



for Young
Researchers

Time Management Skills

TIPs for a More Fulfilling Research Career



TRiSTAR

Top Runners in Strategy
of Transborder Advanced Researches

About This Booklet

For researchers, the early years are extremely important for building achievements and establishing careers. At the same time, this period tends to be busy with personal life events, making it difficult for young researchers to balance their time. Many often struggle with time management. This booklet introduces practical time management TIPS shared through the Researcher Well-Being Workshop held as part of the TRiSTAR Program. The aim is to provide young researchers who share similar concerns with ideas to help them pave a more balanced research career.



MESSAGE

I once read something about time management in a book that made a lasting impression on me. It was a lecture titled “Big Rocks and Little Rocks.”

“Here is a bucket full of big rocks.”

“Everyone, is this full?”

“No, it’s not,” says the Professor, adding little pebbles in the gaps between the big rocks.

“Everyone, is this really full?”

“No, it’s not,” says the Professor, adding sand in the gaps between the little pebbles.

So, what is the moral of the story? It is certainly not that, even if you think your schedule is full, you still in fact have time and should find more to add to it. Instead, the moral of the story is, if you reverse the order and start with the sand, the big rocks will never fit. The big rocks represent important things that are worth spending time on. In

other words, fill your time with the important things first.

There may be more than one big rock in your life. Lifelong dreams, goals, family, health, and so on are big rocks. As a researcher, sometimes you want to spend large chunks of time on the big rock representing research. I would go back to the university after dinner for my research. When riding the Shinkansen on business trips, I would purposely take a non-reserved seat on the Kodama instead of using the Nozomi to make time. And when going on overseas business trips, I would use my time spent waiting for the flight as well as my time on the plane.

When it comes to time management, it is very important to be aware of what the big rocks are for you. Life offers a finite amount of time, so the ability to spend more time doing what you think is really important is what enriches life.



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Time Management TIPS

CASE ①	I Need Time to Focus	3
CASE ②	I Need to Manage My Tasks and Schedule More Effectively	6
CASE ③	I Need a More Efficient Way to Handle Miscellaneous Tasks	8
CASE ④	I Need to Stay Focused Longer	9
CASE ⑤	Be Considerate of Others' Time	11

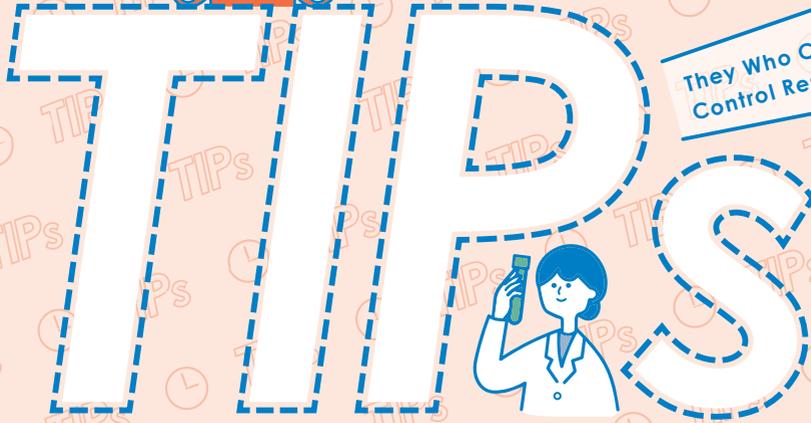
ADVICE Let's Take a Look at Senior Researchers' Time Management Skills!

Senior Researcher Time Management Skills 1	
Prof. Kentaro Shiraki	12
Senior Researcher Time Management Skills 2	
Prof. Asako Nakamura	13
Senior Researcher Time Management Skills 3	
Prof. Masako Ishii-Kuntz	14

Time Management



They Who Control Time
Control Research!



CASE 1

I Need Time to Focus



Close Unnecessary Apps

01

Eliminating distractions is essential for staying focused. Email and messaging apps can help you keep in touch, but constant notifications interrupt your thoughts. You might also find yourself browsing unrelated topics when you try to search for something in your browser. When you need to concentrate, temporarily close these apps or disconnect from the internet. You may initially worry about missing messages, but most things can wait. As a ritual to ease your mind into deep-thinking mode, try turning off notifications or going offline. Create an environment that helps you truly focus.



