From the guest editor's desk:

Time management—Who manages YOUR time?

by Alistair Reeves

A telephone conference about 10 years ago with my group around me: I am the head of a productive and committed publishing team in one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies, responsible for the 'European dossier' on an international project. Things are going well. After a merger, management has moved the central development department outside Germany, as they apparently felt that this would make the company more productive, although no clear reasons have been given. All members of my publishing group—all specialists in their fields—are working at full capacity, as usual. My boss abroad at the other end of the line says, for all to hear: "Higher management wants to go for 'stretch goals' on this project". 'Stretch goals' are a mystery to me, but they immediately smack of 'le citron bien pressé', so I 'innocently' ask: "What do you mean by stretch goals?" The answer is: "That means we set successive goals and then knock off about 20% of the time required for each because everybody has to be prepared to go that extra mile for the good of the project". My team had already chalked up so many extra miles that they should have been languishing on a beach on a Pacific island with no need to return. Dare I ask the question? I did: "So what you actually mean are *unrealistic* goals?" I bite my lip nervously in anticipation of the response. Silence from overseas. Visible thumbs up all around in my group. I am thankful this is not a videoconference. As you might imagine, this did not endear me to management, and certainly contributed to my becoming a freelance writer and editor in 2002. But being a freelancer did not help me to plan better at first, because I mistakenly thought it would be so much easier being my own boss.

I started working on documentation for clinical trials in the pharmaceutical industry in 1976. In the ensuing 32 years, I have worked on only one project that stayed on the schedule planned 18 months in advance: the above project. It was the first centralised procedure in Europe at my company. The reason that it remained on schedule was not because we subscribed to the dubious policy of 'stretch goals'. No. We had planned everything well in advance, built in buffers, and had an exceptionally responsive management in Europe who realised that we were all committed and knew what we were talking about when we said how long things would take. We did have a couple of setbacks, but we actually finished early in Europe (by 19 days, if I remember correctly), and maintained a humane schedule for all concerned. Our colleagues abroad were 6 weeks late.

"Where can we squeeze out another couple of (half-) days?" This was always the statement I dreaded in meetings. What it really meant was: how can we push the workforce harder? How do you answer this when your workforce is at full capacity anyway, and your scanning specialist is just as stressed as your top medical writer or publisher? And we all know: we are in October, we are talking about 'squeezing out' days next January, but by the time November comes, things will probably look very different (because of unresolved questions about those nasal tumours in rats, for example), so why are we wasting time with this sort of question now? Everything—almost always—slips, anyway.

Whether you are a freelancer or a salaried employee, you always have to ask: "What are the timelines on this?", and you are always asked: "By when can you have it ready?" So you have to be a good planner and have a good idea of how long things take. Why does everyone always want everything yesterday? And how often have we broken our back to complete a job, only to find that it laid around in a drawer (20 years ago), or on a hard disk (10 years ago), or on a memory stick (nowadays) for a couple of weeks after you worked until 22:00 several nights running to complete it? The important elements in good planning are honesty with yourself about what you can do, honesty with your staff if you are a manager, being able to represent your staff's interests when higher management has unrealistic expectations, the confidence that your client is being honest with you, and—moreso if you are a freelancer—the ability (and the confidence again) to say no, despite that nagging worry that the client may not come back.

I have been a freelance editor and writer for 6 years now. When I started, I had the luxury of a partner in full employment, my children had almost finished university, and the house was nearly paid off, so the end of large financial commitments was in sight. But that still didn't stop me taking on far too much work for the first few years and working 12-hour days and on weekends, public holidays, and even on 'holiday', trying to please everyone. Four years in, I was completely exhausted and decided I had to do something about it, so I took 2 months off and did no work (I realise this is a luxury a lot of people cannot afford, and I had to wait 3 months before my 2 months off could be accommodated in my calendar). *Plagued* by guilt in the first couple of weeks, I literally did *no work* for the first time in my life. I told important clients I had other long-

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term projects, new clients were referred to reliable colleagues, and I said no to a couple of projects. I thought I had become 'my own boss', but I hadn't: other people were still managing *my* time and therefore *my* life. So what was I doing wrong?

