



*InetCE*

Volume 6

2002

Number 4

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### **Time Management Techniques for Pharmacists**

***InetCE 221-146-04-059-H04***

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**PLEASE NOTE:** The content of the article was current at the time it was written. The exam for this article is not valid for CE credit after 07/01/2005.

**GOAL:** The goal of this article is to help pharmacy practitioners learn about time management techniques that they can apply to their practice.

#### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

After completing this continuing education program, the pharmacist should be able to:

1. Summarize U.S. pharmacists' workload challenges as they fulfill their professional responsibilities.
2. Identify work habits that can make pharmacists more productive.
3. Develop a plan for increasing personal efficiency.
4. Evaluate technologies to determine the extent to which they can save time.
5. Explain strategies for appropriate delegation and outsourcing.
6. Identify ways to manage information overload.

**ABSTRACT:** As pharmacy practice continues to evolve, pharmacists will need to make changes in job design to help optimize time management in pharmacy settings. It is likely, however, that some pharmacists do not have the authority to engage in extensive job redesign efforts. In other cases, even after job redesign, stressors may still be present, and there will be a need for pharmacists to effectively manage their time within those situations. The goal of this article is to help pharmacy practitioners learn about time management techniques that they can apply to their personal practice. The ideas presented in this article are based on a book by Robert W. Bly titled *101 Ways to Make Every Second Count*. In his book, Bly offers time management tips and techniques in general terms. In this article some of the techniques outlined in that book are reviewed and applied to pharmacy practice. This article highlights 5 areas: (1) changing work habits to increase productivity, (2) increasing personal efficiency, (3) evaluating technologies that could save time, (4) delegating and outsourcing, and (5) managing information overload. Time is not something that can be stored or saved. It is, however, something in which we can invest. The common sense approaches to time management outlined in this article can help pharmacists invest their time wisely and help “make every second count.”

### **U.S. Pharmacist Workload Challenges**

The profession of pharmacy is undergoing a transition in which the profession’s goal is to adopt the practice philosophy of pharmaceutical care.<sup>1-5</sup> Such a practice asserts that the practitioner takes responsibility for all of a patient’s drug-related needs and is held accountable for this commitment.<sup>6</sup> Pharmaceutical care practice requires the establishment of a therapeutic relationship with the patient, an assessment, a care plan, an evaluation, and continuous follow-up.<sup>6</sup> To make such a transition in practice, corresponding changes in pharmacist work activities are expected.<sup>1-5</sup> It is quite likely that pharmacists will experience heavy workloads as they may need to continue to engage in traditional pharmacist activities as well as add the new activities that their evolving roles will require.

Based on research conducted in 1999 and in 2000,<sup>7-15</sup> U.S. pharmacists working full-time are on the job an estimated 44 hours during a typical week. On a typical day, community pharmacists engage in 141 interpersonal interactions, hospital in-patient pharmacists have an average of 76 per day, and pharmacists working in other non-community settings have 99 interactions per day. Community staff pharmacists working in high-volume pharmacies report the highest average number of interactions per day at 161.

This program is co-sponsored by ProCE, Inc. and Midwestern University College of Pharmacy Glendale. ProCE, Inc. is accredited by The Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) as a provider of continuing pharmaceutical education. An on-screen statement of credit verifying participation in 0.2 CEUs (2.0 contact hours) will be displayed for printing to participants who successfully complete the examination. This article has been assigned ACPE ID Number 221-146-04-059-H04. For more information, visit <http://www.InetCE.com>.



These interactions were comprised of 67 face-to-face interactions, (65 of which were with patients) and 94 through another medium (32 of which were with patients).

These findings reflect a heavy load of interpersonal interaction for community staff pharmacists working in high-volume pharmacies. For example, assuming a 10-hour workday with no breaks, this means that these pharmacists had over 16 interactions per hour, or approximately 1 every 4 minutes. Assuming an 8-hour workday without breaks, the interaction rate is over 20 per hour, 1 every 3 minutes. Sixty-seven face-to-face interactions translate into more than 8 face-to-face interactions per hour over the span of an 8-hour day without breaks, or 1 every 7.5 minutes. Ninety-four interactions through another medium translate into almost 12 of these types of interactions per hour, about 1 every 5 minutes.

Based on research conducted in 2000,<sup>16</sup> 56% of community pharmacists' time is spent in medication dispensing responsibilities, 19% is spent in consultation responsibilities, 16% is devoted to business management responsibilities, and 9% is spent in drug use management responsibilities (see Figure 1). In comparison, these pharmacists would prefer to spend 38% of their time in medication dispensing responsibilities, 34% in consultation responsibilities, only 9% in business management responsibilities, and 21% in drug use management responsibilities.