Come Early in the Morning

02

Morning is often considered the best time for deep focus and thoughtful work. By coming in a little earlier, you can spend your time in a quiet lab or office with few distractions. If you can start your day calmly — when your mind is at its sharpest — you can work more efficiently throughout the day. Even if you are not a morning person or believe you concentrate better at night, give it a try. You might be surprised how fulfilling your day becomes.



Block Your Schedule Ahead of Time

03

When you are busy, it is easy to get swept up in immediate tasks and postpone the work you really need to do. Instead, protect time in your schedule in advance for important work you need to focus on. If you leave it for your spare time, you may end up with no time at all — or be too tired to do it. In that case, reserve dedicated “Focus Time” on your calendar to make it harder for other meetings or tasks to fill that space. You should protect your own time before many unimportant tasks steal it. Building the habit of intentionally protecting your time is especially helpful when you have an upcoming project or a topic that requires deep thought.

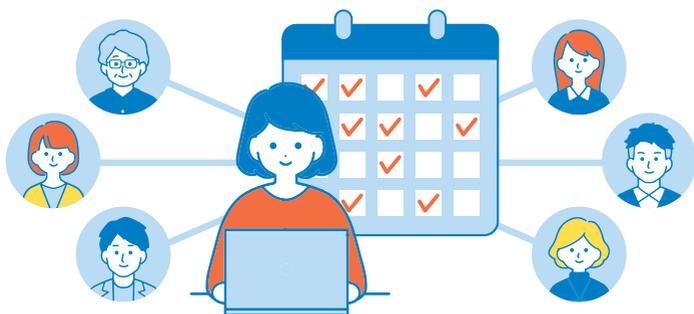




Share Your Schedule

04

Setting aside time to focus is meaningless if other people make plans during that time. One way to prevent this from happening is to share your schedule in advance. By clearly indicating where meetings can be held and where no work should be done, it becomes easier for others involved to adjust their schedules. Using an online calendar, in particular, can help make your availability clear at a glance and reduce unnecessary back-and-forth to coordinate schedules. By showing your own rules, you communicate to those around you that a given time is for focusing on research. This ultimately will lead to an environment where you can immerse yourself in your research with peace of mind.



Take Advantage of Time Alone

05

You can use your time alone to think deeply or focus on your work. For example, when taking the Shinkansen or an airplane while on a business trip, or when traveling on a commuter train, there is little external interference, making these environments well-suited for concentration. While it is easy to get distracted by people coming in and out of the office and chitchat, it is surprising how much work you can get done by changing locations. This is true whether it is a library, a cafe, or even a park bench. The important thing is to change your mindset and say, "I am here to focus on my research." Forcing yourself to change environments can help improve the quality and duration of your focus.

CASE 2

I Need to Manage My Tasks and Schedule More Effectively



Create a Task List in Advance

06

When busy with your day-to-day research and work, the time you spend thinking of where to start on any given day is often a waste. The solution is to create a task list in advance. An effective habit is to itemize the next day's tasks the night before, or organize the week's major tasks at the beginning of the week. Not only does it help you get to work first thing in the morning, it also makes it easier to prioritize and review your progress. Keeping a list of minor tasks will also give you a sense of accomplishment and help you stay motivated. Writing out plans on paper or digitally, rather than keeping them in your head, is the first step to effective time management.



Utilize Your Computer Desktop

07

A simple way to make your day-to-day work easier is to organize your desktop into folders like “In Progress” and “Completed.” When your files are sorted by task, it's much easier to see where you're at and avoid forgetting anything. You can also use a task-management-style wallpaper to keep things visually organized. Wallpapers with color-coded areas or shelf-like sections make it easy to place files by priority or category, so your desktop stays neat without much effort. This cuts down on the time you spend hunting for files and helps you work more smoothly. And as your desktop gets more organized, your thoughts do too — making it easier to decide what to tackle first and ultimately boosting your overall performance.



