

Chatelaine
Date TK
Multitasking

By Jay Somerset

The dental appointment you waited months for conflicts with your daughter's first soccer game—and you volunteered to bring the sideline snacks. A pile of receipts you keep meaning to file, including your monthly payment for a fitness club you haven't been to in months, collects dust in your den. You're supposed to be in a meeting in 20 minutes and only now discover the mustard stain on your shirt left over from making lunch for your four-year-old. And the day has just begun.

Sound familiar? We're all trying to do many things at once. Chances are you're doing something else while reading this article. While some people are content staying up late or cutting out personal hobbies, others have taken control of the multitasking madness that is work, home and family. Here's how 10 Canadians, from an air traffic controller to an executive assistant, get more done. Time management, as you'll soon discover, isn't so difficult after all.

Elaine Thomson, 41

General manager, Comfort Inn, Charlottetown

Elaine Thomson is a woman in charge. She's chairperson of the Atlantic Canada Marketing Committee for Choice hotels, a mother to two young kids and the general manager of an 81-room hotel. While supervising the hotel staff every day, she also solves guest grievances (better rate, better room, better pillows), tracks finances and takes bookings. Oh yes, and brews fresh coffee for the continental breakfast.

Elaine's secrets:

Update others Keep people—coworkers, husbands and kids—as informed of changes as you are and empower them to make decisions. This cuts out the micro decisions that take up so much time over the course of a day.

Delegate wisely Choose the right person for each task and make sure they know your standards. Explain what you want done, and trust them to figure out how to do it. Want the towels folded? Ask your tidy son to have them neatly stacked on the couch before dinner.

Network and schmooze It sounds counterintuitive, but sometimes the key to getting more done is taking more on. Join groups and committees in your community and meet your neighbours. The more relationships you have, the easier it is to find solutions. The first thing Elaine did when she became general manager at the hotel was take time to introduce herself to everyone and find out what each person does. "Now, when a problem comes up, I know who to contact."

Jessica Zelinka, 21

heptathlete, student, Calgary

As a heptathlete, Jessica competes in seven events over two days – from sprinting and shot put to javelin and high jump. She trains six days a week, including a morning run, two hours a day with her coach, 40 minutes of physiotherapy, plus lengthy stretching and yoga. With university classes and assignments on top of all that, Jessica's got to be an organizing ace.

Jessica's tips

Track your progress. Jessica keeps a log of the training she's done each day and what she needs to work on—documenting particular things like “felt sluggish during my run” or “sore biceps,” or “found my mind wandering during the team meeting.” When Jessica goes back to practice, she doesn't need to think about where she was the day before. “I can look at what I wrote and be ready to go right away.” Daily scribbles also highlight trends and progress that are normally too subtle to notice.

Stay organized. For Jessica, one sign that she's not on top of things is a messy bedroom. “So I clean it and it's like clearing out the clutter in my mind.” Don't underestimate the mental payoff of tidying a room or making a lunch the night before. It may help you feel more calm and organized, which in turn, means you're more able to be calm and organized.

Fuel up. You can't perform well if you don't eat well and get enough sleep. Skipping breakfast because you're running late in the morning will only make you less efficient all day.

Gisele Hudson, 45

High-school teacher and coach, Brandon, Man.

Students call Gisele their mom away from home. Besides teaching by day, coaching by night and shuttling her three children around to sports on evenings and weekends, Gisele is also in charge of the Sports School Program at her school. That means when the school's 37 student athletes are off competing, they depend on her to arrange travel and lodging, coordinate with their teachers on missed assignments or tests and hook them up with a tutor or laptop computer.

Gisele's tips

Break it down. Divide a project into smaller jobs. Then knock off each job in sequence, deciding which tasks have to be completed today and which can be done later this week or month.

Make lots of lists. Checking off even minor duties—“pick up the girls from piano” or “water indoor plants”—gives Gisele a sense of order and accomplishment. Having separate lists for home and work makes it easier to manage your responsibilities. Be realistic about timing Know how long it takes to do something so you can better plan your time and avoid disappointment if you can't finish. Allow yourself extra time

whenever you're driving in case you get stuck in traffic. And don't forget about the time it takes to find parking.

Kim Cosman, 37

mother of seven, Grand Bay, N.B.

Imagine raising seven kids. Now imagine home-schooling them, each with unique curricula and assignments. That's what Kim Cosman does with her children, aged 2 to 16. Evenings, she chauffers them to and from soccer, baseball, dog training, basketball and roller hockey. Managing a family of nine is so busy that the Cosmans do double-duty on their Saturday night dates: on the way home from dinner and a movie, Kim and her husband, Rob, stop at the grocery store to buy food for the week.

Kim's tips

Keep a colossal calendar. Everyone can add to it and plan around events. Note future activities, such as team registration dates, even if they're months away.

Track your goals. Even if you're responsible for everyone else's goals, make time to reflect on your own. "Every August I create a yearly plan that includes where I am in terms of personal development – how I can improve my fitness, my marriage," says Kim.

Involve the kids. Rather than giving a general order like "Keep the house clean!" Kim gives each child two chores that have to be done every day. Plus, the kids make their own school lunches. "Stick to this rule and the kids will too," she says.