Research suggests that pharmacists' workload still is focused on prescription drug dispensing responsibilities. In addition, pharmacists have interpersonal

interactions with others outside of their pharmacy practice once every 3 minutes in some practice settings, and may engage in face-to-face interaction with someone not working in their pharmacy at a rate of one every 7.5 minutes.<sup>13</sup> In light of pharmacists' workload and the effects that these workloads can have on pharmacy practice, it is important to consider both job stress and job design as they relate to time management for pharmacists.<sup>17-18</sup> Job stress is a physiologic reaction to job stressors in the work environment. Job design is concerned with the specific tasks a pharmacist performs, the techniques or processes used to perform these tasks, and the meaning of these tasks and processes. A key component for optimal time management is to identify relevant job stressors and then develop a job design model to help overcome job stressors to help accomplish required job duties.

As pharmacy practice continues to evolve, pharmacists will need to make changes in job design to help optimize time management in pharmacies.<sup>17</sup> It is likely, however, that some pharmacists do not have the authority to engage in extensive job redesign efforts. In other cases, even after job redesign, stressors may still be present, and there will be a need for pharmacists to effectively manage their time within those situations. In those situations, it is important to make every second count.

The goal of this article is to help pharmacy practitioners learn about time management techniques that they can apply to their personal practice. The ideas presented in this article are based on a book by Robert W. Bly titled *101 Ways to Make Every Second Count*.<sup>19</sup> In

his book, Bly offers time management tips and techniques in general terms. In this article some of the techniques outlined in that book are reviewed and applied to pharmacy practice. This article highlights 5 areas: (1) changing work habits to increase productivity, (2) increasing personal efficiency, (3) evaluating technologies that could save time, (4) delegating and outsourcing, and (5) managing information overload. Figure 2 summarizes the time management ideas covered in this article.

### **Changing Work Habits to Increase Productivity**

Pharmacists' work settings are becoming more and more complicated. Gone are the days of discrete interactions during which a pharmacist evaluated and prepared a written prescription and a customer paid for the prescription with cash. In recent decades, pharmacists have become responsible for developing and maintaining accurate patient profiles and government-mandated records. Also, pharmacists are responsible for developing relationships with patients and monitoring their drug therapy over time, developing and maintaining complex systems for reimbursement, and preparing reports for colleagues or members of their corporation.

### ***To-do Lists***

One method for increasing productivity in this new environment is to keep 3 types of to-do lists. The first is the daily to-do list. For example, a reminder to phone a wholesaler about an order, a long-term care facility nurse about a patient admission, a physician about a formulary change, and a patient about a new over-the-counter product that is on order could quite easily be forgotten in

the busy pace of the pharmacy. A daily to-do list will serve as a reminder to get these important tasks completed. This list should contain only those items that need to be accomplished on that day.

The second to-do list is called a "projects to-do list." This lists current projects and the deadlines for each. This list can be reviewed several times per week, using it to make sure the daily to-do list covers all essential items that have to be done right away. The third list is the "long-term to-do list." This is a list of projects that you want to do at some point, but do not have any assigned deadlines. It is useful to check this list about once per week and to put in a few hours per week on at least one of the projects that interest you the most. You might see a need to write a new pharmacy technician manual or to redesign the stockroom. Spending just an hour a week on these projects can provide real progress and gratification in getting these things done.

### ***Overcome Procrastination***

Most pharmacists have some slow times in their pharmacy. Rather than using this slow time to accomplish projects, however, pharmacists and staff might use the time to relax, talk, or even read. Each of us realizes that these slow times are opportunities for accomplishing projects and goals in the pharmacy. Procrastination, though, is the biggest factor causing people to fall behind in their work, miss deadlines, turn in half-hearted efforts, or miss opportunities. Putting off an unpleasant, routine, or difficult chore is human nature, putting off an easy thing makes it hard, and putting off a hard thing makes it impossible. Those who discipline themselves to tackle the things they

dislike or fear will gain self-confidence and make better use of their time.

According to Bly,<sup>19</sup> here are some techniques to help overcome procrastination:

1. Imagine how great you'll feel when the chore is completed.
2. If the project is complex or overwhelming, break it down into a series of steps to be entered on your to-do list.
3. Create an incentive by promising yourself a special reward for getting the job done.
4. Delegate or outsource segments of the work you find mundane, peripheral, or inconsistent with your expertise. Note: A later section of this article covers delegation and outsourcing.

Another useful reference that individuals find useful for overcoming procrastination is the Time Management Matrix, which was developed by Stephen Covey.<sup>20</sup> In this Matrix, activities are defined by their level of urgency and importance. Thus, activities can be categorized as

(1) urgent/important, (2) not urgent/important, (3) urgent/not important, or (4) not urgent/not important. Urgent matters are usually visible. They press us and insist on action. Importance, on the other hand, has to do with results. If something is important, it contributes to your mission, your values, and your high-priority goals. We have a tendency to react to urgent matters, but important matters that are not urgent require more initiative and more proactively. To help overcome procrastination, it is useful to pay attention to those activities that are very important but might not be urgent.

Paying attention to these activities can make a tremendous difference. Examples of important but not necessarily urgent activities may include prevention, relationship building, recognizing new opportunities, planning, and recreation.