When There is Some Leeway in Your Schedule

08

When your schedule has some extra time, it's the perfect time to anticipate potential "unexpected tasks." Identify in advance the kinds of urgent requests you might receive — for example, sudden tasks from your lab supervisor or the administrative office, or last-minute consultations from students. Preparing for this kind of "predictable uncertainty" allows you to respond more flexibly when unexpected work arises. Leaving some buffer in your schedule also helps you stay calm when plans change suddenly, enabling you to meet deadlines while maintaining the quality of your work. This buffer isn't just about having free time; it functions as a "cushion" that ensures you can secure stable, uninterrupted time for your research.



Group Tasks

09

Grouping related tasks and handling them together can significantly improve your productivity. For example, replying to emails and working on documents in one block reduces the load on the brain and helps you stay better focused.



Use a Game-Like Approach

10

With tasks piling up, sometimes it can feel like there is no end in sight. If that is the case, try to find ways to make the tasks more enjoyable. For example, you can write tasks down on paper or in an app, and then erase them at once when they have been completed. This alone creates a sense of accomplishment, with a sense of exhilaration like you have just successfully completed a level in a game. It is also effective to add tricks such as keeping track of the number of achievements and the number of consecutive days with achievements so that you can work to reach a new personal best. Other effective ideas include small rewards for each achievement, and creating a chart to visualize your progress. By incorporating these game-like approaches, you can increase your motivation and reduce the stress associated with managing and completing tasks.

CASE 3

I Need a More Efficient Way to Handle Miscellaneous Tasks



Clarify Meeting Times and Goals

11

In day-to-day work, it is not uncommon for meetings to run longer than planned, resulting in less time for other tasks. Meetings, in particular, tend to be a major source of inefficiency especially during periods when a variety of other tasks are moving forward simultaneously. It is therefore a good idea to clearly agree what needs to be decided by what time before a given meeting starts. Simply clarifying the time limits and goals will make the discussions less likely to wander, keeping everyone's attention focused on the matter at hand. In certain cases, some people use slightly unconventional or strict measures, such as turning off the lights or automatically ending the online meeting when the time limit is reached. By incorporating ideas like these, you can create an environment where meetings are concluded smoothly and the remaining time can be used effectively for other tasks.



Use Generative AI Wisely

12

Generative AI is useful as a supplementary tool to improve the quality and speed of work. You can save time and effort by using it for routine tasks, such as drafting fixed phrases and emails, summarizing minutes, generating ideas, and organizing data. However, it is essential to examine the AI's response with a proper understanding of the risks of generative AI, such as whether it contains confidential information or unpublished ideas. In addition, AI may generate hallucinations (information that is not factual), and therefore, important decisions and texts for external communications require human review. Use generative AI wisely and effectively.





Rely on Others

13

Day-to-day work consists of delicate and complex tasks. For example, processing payment for academic conference fees can be time-consuming, and purchasing items involves several steps, such as receiving delivery and inspecting the items. These tasks may pile up and prevent you from focusing on the work you should be doing. At first, it is important to separate the work only you can do from tasks others can handle. If possible, delegate tasks to a suitable person based on the nature of the tasks and the person's strengths. Deciding not to take on too much yourself and handing it to others you trust, or even hiring someone to handle the work, will bring about your mental ease. Along with using tools like generative AI, relying on others will improve operational efficiency. Additionally, do not forget to thank them when they help you.

CASE 4

I Need to Stay Focused Longer



Attention Residue

14

When switching between multiple tasks, you may sometimes find it difficult to concentrate on the next one. This phenomenon is called “attention residue,” and it causes information and thoughts about the task you were just working on to stick in your head, reducing your ability to focus on a new task. Attention residue occurs unconsciously, making it difficult to recognize. However, just knowing how it works can give you a chance to find ways to stay focused and recover. For example, incorporating habits to reset your mind such as clearing your head with notes before switching tasks, or taking a short break to stretch or take deep breaths is recommended. Creating a conscious routine for switching tasks will help you move on to the next task more smoothly, which will also lead to improved overall work efficiency.



Create a Positive Work Environment

15

Your environment influences your motivation. Laying out your favorite items, playing your favorite music, and bringing a mug of coffee — such tricks can lift your spirits and put you in a mind ready to work. It is also a good idea to work at your favorite café or a quiet place for a change. Establishing a routine that motivates you may help you focus on work. Create a positive work environment that motivates you the most.



