used for statistical analysis. Three recent project teams I have been part of, for work on bibliometric analysis, have used Airtable to maintain the research databases and conduct the analysis.8,9,10

CONCLUSION

There is tremendous opportunity in our digital environment for efficiency, productivity, and time savings. At the same time, expending too much time learning a program or application that will not help you in the long run is a poor ROTI. In this article, I have tried to make it clear that a digital calendar is essential and productivity tools are also very high on the list. You need to think about your own personal workflow and balance that against short- and long-term career plans and goals. It may be the case that resources available to you, either because they are affordable or given to you by your employer, are all you need to use. But if you must venture further afield, considering ROTI provides a framework for decision-making and adoption of applications that I hope will be beneficial.

REFERENCES


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