### ***Eliminate Time Wasters***

Identify any bad habits you have that waste your time. In the pharmacy, this can include such things as gossiping with co-workers, spending too much time chatting about non-work topics, or engaging in activities that are better suited for pharmacy technicians or pharmacy staff. After you have identified the bad habits, it is often helpful to make a list so that you can be reminded to avoid them and correct behaviors that waste time.

Outside distractions can be a time-waster, if you let them. The key is to physically block out disturbances as much as possible. In an office setting, this means shutting your door, turning your desk away from passersby, letting your voice mail take your calls, posting a "do not disturb sign," working at home for part of the day, or asking people to be quiet. These suggestions seem ridiculous for a pharmacist working in a busy pharmacy. But, almost every pharmacist engages in tasks that require great cognitive effort (chart review, patient care decision-making, correspondence with colleagues or patients, inventory control decision-making, report generation, financial statement evaluation, etc.). It is very difficult to accomplish these tasks if the pharmacist is distracted by the noise and activity of a pharmacy department. It would be helpful to block out disturbances as much as possible when

accomplishing these tasks. A private office area, setting time aside solely devoted for the task, or creating staffing patterns so that a colleague could cover the “front of the pharmacy” while you are giving attention to another task will provide the uninterrupted time needed to tackle these important tasks and help eliminate distractions.

### ***Design a Productive Workspace***

It is important to design your workspace so that everything you need – computer systems, equipment, telephone, supplies, reference materials, files – is reachable by turning in different directions without having to walk to another location. The dispensing of prescription drugs is often a multiple-step, multiple-person process that requires 100% accuracy. There is the need for multiple checks before the drug product is delivered to the patient. As the workspace is designed, it is important to have clearly defined tasks for each person involved in the process, and each person should have input about how to best design his or her workspace. It is worth the effort to design workspaces that minimize walking distances so that both efficiency and accuracy of dispensing can be improved. This requires a continual assessment of the products that are most often dispensed and how prescriptions are processed and prepared. Input from pharmacists, technicians, and staff is needed as workspaces are designed and reevaluated over time. In some cases, it would be worthwhile to hire a consultant to assess the ergonomics of pharmacists’ workspaces.

It is also vital to pay attention to references. Don’t hesitate because of the price of a book, CD ROM, computer subscription to a reference source,

portable reference device, or other reference material that you know you will use in a productive way. It is a small investment to save valuable time later on getting the information you need.

Finally, computer hardware, computer software, computer peripherals, and computer support can influence the productivity of your workspace. Every pharmacist could provide stories about how frustrating a slow computer or a slow connection can be. For some, “www” stands for “world wide wait.” Smart investments in computing devices and services can have a great impact on workspace productivity.

### **Increasing Personal Efficiency**

#### ***The Power of 10% More***

Although we may think we can do no more than we are doing right now, most of us would have to admit that we could increase our effort by 10%. We can put forth a little more effort than we normally do, just by reminding ourselves that this is what we need to do to achieve the increased productivity that we want. You’ll find that it is fairly easy to do 10% more of almost anything. Yet this simple effort pays big dividends. For example, if you work an 8-hour day and personally dispense 100 prescriptions, a 10% improvement will increase a yield to 110 prescriptions per day. Assuming you are open 360 days a year, this will result in an extra 3,600 prescriptions dispensed. At \$3.00 net profit per prescription (including net profit from other purchases made by that patient during the pharmacy visit), this translates into over \$10,000 ... considered by many to be a nice end-of-the year bonus.

### ***Increase Efficiency by 10%***

Do you feel pressured during most of your workday? Many pharmacists would answer “yes,” though, it probably isn’t really so. If you don’t believe it, try this experiment. Set up a video camera and point it at your work area. Tape yourself working and then watch the tape. To your amazement, you’ll see yourself daydreaming, chatting idly with colleagues, making prolonged personal calls, drinking coffee, fussing with your hair, reading magazines or newspapers, and doing all sorts of time-wasting, inefficient activities. If you want to really be amazed, tape yourself during a normally slow time in the pharmacy. While you are caught up in the busyness of the day, you don’t mind these things; they are necessary breaks to alleviate stress. But on video, they are painful to watch. The tape will illustrate that you can easily cut down on wasted time at least 10% without adding stress.

A unique aspect about working as a pharmacist is that, by law, you must be present in the pharmacy department while it is open to dispense prescription medications. If you are the only pharmacist on duty this means that, technically, you cannot leave the pharmacy for a lunch break or even to use the bathroom. Quite often there is a bathroom in the back part of the pharmacy department, but still there are those of us who think there should be a phone installed in the bathroom just in case there is an incoming call from a physician. The point is, our work never stops, and we cannot anticipate when a situation that requires a pharmacist’s expertise might arise.

Even so, there are practical ways to help increase efficiency by at least 10%.