Take a Break

16

It is difficult to stay focused for extended periods of time. If you have an upcoming deadline but cannot stay focused, try taking a break from your work. Eye exercises, stretching, and getting up and walking around are all good ideas. Setting a time to focus in advance and making a rule that you will take a break once that time is reached is also a good idea. Refreshing yourself in meaningful ways also increases the efficiency of research. It is also recommended that you take a walk nearby or take a nap during your lunch break. And if you do not feel well, go home early. Never overdo it.



CASE 6

Be Considerate of Others' Time



Consider the When of Your Inquiries and Consultations

17

When you want to inquire or consult about administrative processes, for example, do you make phone calls just before or after the scheduled job end time? There may be no way around it if something is urgent, but if it is not, simply saying something like, "If you can let me know once you have time," will make the other party feel better. Do your best to consult or make requests as early as possible so that the other party has time to respond. This kind of consideration helps facilitate cooperation throughout the workplace.



Be Considerate When Sending Emails and Messages

18

Email and chat are indispensable communication tools now for work. However, checking and responding to emails can take up a lot of time. Creating response templates in advance and using the scheduled email feature for meeting reminders are good ways to make better use of your time. Many people also take steps such as labeling emails that require a quick reply as urgent or indicating the level of urgency in the subject line. But it is a good idea to be considerate of the other party even if a response is not needed urgently. For example, you can make it easier for the recipient to respond by attaching a label that says, "OK to open tomorrow," to the subject line or adding "When you have time" in the body of the email.

Prof. **Kentaro Shiraki****Q1** What kind of work are you involved in now?

A major role of mine is to provide research guidance in the lab. I currently work with just under twenty students, including three in the doctoral program for working adults. Research topics include about five Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research projects and collaborative research projects each year, and another five industry-academia collaboration with companies and academic guidance projects. In addition to this, I devote time to activities slightly outside of research. For example, I have been writing high school biology textbooks and writing a serial in the magazine *Chemistry Today* for nearly twenty years. I am often asked to give lectures—sometimes more than 30 times a year. Right now, I serve as the program leader for the Bachelor's Program in Interdisciplinary Engineering, but since being promoted to Professor, I have continued to hold responsibilities related to the management of university organizations, including as the department chair. This means the proportion of administrative work that I do has increased even further.

Q2 In general, how do you manage to create time for research within this busy schedule of yours?

Like most university faculty, ensuring I have time for research is always a challenge. It is more a matter of mindset than of time itself. Especially since becoming a professor, I have been able to maintain a stable mindset by accepting the fact that weekday daytime hours are basically for administrative work and lecture preparation. I am lucky if I have a day when I do not have a meeting or anything else that takes up time, but I try to accept not being able to do research as normal. Writing papers and manuscripts is something I enjoy, so I like to do this work not only on weekdays but also on my days off. I feel a great sense of fulfillment when I can write with a cup of coffee in one hand as well as walk through the deserted campus.

Q3 When you were younger, did you struggle with time management or learn any specific skills to help with this?

In contrast to the today's focus on cost-effectiveness, in the Showa era, I learned to do as much as necessary. So, when I was younger, I relied on my physical stamina rather than my ingenuity. The idea was, the real challenge only begins after fatigue sets in; small tasks could be finished with the energy left over from bigger ones. Looking back, when I was in my 30s, I think I developed my mental stability by doing huge amounts of work that depended on my physical stamina. On the other hand, young researchers today prioritize family and child-rearing in addition to research, achieving results while maintaining a good balance. From my point of view, this is a superhero-like feat, and I aim to support these young researchers who work so hard every day.

**Prof. Kentaro Shiraki**

Professor, Institute of Pure and Applied Sciences, University of Tsukuba
Area(s) of expertise: Protein solution chemistry, phase separation biology

Prof. Asako Nakamura

Q1 What kind of work are you involved in now?

As the vice president, I am in charge of admissions. In more specific terms, our admission team members are in charge of coordinating between high schools and the university and the administration of entrance exams. We are working to create a system that takes into account connections with university curricula. In tasks such as those involving entrance exams, fairness and impartiality take priority over efficiency, so it can be difficult in all honesty to gain an understanding from others regarding this balance. Coordinating the demands of each department, in particular, is not easy. I am constantly trying to find ways to reconcile the policies of the university as a whole with the opinions of people on the ground. A portion of my work also relates to social cooperation, an area where I worked until 2023.

