

Carol's strategy

In order to fit the various demands of PhD work pressures and general life demands, I have taken a proactive attitude to work organisation.

Rather than wait for deadlines to suddenly hit me, at the start of each block of time (e.g. a term or vacation) I write a rough list of the major pieces of work needing to be completed in the time, and allocate different weeks to each task. At the start of each week I then flesh out the rough list to include the various stages needing completion, and allocate deadlines for each. I am careful to ensure that these deadlines are realistic and achievable rather than idealistic, as regularly failing to meet any deadlines would prove counter-productive to work morale. I am also flexible enough to recognise when I have inaccurately assessed how long a piece of work will take, and then alter the deadlines according to the amount of work and available time.

Although I obviously sometimes over-run on deadlines, I also often finish work early - and thus the rough list of term or vacation work is usually finished more or less on time. I find that setting my own deadlines and then keeping myself to them provides me with small boosts of satisfaction for completing some work, whereas looking at the whole PhD as a 3-year process with no small broken-down stages would be incredibly overwhelming and demoralising. Obviously this work style only suits certain individuals, with strong time management and self-discipline, and for many I am sure that such an isolated work approach would prove ineffective.

In addition, I have refused to engage in the regular PhD student 'panic' discussions about how much work is needed to be completed in so little time, how difficult their supervisor is, how they don't know what they ought to be doing, how their topic is too large etc. As far as I can ascertain, at the PhD stage of study it is impossible to realistically compare one's work progress with someone else whose topic, supervisor, and approach to work is likely to be so completely different to my own. In addition, as such 'panic' discussions seem to actually demotivate rather than encourage the students engaged in such conversations, I have tried to avoid them by preferring to discuss personal rather than work issues with my colleagues. However, when work issues do dominate discussions I have shared my work approach and suggested that others try writing their own lists of work demands, and creating their own deadlines, to see if this style also benefits them.

As the PhD process is an inherently isolated and personal experience, I am fortunate that my natural preference is to work alone anyway, and thus I am actively enjoying the isolation rather than bemoaning the lack of interaction. I do however recognise that students who learn and develop ideas by interacting with others will find a PhD much harder than lone-workers like myself. Therefore, I think that institutions ought to discuss work personality types with students *before* accepting them for PhDs, and also try to allocate supervisors accordingly, so that lone-workers do not get an aggressive and demanding supervisor and so that group-based students get a like-minded supervisor.

The different styles of work are also something that I believe ought to be more deeply discussed in the initial introductory sessions (i.e. when students first start their PhD), so that

students can recognise (if they haven't already) their preferred work style and thus explore how this might affect their PhD and supervisor relations.

In terms of fitting a personal life into my weekly diary I have thus far been strict about not working on weekends, and since the commencement of my PhD have only once worked at a weekend (when my fiancé was at a conference in America, and I had taken two week days off from work in order to see him before he departed). However, whether my morning involves PhD work or training I aim to be at my desk (or cycling) by 8am, but regularly work in the evenings, always aiming to be in bed between 11pm and midnight.

Obviously it is not always possible to work in the evenings due to various commitments (e.g. Church, sport, socialising), but I always make sure that these non-work commitments are as clearly marked in my diary as work is. Although some days this might mean I work only 4-5 hours, there are other days that I regularly exceed 10-11 hours of work. Such flexibility ensures that when I do work, I am at my most productive, and also do not feel guilty for doing the mundane life chores (e.g. shopping), having a long lunch, or enjoying the lovely weather (e.g. cycling or a walk with friends), during daytime because I know what my deadlines are and thus organise my time accordingly.

Team task

Discuss Carol's strategy for managing her doctorate and list on the acetate provided the main issues it raises for new postgraduate research students