First, create blocks of time when you can concentrate on your hardest tasks without interruption. Let everyone around you know that during this time period you are completely unavailable. Pharmacists are called upon to evaluate complicated patient cases. This requires the pharmacist’s whole attention during which time the pharmacist reads reference source material and then develops the best course of action. Pharmacists can create blocks of time (preferably in an area without distraction) to accomplish such tasks. Staffing patterns would need to be adjusted to accommodate this, but with planning this can be done. In some pharmacies, there is overlap in pharmacist staffing for this very purpose.

Second, pharmacists should schedule easy tasks outside of this prime-time block. It would be unfair to others to misuse a block of prime time. For professionals like pharmacists, easy tasks are often done at home or at a time just before the pharmacist begins work or at a time just after the pharmacist completes his or her workday. Easy tasks such as writing informal notes, reading trade journals, and performing some administrative chores can all be done at times when you are not completely focused on more difficult tasks.

Finally, keep your prime-time block sacred. If you have been able to take some time each day to devote to your most difficult tasks (e.g., patient case reviews, pharmaceutical care appointments with patients, managerial tasks for which you are responsible, etc.), don’t use it for other purposes. It might be tempting to schedule a dentist appointment during this time block since

you know it is “your time” during which you are not disturbed and there is another pharmacist to cover other aspects of the pharmacy. This would not only decrease your productivity but would be unfair to others who have helped open up this time block for you. If you find that you are not using your prime-time block, it would be prudent to reevaluate how much undisturbed time you really need.

### ***Gain 10% More Energy***

Even though there are slow times in most pharmacies, and pharmacists might be able to block out periods of time to accomplish innovative clinical and administrative tasks, there are large blocks of time during which most pharmacists are responsible for dispensing prescriptions to patients. This involves responsibility for (1) evaluating that the prescription order is appropriate, (2) ensuring that appropriate measures are taken to receive payment, (3) overseeing the preparation of the prescription drug product, (4) providing direct patient counseling about the product, and (5) ensuring that all laws and record-keeping requirements are fulfilled.

Accomplishing these tasks with the goal of 100% accuracy is extremely difficult and tiring. There are some simple things you can do to help give yourself an incremental lift in energy while you are working:

1. Drink cold water, juice, or other fluids throughout the day.
2. Wash your face (it has a revitalizing effect).
3. Go to bed an hour earlier (sleep has a restorative effect).

4. Eat breakfast (even something small sometime in the morning).
5. Avoid big meals in the middle of the day.
6. Do not drink alcohol during the workday
7. Acknowledge the effects that medications have on you. Just because you are a pharmacist doesn't mean that you don't need to keep abreast of how medications you need to take affect your energy and performance.
8. Keep good nutritional habits (e.g., foods rich in vitamins, or take a multivitamin).
9. Exercise (even parking your car a few blocks away from your workplace and walking briskly to and from work; others advocate taking the steps rather than riding the elevator).

### ***Increase Reading Speed by 10%***

Pharmacists are required to read vast amounts of reference material, reports, contracts, charts, articles, and books. The practice of pharmacy has made the transition into an information-based profession. Because of this information explosion, the amount of reading we must do to keep up and stay competitive is growing. Some individuals cope with this vast amount of reading by either procrastinating or by wasting precious work time reading the wrong things. The following tips can help increase your efficiency in reading.

1. Be selective in the number of magazines, newsletters, and trade journals you receive. Analyze which ones give you the best return on your reading time and focus on those.
2. Use the journal's table of contents to distinguish between useful and

extraneous information. If you can't read the articles right away, clip or photocopy items of interest and put them in folders.

3. Develop a filing system for saving information of relevant or interesting topics. Organizing articles by topic in folders can be very useful down the road when you need the information.
4. Use waiting or travel time to catch up on professional reading. Spare moments such as waiting in line; waiting at airports; riding a bus, train, or airplane; or even being on hold on the telephone, normally wasted; can be put to good use by reading.
5. Set aside a specific time each day for reading. (This might be at home. As professionals, we have a personal responsibility for professional growth outside our workplace, which includes continuing education, organization membership, etc.)
6. If possible, read demanding or crucial material when your energy level is high. Some people work best in the morning, whereas others are at their best at night. Figure out when your energy peaks occur and do your most demanding reading during those times.
7. When reading difficult material that requires retention, take notes. Writing down important points aids in comprehension and memorization.
8. Take breaks. Most people can maintain good concentration for about 50 minutes, after which they need a 10-minute break to absorb more information and prepare for further work.
9. Take a course to help you learn how to read faster. Such courses are particularly helpful for individuals

who subvocalize (say words to themselves as they read) or who read everything at the same speed.

### **Evaluating Technologies that could Save Time**

Technology is often an expensive investment, but one that can save time and help increase productivity for pharmacists. At the writing of this article, many new advances are becoming available, and their adoption is diffusing throughout the marketplace. Many decisions regarding technology are made at the corporate level, so pharmacists might not be involved in the decision about what type of technology to use. Rather, they might have greater influence on how the technologies are used and implemented in their practice. In this section, 3 types of technology that pharmacists rely upon for communication are discussed: e-mail, telephone, and wireless communication. As outlined before, most pharmacists interact with others via communication media multiple times per day. These technologies are communication media that can greatly affect pharmacists' productivity.