As a researcher, I currently lead fourteen students, four of whom are doctoral students. As my roles at the university have increased, I have less and less time for my own research. But I try my best to run my lab so we can achieve good outcomes.

Q2 In general, how do you manage to create time for research within this busy schedule of yours?

It may depend on one's definition of "time for research," but in my case, the key is how I built the team. There are three teams in my lab, and each holds its own daily discussions. I keep an eye on the lab as a whole, checking progress on a weekly basis and reading and commenting on the progress reports submitted every Monday. By doing this, I am able to grasp the direction of the research being performed even when I have limited time. I am always thinking about research topics and ideas. When I write a paper or an application, I always gather information in my head, think of a plan, and when the time is right, I write it all out in one go. On the other hand, once I get this down, I try to do something completely different, such as going to a concert, traveling, or going out for drinks on the weekend. By creating clear distinctions, I devise ways to use my time and brain in ways that will enable me to achieve results more efficiently.

Q3 When you were younger, did you struggle with time management or learn any specific skills to help with this?

Personality-wise, I am more of an overnight crammer, but I work to always keep the information I need organized and visualize it in my head so I can retrieve it in a pinch. I like using paper for notes, so I write out tasks and check them off when I am done. This is a habit I started when I began having to handle numerous things at the same time. I hate wasting time to find certain documents that should be there the most, but even now I sometimes end up wondering in what paper certain data was listed (laughs). Another thing I make sure to keep in mind is to be able to get back to work immediately after a long break, such as a long business trip or vacation. When I was studying abroad in the US, I made the habit of clarifying tasks in advance so that I could resume my research immediately after a long vacation without having to take time to review the rest of my research.

Prof. Asako Nakamura

Vice President (Head of Admission) and Director of the Admission Center, Ibaraki University

Professor, Faculty of Basic Natural Science Domain of Biological Sciences

Area(s) of expertise: Cell Biology, Radiation/Chemical Substance Influence Science

Prof. Masako Ishii-Kuntz

Q1 What kind of work are you involved in now?

I am in charge of promoting international exchanges and diversity. With international exchanges, I am currently focused on exchanges with universities in India, and am working toward my university's international expansion. This includes applying for competitive funding to strengthen the university's international capabilities. Diversity Promotion was renamed from "Gender Equality" in April 2025. Our university prides itself on being the most advanced in gender studies and education in Japan. We are committed to widely disseminating the outstanding research done here, further enhancing our research capabilities, and nurturing young researchers. We also operate the University Management Visionary Development Project, in which other universities also participate, with the aim of nurturing female researchers who are interested in university management in the future. In joint research with companies, we are developing AI technologies and more that can help ensure diversity at the hiring stage.

Q2 In general, how do you manage to create time for research within this busy schedule of yours?

When I was a professor, I was able to coordinate my own schedule, so I feel busier now in my current role as trustee and vice president. However, as one's work-life balance changes depending on where one is in life, I think it is important to plan from a medium- to long-term perspective while still cherishing your current lifestyle. At American universities, where it is difficult to be promoted unless you spend time on research, I found it to be very difficult for me to balance my work with raising my children.

In addition to support from my spouse, I also researched childcare support systems and reliable daycare centers myself, actually visiting many of them myself. I get stressed when research and parenting mean I do not have much time for myself. It is important to first take action yourself, visit daycare centers and parenting consultation groups, and talk to people in the same situation or with parenting experience to gather information. Actively seeking support from those around you is critical.

Q3 When you were younger, did you struggle with time management or learn any specific skills to help with this?

I was busy raising my children and doing research and teaching, so I had less time for myself. It felt that my world had become smaller. This ties in with the previous question, but being good at asking for things in order to gain support from those around you and overcome a situation is a skill that I may have acquired while raising my children. I think you have to try to find time for yourself to rest. It is important for one to take action instead of waiting for someone to invite you to do so.



✉ Finally, a Message to Young Researchers

Young researchers are busy raising children and doing research and teaching. There are so many things one has to worry about. Raising children is also a time for the parents to grow with their children. Children are only little for a short time, so it is important to enjoy this time together with their worries and joys in a positive way.

Prof. Masako Ishii-Kuntz

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TRiSTAR

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