

BUFFET TIME MANAGEMENT

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You can usually spot a creative person because they seem lost and confused or doing too many things at once. Time management simply bedevils creative types. Whether it's keeping focused on projects or just

getting the stuff of life done, a bubbling cauldron of chaos is usually close at hand. Being creative myself, I've struggled with my own three-headed hydra: disorganization, distraction and bedlam. I've spent entire days wandering down blind alleys, doing things I really don't have to do, goofing off and generally being unproductive. My meanderings come at the expense of doing things I say I really want to do, like writing this article. I developed a time management system that works for me and it might work for you. My system is like being at buffet, taking bit of this, doing a bit of that so at the end of the week you have some made some semblance of progress and you feel satisfaction, like after a good meal. If this sounds like something you need in your life, read on...

Benefits:

The Buffet system is practical and flexible, yet simple. It not only keeps me focused on what I have to do, I easily manage multiple projects and goals and have the action steps to get me there. A secondary benefit is that it gives me is a sense of satisfaction that comes from feeling like I am in control of my time (excellent for keeping moping at bay). A third and for me, the most important advantage is that it keeps me productive while maintaining enough flexibility to be creative. A fourth benefit is

that it helps keep me in balance, a dicey proposition at the best of times. Fifthly, I can easily pick out my priorities when I have them laid out in front of me.

Structuring Time (or not):

Many people try to manage their time by getting structured, slotting in as much as they can in a day with their phone or computer dinging before every meeting. This might work for some people who feel they need a scary load of structure to be productive. In my experience being over-structured doesn't work for creative types. Too much structure sinks the creative ship. One solution is to make lists. Lists are fine for the grocery store but unless you build in accountability and focus, they generally aren't much help in planning your week. The Buffet method is excellent for maintaining progress toward your goals while staying open, flexible and creative. The system is bendy enough to give you flexibility to select what you feel like in a particular moment as long as it's on the list.

Confession:

Before we go too much further, I have to confess my assumptions and biases. First of all, I believe everyone is creative, whether you like it or not. Some people have been told they are not creative and sadly they believed it. Working as a creativity coach, I know this to be true. Anyone can benefit from the Buffet Time Management System if you are open minded enough to try it. Secondly I know that creativity flourishes when there is enough structure to support it, yet it dies a rapid death when there is too much structure. The Buffet system is a simple and flexible enough container to support my creative process and it can support yours too.

Solution:

I enjoy making lists because it feels like I'm getting organized and taking a step toward actually doing things (which doesn't always happen). What seemed to be missing is having over-arching goals that provide a clear focus for my action steps. So each week I find time to review my goals and projects and see what is coming at me next week. I do this on Sunday because it's usually a quiet day with few

obligations but you can do it any time as long as you keep up a regular schedule. I take a piece of paper but you can use a personal organizer, there is nothing magical about paper; my system works in any media. I write down all my goals, projects and aspects of my life that I need to keep balanced. My goals look like this:

- House
- Work
- Family
- Self
- Friends
- Creative Week Project
- TV proposal

These are the goals and projects I'm juggling this week. Now comes the fun part. I think of what action steps I need to take in order to maintain a balance and move all these goals forward. Your set will undoubtedly look different. Note: If you are the sort of person who has a tendency to neglect your own needs, you want to make sure Self is on the list. "Self" for me, generally means how I support myself (more about that later).

List:

Now make a list down the left hand side of the sheet. This is where you write your action steps for each goal/project. If you extrapolate each goal and project into a few steps you can reasonably do this week you will have a nice step of steps for your week as well as an intention to work toward that goal. The essential thing to remember is to break each goal into actionable steps; so you don't write DO TAXES on the list. Doing your taxes would be a project with a number of small steps unless you are the sort of person who hands your accountant a shoe box full of receipts, in which case "Taking shoe box to accountant" is your action step. I've left some room at the bottom right for phone calls I need to make in a week, but you could use it for anything else like sending emails, following up, doing research, and so on.

Download a free template at:

<http://giantstepscoaching.com/articles/buffettemplate.pdf>

An Example of Self Neglect:

As I mentioned, I tend to neglect my needs. Exercising is one activity that slips off my plate. So one of my action steps is to join the Y. I also have to do the laundry and shopping this week so I will remember to slot them in. I have made a note to write this article and as you may have noticed, I am busy doing it right now. I don't always leave time to read so I have granted myself quality time with a good book. This is how I use the system to help me stay balanced. I don't forget about my own needs and put other needs before them. If you would like to have a better example of how I fill out my template, go to

<http://giantstepscoaching.com/articles/buffetexample.pdf> and download it.

Using an Agenda:

If you use an agenda (which I think is essential), the next step is to pencil in a few of the larger items in the big spaces and use your list of smaller things as a buffet table when you only have small chunks of time. Look for list items that are time-sensitive and make sure you get those done on the right day. As some items are higher priority than others, they will jump out at you. Make sure you get them done first. If something important comes up during the week, add it to the list so you don't forget about it. If your agenda is too full to accommodate the buffet, then my system won't help you. I could recommend some good therapists.

Having your cake and eating it too:

The idea is to get as much of your list crossed off by the end of the week. It's important to remember that you only have so much time so don't crowd your plate. This is how the system is like a buffet. Pace yourself; don't be greedy, although if you are clever you can still have two desserts. Slow and steady wins the race. If you are finding you are finished your list before the end of the week, you probably have more time than you think and you can afford to generate more items. Cross off anything you get done. Items that are still not done at the end of the week should be added to your list next week. If I have a particularly unstructured day I like to make

a sub-list of things I want to achieve that day. With a teensy bit of effort, you can be more productive *and* still be creative.

If you have any questions or comments about my system, you can reach me at my blog at www.bradleyfoster.wordpress.com and I will answer you. You can also download a template of the paper version I use from:
<http://giantstepscoaching.com/articles/buffettemplate.pdf>