I am a disciplined worker and am not easily distracted. I used to sit at the PC for 12 hours or more 6 days a week. This was the problem. It took a while for me to admit it to myself, but I was being 'overconscientious', to my and my partner's detriment. So I decided that work was to be done between Monday and Friday from about 08:00 to 17:30, and that was it, and, importantly, that e-mails did not have to be answered *immediately*. E-mail stress is one of the worst evils of the E-age, especially since it is obvious that your carefully considered responses are often not read properly. And I had to convince myself that I could say no without causing my business endless harm. Two years later, I have fared well despite my self-imposed restrictions and have worked on three weekends and two public holidays (yes, I have counted!), and have *even* taken days off during the week to do things I want to do (like learning [again] how to enjoy an hour in a bookshop, or just wandering about town, or even just reading the newspaper *properly*). To meet deadlines, I used to take work to conferences and try to sneak in half an hour's editing before, during and after workshops, and before social events, usually at an uncomfortable hotel room table with bad lighting and a seat that was too low. I have not done this at the last two EMWA conferences nor at other events for the past two years. I really had to resist not doing it; but all events have been all the more enjoyable for not doing so. At last, some time for a chat with colleagues! Or just sitting for 15 minutes after lunch watching the world go by.

The other thing was how best to say no. I decided never to say no outright, but always to try to find a colleague who could take on a job. And I really do try. Judging by the e-mails and telephone calls I have had with thanks from colleagues for referrals, I am not always unsuccessful in helping colleagues and clients alike. I also stopped taking on jobs that are just too 'big', and now stick to 'smaller documents' (investigator brochures, study protocols, study reports, patient information sheets, Summaries of Product Characteristics, journal articles, small websites), but no more ambitious things like dossiers, or projects that need coordination across several countries and people.

Apart from a couple of hectic, but brief, periods over the past 18 months, I now feel that *I* am basically managing *my* time—even though only just. I am still at the beck and call of the client and do my best for them, but I don't feel that they are at the helm.

Like Virginia Watson in this issue, I don't think I was suffering from burnout. I was just chronically tired. This is obviously one of the precursors of burnout and something you should watch out for. If you feel you are close to burnout, Lydia Goutas has plenty of advice in this issue on how to recognise the signs and symptoms, and on the countermeasures you can take, including 'mindfulness-based stress reduction', and even extending to taking a sabbatical. I suppose my 2 months were like a sabbatical, although she has longer in mind. Maybe it would do you good too! What may also do you good is meditation—although I haven't tried it yet. EMWA's very own neurophysiologist website manager, Shanida Nataraja, recently published a book entitled *The Blissful Brain*, in which she explores the workings of the brain and the history and benefits of meditation. I need go no further into its contents here because we have a 'rave review' in this issue from Helen Baldwin, who says: "I have been meditating regularly for the last year (ed: before she bought Shanida's book) and I have been astonished by the results. I am much happier and less stressed than before: time seems to go more slowly, and I am able to finish my projects faster with less effort!" Because the wish for 'time to go more slowly' must be uppermost in all of our minds (and not only so we can do more work!), it sounds like this and many other books on meditation should be on every medical writer's bookshelf—and should be read!

Sometime in the 1990s, companies started setting up whole departments responsible for 'reverse planning', as if it were a new discovery and would be the solution to everything. I appreciate that preparing a dossier is more complex than preparing a meal for 8 people or planning a week's cooking—but anyone responsible for feeding a family or planning a large social or sporting event knows that you have to work backwards from a target time (the time your family wants to eat or your guests will arrive, or how many rounds you have), even sometimes several weeks or months hence, to work out your starting time. This is a balancing act par excellence. So there is nothing new about 'reverse planning': valiant homemakers have been doing it for centuries. Wendy Kingdom seems to have the business of cooking and providing for her husband and friends under excellent control, and would also have the business of writing under excellent control, if it weren't for that often incalculable confounding factor: the client. The essence of her advice is: do less so you are able to respond better to changes, and, as a freelancer, don't be afraid to have breaks of a few days when you have 'nothing to do'. It takes time, of course, to build up your clients, but again the message is: at the same time, build up the confidence to say no.

The word 'deadline' hangs over the head of every manager, writer and editor in our business. We can be glad that 'deadline' has lost its original meaning, which is explained by Ursula Schoenenberg in a light-hearted look at the term in this issue. She does, however, more seriously caution that deadlines are viewed differently by different cultures, and candidly identifies three 'personality types' by the way they respond to deadlines. Which type are you?