### ***Controlling your E-mail Volume***

E-mail opens new channels for pharmacists to communicate with other health professionals, business professionals, and patients. While helpful, it also can open the door for unwanted volumes of e-mail messages. In his book, Bly<sup>19</sup> outlined some strategies for controlling your e-mail volume. First, read the subject header before opening the e-mail message. This will help you decide if you should open the message at all. Don't waste your time reading unnecessary e-mails. Also, reading the subject header and

identifying the sender can give you a clue about the potential that attachments to the message could contain a virus. Second, be selective about giving out your e-mail address. Give your address only to special clients, colleagues, coworkers, and others who really need it. Third, use just one mailbox. If you have multiple e-mail addresses with different services, give out only one of them for your professional practice. Fourth, stop "spam." When you receive unsolicited junk mail (spam), check the bottom of the sales pitch for an "autoresponder" address. Send an e-mail message to the address with the word "remove" in the subject area, or follow instructions given at the end of the e-mail message for unsubscribing. Use caution, however. Such a response might serve a signal that your e-mail address is an active account and might lead to even more unwanted messages. Often, it is better to simply delete the messages. And fifth, prevent needless responses. Let your correspondents know when they don't need to respond. Make sure you haven't invited a response when you haven't wanted one.

### ***Increase Telephone Productivity***

Business telephones have many built-in, productivity-enhancing features such as push button dialing, LED displays, memory dial, integrated services digital network (ISDN) compatibility, multiple lines, conference calling, redial, hold button, extra function keys, extra length cord, headset, speakerphones, voice mail, voice activated dialing, message waiting indicator, single number reach (if you have several business phones), call transfer, selective call acceptance, call forwarding, and call waiting, to name a few. The telephone has a great deal of communication power, but is

often misused. The majority of a pharmacist's contact with many individuals is over the phone including physicians, patients, third-party payers, wholesalers, etc. These individuals will form a lasting impression of you based on your phone conversations. With tact and attention to what you say and how you say it, you can use the phone as an effective tool in getting and keeping cooperation, goodwill, and meeting objectives.

To increase telephone productivity in your pharmacy department, take time to periodically evaluate how your phones are used. Take inventory of which phone services you use and don't use. Evaluate underused services to see if you need to train your pharmacy staff to properly use them or if the services are not needed. Also, call your pharmacy's phone numbers and evaluate how the phones are answered, who answers the calls, how many rings it takes for an answer, and how long you are put on hold, etc. Remember that the phone may be the primary communication medium for many individuals with whom you interact.

According to Bly, a few guiding principles can help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the telephone as a communication tool. First, calls should be answered on the first or second ring. This gives the caller the impression that you are responsive and efficient. Second, identify yourself to the caller. When pharmacy personnel answer the phone they should identify both the pharmacy and themselves. This gives the caller valuable information, and it can make the call more efficient. Third, tell callers to whom they are being transferred. People don't like to

get the runaround. If pharmacy personnel need to transfer a caller, first explain why and where you are switching the call. Fourth, train pharmacy personnel to take complete messages. It is important to listen carefully and write down everything. In pharmacy practice, not only do incomplete or incorrectly taken messages lead to unnecessary work and call backs, but may also lead to dispensing errors with dire consequences. Fifth, have a consistent plan for putting callers on hold. Explain why you need to leave the line, how long you'll be gone, and then ask if the caller can hold. Wait for a reply; no one likes to be put on hold before he has a chance to object. When you return to the phone, thank the caller by name for waiting. If you find that callers are on hold for longer than one minute in your pharmacy, you should develop a means to call individuals back at a mutually agreed-upon time. Putting callers on hold for minutes at a time not only frustrates them, but also distracts you as you hurry to finish your tasks at hand. Put yourself in the place of patients who call your pharmacy with an important question about their medications, only to be put on hold for 10 minutes, and then when the pharmacist does pick up the phone answers with a terse, stressed voice that basically implies "Yeah, what do you want . . . this better be good because I'm busy." Needless to say, this is neither good use of the telephone nor good patient care.

### ***Wireless Communication***

Communication devices now allow conversation and data transmission without phone lines or cable wires. The same principles for e-mail and telephone outlined earlier can apply to these

devices as pharmacists strive to increase their efficient and effective use of these communication channels. The benefit of wireless communication is that these devices are portable, and the communication terminal can be taken with the pharmacist wherever he or she goes.

Wireless communication has evolved from primitive pagers that would signal the user that he or she should go to the nearest phone and call the paging service to receive a message to devices that can now connect the user instantly with the caller and keep the user's hands free to do other tasks. Verbal communication, prescribing, data transfer, and data access can now be accomplished remotely using wireless communication. Before adopting new wireless equipment, keep in mind that you would probably be using only a small fraction of the equipment's capabilities. It is useful to take a "technology day" where you do nothing but explore the power and capabilities you already have in the equipment you currently own. You might find a lot of timesaving technology there; yours for the using as soon as you and your pharmacy staff master it. Also, it is important to mold the technology into what your pharmacy department needs to accomplish, and not the other way around.

