

Living Like an Academic Athlete: How to Improve Clinical and Academic Productivity as a Gastroenterologist

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Entering a career in gastroenterology, be it as a fellow or new faculty, can be daunting and comes with expectations regarding academic and clinical productivity. Academic clinicians combine multiple tasks involving patient care, research, teaching, and administration. This mix may inhibit your

ability to achieve your goals or the expectations of your superiors. The key to any new career is to establish a system to ensure success while minimizing the stress that may result from disorganization, decision fatigue, and overcommitment (to the wrong tasks). Living like an “academic athlete” (borrowing a phrase from a *Harvard Business Review* article on becoming a “corporate athlete”¹) will help you to be happier, feel more fulfilled, and be more productive. The establishment of goals, objectives, routines, and self-restraint all resemble the intensive discipline of athletes required to achieve the highest levels of performance. Athletes cannot simply “show up” to work and expect to achieve their best. They start off the field using discipline, training, and preparation. This article reviews some systems, strategies, and technologies to help you achieve the goal of living like an academic athlete.

Planning Your Career and Establishing Expectations

First, we need to define productivity. It is common to respond to the question, “How are you?” with the word “busy.” However, having many outstanding tasks is not productivity. Instead, productivity refers to the act of being purposeful and achieving one’s goals in an efficient and effective manner. Athletes do not begin visualizing success after the game has already started. It is important to start any new career by establishing goals and objectives. Short- (3-12 months), medium- (2-5 years), and long-term

goals (10-20 years) should be crystallized in your mind upon starting a position. These goals should be S.M.A.R.T.: Specific, Measurable, Agreed upon (with a supervisor, mentor, or stakeholder), Realistic, and Time based.² The goals should be reviewed regularly and may be revised when circumstances or priorities change. Your goals should guide your decisions to agree or decline tasks and opportunities. They should also guide the negotiations of your new position, including startup packages and protected time.³ The Pareto principle states that 80% of effects result from 20% of causes.⁴ This means that 2 of the 10 items on your to-do list will produce more progress toward your goals than the other 8 combined! Establishing goals and objectives will allow you to identify these high-value tasks and activities.

Establishing a Productivity System

Early in your career as an academic athlete, you should establish a system to help you be more organized and productive. **Table 1** lists resources to help you identify a system that fits your personality and work style. *Getting Things Done* by David Allen is one of the most popular ones and can teach you some important principles even if you decide not to adopt it. First, all your thoughts, tasks, and goals should be written down (whether on paper or in an electronic system). Nothing should be left to your (regrettably unreliable) brain to remember. Your system must provide trusted places for your outstanding tasks, project lists, reference material required for the tasks, reminders, and ideas for future work. Second, your system should allow you to quickly process tasks that come across your desk, and to “touch it once.” You need to decide whether a task should be done immediately (“Do It”), delegated (“Delegate It”), or placed in your task manager or calendar (“Defer It”). As a rule of thumb, if a task takes less than 2 minutes, you should do it immediately; if it takes longer than 2 minutes you should defer it. We have suggested some task management applications in **Table 2**.

Daily journaling of accomplishments and most important tasks will help you to prioritize. We recommend a

MENTORING, EDUCATION, AND TRAINING CORNER

Table 1. Useful resources for useful productivity techniques and tips

Title	Author/Creator/Organization	Description/URL
Books		
Getting Things Done	David Allen gettingthingsdone.com	Widely adopted productivity technique.
Deep Work	Cal Newport calnewport.com	Scientific theory and practical application related to technique and benefits of scheduled, focused work.
7 Habits of Highly Effective People	Steven Covey stephencovey.com	Detailed examination and practical application of techniques used by successful people to be more productive, happier, and feel more fulfilled.
Eat That Frog!	Brian Tracy briantracy.com	Theory and practical application of technique of accomplishing most important task of the day immediately.
Smarter Faster Better	Charles Duhigg Charlesduhigg.com	Eight key concepts are presented that explain why some people are more productive than others.
Podcasts		
The Productivity Show	Asian Efficiency @asianefficiency	http://www.asianefficiency.com/podcast/
Beyond the To Do List	Erik Fisher @ErikJFisher	https://beyondthetodolist.com/
The Productivityist Podcast	Mike Vardy @makeover	https://productivityist.com/category/podcast/
The Productive Woman	Laura McClellan @LauraMcMom	https://theproductivewoman.com/
Blogs		
Lifehacker	Lifehacker/Gizmodo @lifehacker	http://lifehacker.com/
Asian Efficiency	Asian Efficiency @asianefficiency	http://www.asianefficiency.com/blog/
I Will Teach You To Be Rich	Ramit Sethi @ramit	https://www.iwillteachyoutoberich.com
The Productive Physician	The Productive Physician @ProductivePhys	https://productivephysician.com/
Unclutterer	Unclutterer @unclutterer	http://unclutterer.com/
Zen Habits Lifehack	Leo Babauta Lifehack @lifehackorg	http://zenhabits.net/ http://www.lifehack.org

structured journal entry to gather your thoughts and goals at the beginning or end of the day. Examples of questions that could be answered in a journal entry include: “What did I learn yesterday?”, “What did I accomplish yesterday?”, and “What are my three most important tasks for today?” (the tasks that fall in the top 20% according to the Pareto principle). The 5-Minute Journal (Table 2) offers a structured journal format with example questions.

Most productivity systems suggest completing your most important task first thing in the morning (*Eat That Frog!*; Table 1). Grouping tasks into an Eisenhower box can help you to prioritize your day and determine whether these tasks are important and/or urgent.⁵ This method is named after President Dwight Eisenhower, who was known for his extreme productivity. He famously said, “What is important is seldom urgent, and what is urgent is seldom important.”

The Pomodoro technique suggests using a timer to divide the day into focused work sessions (without interruption) interspersed with scheduled breaks (with tracking of segments achieved on a daily/weekly basis). Other suggestions include daily calendar notation upon completion of an important task. This is dubbed the “Seinfeld technique,” after

the comedian’s response to the question of how to become a better comedian: mark the calendar with a big red X after writing a joke every day, and “do not break the chain.”⁶

Establishing Routines

Most successful athletes use routines to physically and mentally prepare themselves for their best performance. Similarly, we can use routines and rituals to prepare for the day or wind down after a difficult day. Many highly productive business people rise early to get their most important work done before the distraction-filled day begins. Irrespective of whether you are a morning person or night owl, a morning ritual helps to prepare your body and mind for the day. A few beneficial morning rituals include rehydration with a large cup of water, meditation to calm your mind, journaling, stretching or exercises to get your heart pumping and blood flowing, and eating a nutritious breakfast. This routine will create the momentum required to face your busy day.

Similarly, an evening routine will help you to wind down and allow you to have a healthy sleep, which plays a major

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