A truly frequently asked question is "How long does it take to write a …. (document)?" It is also frequently answered,

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and often unsatisfactorily. I can still remember 5-page study protocols and 25-page study reports with hardly any appendices, but study reports (and almost all the documents we deal with) have now turned into vastly complex documents prepared by a large team of specialists, sometimes with hundreds of thousands of pages, often with an astonishing network of electronic cross-references. Several contributors to this issue have looked at this question from different angles. There seems to be general agreement now that there are low-complexity, medium-complexity and high-complexity assignments, that these degrees of complexity have blurred boundaries, and that it is not possible to account for all possible confounding factors. This means that it is easy to get into a real mess if you don't plan properly. 'Can't you just put more people on the job?'—another comment from management I used to dread. In this issue of *TWS*, Stephen de Looze passes on a distillation of the wisdom he has gained from 20 years as a manager of a medical writing group, first in a leading pharmaceutical company, and later working for a contract research organisation. It is packed full of sound advice on how to approach managing resources on multiple projects, each with their own shifting timelines. This article—longer than usually accepted for *TWS*—should be compulsory reading for all writers and managers of medical writers—and also for the bosses of medical writing managers. Why not casually deposit a copy on your boss's desk?

Sam Hamilton reports on an EMWA workshop she runs on writing proposals, study protocols and clinical study reports (CSRs) from the time-management point of view. She presents some interesting results on the participants' experience of how long these activities take, like 'first draft of CSR to final CSR, including review in 6–100 days'. Most of us will be used to fairly high two-digit time-spans for reports (and perhaps we should keep quiet about the 6 days so we don't give our bosses ideas: a dream figure if ever I saw one!). Inadequate coordination of review cycles is often the problem; they can be the bane of our lives as writers and can be very disruptive to timelines. How often do you *not* get the promised 'consolidated comments', but 10 e-mails with contradictory comments in each attached 150-page document? While I was working as a salaried employee, a German physician colleague of mine, herself an excellent writer, always asked with a twinkle: "Is this the 'final' review cycle, or is it the 'absolutely bloody final' review cycle?" Needless to say, she refreshingly stuck keenly to any timelines set (a rare beast in our business)—we knew where we stood with her.

Christoph Pfannmüller answers some questions on what it is like to manage a high volume of medical writing and publishing projects in a division of a large Germany-based pharmaceutical company. His company mainly uses a preferred partner for medical writing and has in-house publishing, and he spends his days mediating between external writers and internal specialists vying for priorities and setting up and (sometimes almost daily) revising project

'route maps' to meet submission deadlines. Christoph has three wishes that he thinks would make life much easier; two are in the realms of Utopia, but I am sure that one related to ICH E3 has occurred to many of us already.

Andrea Rossi has the dilemma that he is expected to write *and* manage publications and congress contributions amongst a huge range of other documents for a multinational pharmaceutical company in Italy. This requires a degree of flexibility and patience that his colleagues in other departments do not always appreciate. Everyone wants to be served first, especially when a conference is looming: suddenly, everybody's abstract becomes the most important and everyone wants to claim Andrea's time. But it wasn't planned that way!

Debbie Jordan provides us with practical advice on planning your year (yes—your year! And you do need to), your week, and your day—for freelancers and salaried employees alike. Have you heard of the 2-hour rule? If not, take a look at what she has to say in this issue—a simple device to make your life easier. Salaried writers should take heed of her advice and use this in discussions with management. And the 2-hour rule is not a bad idea for freelancers either.

I asked Thomas Mondrup to tell us about a typical working week as a medical writer for an international biotechnology company in Denmark, and tell us how, by Friday, he had managed to fulfil his aims for the week set on Monday. He decided to apply the ABC task system he had learned at Debbie Jordan's time-management workshop in Barcelona. The problem is that the C tasks keep encroaching on the B tasks, and the B tasks on the A tasks, and suddenly, you have more A tasks than you can handle, with little hope of downgrading them. Also, your C task is a colleague's A task, providing great potential for conflict! After a 16-hour working day on Monday, things seemed to be going well on Tuesday (despite receiving three sets of unconsolidated comments on three clinical study reports), but Wednesday had some unplanned surprises. By Thursday, he had banned all statisticians and programmers from his office so he could just get on with his work, and actually managed to get away from work 'early' and enjoy a barbecue with family and friends. On Friday he didn't get away until about 20:00 because of the late arrival of more comments. This was followed by a busy private weekend, with the prospect of a similarly hectic week ahead. Sound familiar?

After all this talk about too little time: what do you do when you have too much time? Short periods of 'inactivity', which do occur sometimes, both for freelancers and salaried employees, should not make you feel lazy or guilty. Jack Aslanian shares his thoughts with us on such periods, which often fill themselves with those 'jobs' you have put off, but still have to be done, like clearing out those 2,253 e-mails in your inbox. Or sometimes work itself tends to expand into the time available (at last you have time to research that term *properly*, or make a start on

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working through that ever-growing pile of interesting papers). Nor should you be guilty about telling a client or colleague that you really will need 2 weeks to edit their paper, even though the actual time spent editing will probably be only 15 hours. This is because you have other projects, need time to think, and need some time to let the piece of work 'lie' so you come back to it afresh because you want to deliver a good product. Jack reaches an interesting conclusion on 'What' as opposed to 'Who' should be managing our time—a concept which we all know very well—but I will let you discover what it is by reading his article.