### **Delegating and Outsourcing**

Even if you could somehow be productive every minute of your life, there are still only 24 hours in a day. But, there is a way to get 48- or even 96-hours' worth of work done in a single day—or, much more—by delegating or outsourcing some of your work to others.

### ***Delegation***

Delegation is more than just giving work to people: it is managing those people so they get the work done correctly and efficiently. There are many technical tasks in pharmacy departments that can be delegated to pharmacy clerks and technicians. Bly offers some suggestions that will help you be a more effective delegator. First, demand solutions, not problems. A key delegation principle is for managers to require employees to bring them solutions, not problems. For example, a pharmacy technician might begin to give a lengthy explanation of why certain files that a local nursing home e-mailed could not be opened and starts to give various ways in which the problem might be resolved. Rather than stepping in to solve the problem yourself, it is better to say, "I trust you. I just want the files in electronic or hard copy form. Don't tell me the details; I don't care." If you can get your staff to focus on your ends, they'll find the means.

Second, target productive work times for delegation. It is not wise to think that your staff will diligently attend to a task handed to them on a Friday afternoon before a 3-day weekend. Assign involved tasks to employees when they are most likely to produce results.

Third, it is important to remember the human touch when delegating to pharmacy staff. The most valuable qualities you can develop within yourself are patience, kindness, and consideration for other people. Although machines and chemicals don't care whether you scream and curse at them, people do. Most successful managers know that the best way for their staff to learn and grow is through

experience, and that means taking chances and making errors. Give your staff the chance to try new skills or tasks. For those tasks where performance is critical, a great deal of supervision will be needed to identify and correct mistakes. With time, however, this investment can result in a well-trained and trusted employee to whom you can delegate.

### ***Outsourcing***

The practice of delegating work to vendors instead of staff employees is called outsourcing, and its popularity has grown tremendously in recent years. According to Dunn & Bradstreet Information Services, 40% of all small businesses outsource at least one function. Many pharmacy departments may think that (1) they are too small to need help, (2) they don't have enough work to keep an assistant busy, or (3) they are not able to afford to pay someone else to do some of their work. But, as pharmacists become busier and busier, it is important to focus pharmacists' activities to "reimbursable work" that earns a high hourly rate (e.g., dispensing, consulting, patient care). To do this, pharmacists need to free up time that is billed at a low rate or not reimbursed at all (e.g., third-party claims processing, filing, etc.). This is where outsourcing can be helpful.

Pharmacists make money for their pharmacy by thinking and producing. Everything else—compiling source materials, buying supplies, database management—is drain on pharmacist's time that could be spent on more productive work. Some or all of these activities could be outsourced to others. Businesses outsource many different kinds of tasks. To make a profit, you

have to pay the subcontractor less money than it would cost you to do the work yourself. Given their high degree of proficiency, subcontractors can accomplish these tasks in a much shorter time frame than you can, and thus can save both money and time. For example, attorneys are relatively expensive on a per hour basis. Attorneys, however, not only do a much better job in contracts and other tasks, but they also can do in one hour what would take pharmacy staff a half day or more.

### ***Outsourcing versus Adding Staff***

When you hire employees, they generally work on your premises using your pharmacy space, equipment, and supplies. You pay them a salary and often provide benefits such as sick days, vacation, and health insurance. When you outsource, you contract with an individual or small firm that provides the services you need on a fee-for-service basis. This fee can be a project fee but is often an hourly fee. Independent contractors typically work on their premises, using their office space, equipment, and supplies. You pay their invoice as you would pay a bill for any product or service.

Pharmacists working as the only pharmacist in the pharmacy often feel as if they must do everything themselves. Those pharmacists will probably never get everything done. Only by delegating or outsourcing to others will that pharmacist be able to go beyond his or her own limited personal effort and energy and make the most of every second of every day.

### **Managing Information Overload**

As outlined earlier, pharmacists in high-volume community pharmacy settings

are estimated to have an interaction with someone other than pharmacy staff at a rate of 1 every 3 minutes. Add to this the vast amount of information that a typical pharmacist needs to read and contemplate, and one can see how pharmacists are facing information overload. The concept of information overload is based on the assumption that there are finite limits to the ability of human beings to assimilate and process information during any given unit of time. Once these limits are surpassed, behavior tends to become confused and dysfunctional. Those who experience information overload can become confused, doubtful, overwhelmed, anxious, or even angry.

Individuals are more likely to experience information overload when time constraints are placed on them. Also, there appears to be an inverted, u-shaped relationship between information load and decision quality. That is, individuals with “too little” or “too much” information make poorer decisions than those with an amount of information that is of sufficient breadth and depth, but still manageable. Some research suggests that an individual who is experiencing information overload might pay attention to only a subset of the information that may be selected probabilistically, without much thought. In some contexts, individuals can select the most important information from the total, but in other contexts, useless or less relevant information can dilute the effects of more important information on judgments.