Judith McGill, 50

Executive assistant to the editor of The Globe and Mail, Toronto

Judith McGill marshals her boss through his entire day. She sets meetings ("He'll be here in six minutes so can he meet with you in eight?"). She handles calls from frustrated readers and hopeful writers boasting the scoop of all scoops. She sifts through 100 e-mails a day. And she returns to her boss's office with an end-of-day list ("Did you call Jean Chrétien's office back? Do you want to catch the 10 pm flight to Ottawa? Do you want the same hotel room as last time?"). She's a breathing daytimer with a self-indexing mind.

Judith's tips

Always carry a notebook. That way you don't have to rely on your already overloaded memory to relay and receive information. It also means you won't have to make people wait until you find a pen and paper.

Make judgment calls. "I was told to never interrupt meetings at the end of the day," says Judith. "On my first day, there was a call from the Prime Minister's office. I interrupted the meeting after weighing the options and not losing my cool. Once you panic, you'll forget things and start making mistakes."

Wait it out Instead of constantly interrupting yourself and others every time a small question comes up, keep a list and then go to the relevant people to get answers.

Isabell Fooks, 32

editor, The Valley Times weekly newspaper, Drumheller, Alberta

Editing a small-town newspaper means doing a little of everything. For Isabell Fooks that includes designing, reporting, taking photos, editing copy, creating story lists and updating the Web site. Since she is also the publisher and owner, she also orders supplies, sets up the print run, solicits advertisements, pays the bills and manages the staff. When the 5,300 newspapers are sent out every Tuesday, it's like each one is personally signed by Isabell.

Isabell's tips

Finish your leftovers. Before beginning something new, finish what you started. It means you won't leave piles of work around that you've only nibbled on.

Keep your cool. Problems don't need emotions, they need solutions. Exploding will only leave you reeling and put you back where you started, minus the hour or two wasted, of course.

Combine outings. Before heading out on an assignment or errand, figure out what else you could do while you're in the area. Does a friend you never seem to have time to visit live nearby? Does a client have a shop along the way?

Susan Bourque, 38

Employee coordinator at Purolator Courier's national call centre, Moncton, N.B.

If you're one of the 44,000 Canadians sending or receiving a Purolator Courier package today, there's a good chance your call will reach one of the 60 operators supervised by Susan Bourque. On her shift, packages are rerouted, cancelled or retrieved. Bourque's mission: to make sure every single problem is solved in the moment—whether by her or one of her staff—without once sounding frustrated to the caller on the other end.

Susan's tips

Build in buffers. Schedule 15-minute buffers between every meeting. "In essence, it's an appointment with yourself," says Susan. It allows space for solving things right when they happen rather than having to rearrange the next thing on your agenda, and it gives you time to prepare for and get to your next event.

Use easy answers. Solve problems with solutions that don't require more of your time and can be implemented immediately. What is a quick fix for an unhappy customer? How about a refund or alternative arrangements? "Offering a reasonable fix right away is much better than promising something in the future that may never come to be." Don't guess If you don't know the answer to a question, don't escape the situation by panicking and guessing - you'll spend double the time fixing the error. Tell whoever's

asking that you'll get back to them. Say no if you aren't qualified to do a task or can't commit enough time to do a good job.

Fiona Beingeffner, 36

Air traffic controller, Toronto

Thousands of people rely on Fiona Beingeffner every time she sits inside the control tower at Pearson International Airport. Working with zero tolerance for error, she must know which plane is due to arrive or depart, when and on which route. It's also her job to issue flight plans to pilots, including creating suitable detours due to erratic weather or malfunctioning equipment. Every decision she makes affects the entire system and one small detail may throw the sequence into chaos. A mistake in a moment of stress could cost lives.

Fiona's tips

Pay attention to details. Pressure can cause people to skim their surroundings instead of really seeing what's happening. Be speedy, but don't let your eyes roll over details because you don't have time. How often have you looked for your wallet in a panic and eventually find it in the exact spot you frantically looked at three times?

Think ahead. Consider how the decision you're making right now will affect the next ones or the ones you just made. "Don't isolate every decision," says Fiona. "Things happen in combination, like a chess game."

Take a time out Don't underestimate the importance of truly relaxing on your time off. Go to the gym, watch a movie—whatever makes you fresh and able to concentrate without becoming sloppy or distracted.

Sidebar: Be a task master

Want to stay on top of your to-do lists? Borrow these tricks from Mark Ellwood, the Toronto author of *A Complete Waste of Time: tales and tips about getting more done*:

- Make smarter choices People say time is money. So is it really worth driving across the city for gas that's three cents cheaper, or squandering two hours tinkering with a problem someone else could fix in five minutes? Your time has value so spend wisely.
- Take time to plan The average person sets aside one hour of planning time a week while spending 17 hours on low-priority, time-consuming tasks. By setting aside three planning hours, you'll decrease time spent on low-priority tasks while increasing time for things that make a difference in the long run.
- Set priorities Imagine you had nothing to do tomorrow: what would you do to affect your situation a month from now? Think about the long-term goals you're striving towards. These are the things you should plan for and create time for.
- Impose deadlines Tell people that if you don't hear back from them within a specified time period, you're going to go ahead and execute the task. This shows people you're not just asking for permission to do things and it forces them to adhere to your schedule.