Stefan Lang continues his report on setting up as a freelancer in this issue in the Out on our Own section, also focussing on time management. And John Carpenter, who has been an enthusiastic medical and scientific communicator and a freelancer for many years, actually admits that he is thinking of 'slowing down' (What is that?), but almost in the same breath tells us that he would take on a full-time job again if it paid well enough and 'stretched my knowledge, experience and skills to their limits'. Looks like another one amongst us who will never really 'slow down'!

Nancy Milligan brings us welcome relief from the pressures of time in Journal watch. In this issue, she focuses on papers she has found on the importance of guidelines when reporting on medical research and the adequacy of treatment descriptions in manuscripts (with the astonishing statistic that in 80 papers reviewed, only 39 described the treatment given well enough to enable other clinicians to apply it without asking for more information). A paper on the effect of the online availability of journal articles on citations also makes interesting reading. This issue also sees the second part of Françoise Salager-Meyer's article on medical book reviews where she examines how the critical voice or 'rhetorical persona' of the book reviewer has changed over time, with examples from the mid-20th Century, when reviewers were often merciless in their criticism—but not without humour—and said quite directly 'Don't buy this dreadful book', and the closing years of the 20th Century, by which time a greater degree of objectivity had come to prevail.

Back to time management: our webscout has been on the lookout for tips from the Internet. Joeyn Flauaus has found good advice, including ten tips from a blog and a worthwhile video with a presenter who says that time must be managed as carefully as money. A good principle: but as we know, clients are not infrequently as fickle as the stock market. So do your best!

As usual, we can find sound advice elsewhere in the non-scientific literature about the value of our deeds and whether it is worth pushing yourself to your limits. And where better than in Shakespeare? In *Troilus and Cressida* (Act 3 , Scene 3), Achilles has done heroic deeds in battle and is distraught that Ajax, described elsewhere as a lubber (lazy fellow), is getting all the credit for them. Ulysses has good advice for him (which Achilles did not heed, by the way!):

Achilles*: ... they [the Grecian Lords] pass'd by me/As misers do by beggars, neither gave to me/Good word nor look: what, are my deeds forgot?*

Ulysses*: Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back,/Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,/A great-sized monster of ingratitudes:/Those scraps are good deeds past; which are devour'd/As fast as they are made, forgot as soon/As done.*

This may sound rather pessimistic and not encouraging: the wallet of time is greedy; it relentlessly gobbles up your time; some of us don't get many thanks for all our efforts; and basically good deeds are forgotten, although there may be some momentary glory. But this reflects the harsh reality of many peoples' working situations. I hope that this salutary message from antiquity via the 17th Century and all the good 21st Century advice you will find in this issue will alert you to the importance of making the most of this vital (in the truest sense of the word) aspect of your professional and private lives: take control of YOUR time. Trite and hackneyed: you only have it once. And it is one of the few things that belong only to YOU.

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Received any dog-eared e-mails recently?
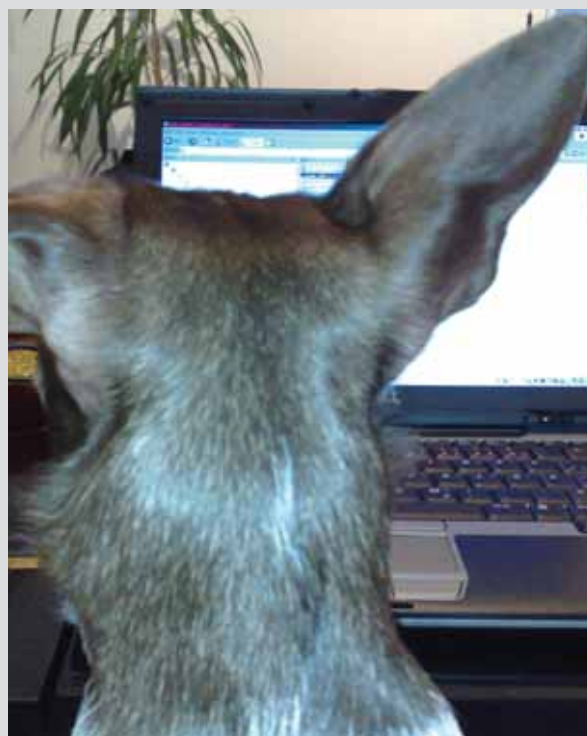
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