Because pharmacists are responsible for medication dispensing and use, they make important decisions many times each day, and there is no room for error

in pharmacy practice. With such a “zero-errors” goal, coupled with information overload that can be experienced by pharmacists, it is clear that managing information overload is a priority in time management. The key to managing information overload is to know how to “filter” and be selective in your information intake.

### ***Reduce Information Input***

One strategy for managing information overload is to reduce unnecessary information input. For your pharmacy practice, are there 1 or 2 reliable information sources upon which you can depend? Is there an on-line service that can provide reliable updates? If you find yourself using just a handful of trusted resources, you might consider canceling subscriptions to information sources that are redundant or not used. By doing this, you take away the temptation to consult resource upon resource in your decision-making. By being selective in your information resources, you can invest relatively large amounts of money into a small number of valuable resources, rather than investing relatively small amounts of money into a large number of mediocre resources.

### ***Don't Read—Scan***

For information that is not critical (e.g., much of our e-mail, newsletters, or mail), you can save time by scanning instead of reading without missing important information. For tips on how to do this, refer back to the section about how to increase your reading speed by 10%.

One may argue that pharmacists do not have the luxury to scan information because we need to make important medication dispensing and patient care

decisions based on the information available to us. Remember that, for most people, it is difficult to remember everything we read. It is more important to know where to find the information we need quickly and then to use our professional judgment to interpret the information in decision making. One excellent source of information is worth more than many mediocre sources combined.

### ***Improve Your Listening Skills***

Much of the information that pharmacists use for decision making comes through listening. Listening involves 4 basic steps: (1) hearing, (2) interpreting, (3) evaluating, and (4) responding. When it comes to listening, many of us are guilty of at least a few bad habits. As examples:

1. Instead of listening, do you think about what you are going to say next while the other person is still talking?
2. Are you easily distracted by the speaker's mannerisms or by what is going on around you?
3. Do you frequently interrupt people before they have finished talking?
4. Do you drift off into daydreams because you think you know what the speaker is going to say?

All of these habits can hinder our listening ability. Listening is not a passive activity. It requires full concentration and active involvement. Through good listening, it is easier to “filter” and be selective in your information intake. Thus, by being a better listener, a pharmacist can actually decrease information overload, since the information received through listening

will be more accurate, clear, and relevant to the decision at hand. Learning how to be an active rather than a passive or a distracted listener can greatly improve time management for pharmacists. The following tips offered in Bly's book can help you become a better listener:

1. Don't talk; listen. If you interrupt the speaker, the speaker will get the impression that you are not interested in what s/he is saying. This will result in poor information from the speaker.
2. Don't jump to conclusions. Many people tune out a speaker when they think they have the gist of the conversation or know what the speaker is trying to say next. Although some dispensing or patient care situations can become repetitive and routine, remember that each person is unique and might provide important information if you don't jump to preconceived conclusions.
3. Listen between the lines. Concentrate on what is not being said as well as what is being said. Clues to meaning can be gained from the speaker's tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures.
4. Ask questions. It is useful to repeat what you hear back to the speaker through questions such as "Did I understand you to say . . . ?" or "Do you mean . . . ?" Don't let the environment distract you or allow yourself to be

distracted by the speaker's appearance, accent, mannerisms, or word use. It is sometimes difficult to overlook characteristics of the speaker or distractions in the pharmacy. But paying too much attention to these distractions can make you miss important parts of the conversation. Try to position yourself away from commotion in the pharmacy or go to a private consultation area. Also, make eye contact with the speaker to help you focus on the message and not the environment.

5. Take advantage of your brainpower. You can think approximately 4 times faster than the speaker can talk. So, when you are listening, use this time to evaluate what has been said and summarize the central ideas in your own mind. Be sure to stay focused on the speaker's agenda, not your own. By doing this you can obtain accurate and useful information for decision making without being overloaded by the many other things that might be going on in the pharmacy at that time.
6. Provide feedback. Show the speaker that you understand through eye contact, nodding your head that you understand, maintaining an upright posture, and interjecting an occasional comment such as "I see" or "tell me more."

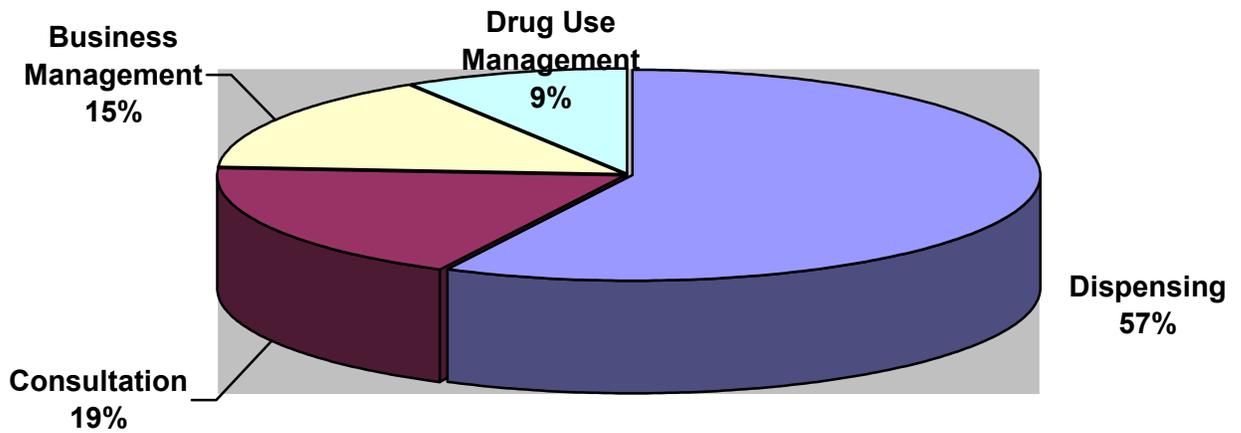
In summary, information overload can be managed by learning how to collect the most pertinent information for decision making, while at the same time filtering out information that is inaccurate, unnecessary, or redundant. This can be accomplished by reducing unnecessary information input, by learning to scan information, and by improving listening skills so that only accurate and relevant information is collected in our decision-making process.

### **Summary**

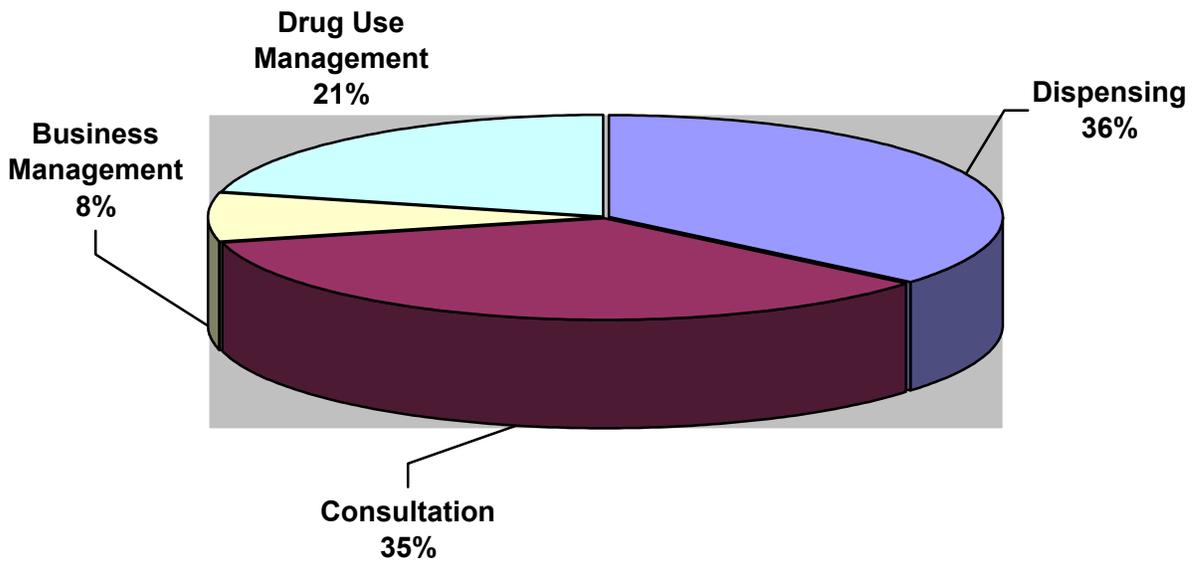
As more pharmacists develop pharmaceutical care practices that require the establishment of a therapeutic relationship with the patient, an assessment, a care plan, an evaluation, continuous follow-up, and documentation of these services, proper time management will be important for the success of such practices. Time is not something that can be stored or saved. It is, however, something in which we can invest. The commonsense approaches to time management that are outlined in this article can help pharmacists to invest their time wisely and to help “make every second count” as they make the transition into the next phases of pharmacy practice.

**Figure 1**  
**Proportion of Community**  
**Pharmacists' Time Spent in**  
**Professional Activities**

Time Spent



Time Pharmacists Would Like to Spend



**Figure 2**  
**Time Management Ideas Covered in  
this Article**

Changing Work Habits to Increase  
Productivity

- To-do Lists
- Overcome Procrastination
- Eliminate Time Wasters
- Design a Productive Workspace

Increasing Personal Efficiency

- The Power of 10% More
- Increase Efficiency by 10%
- Gain 10% More Energy
- Increase Reading Speed by 10%

Evaluating Technologies that Could  
Save Time

- Control your E-mail Volume
- Increase Telephone Productivity
- Wireless Communication

Delegating and Outsourcing

- Delegating
- Outsourcing
- Outsourcing versus Adding Staff

Managing Information Overload

- Reduce Information Input
- Don't Read—Scan
- Improve Your Listening Skills

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