

Managing Multiple Projects, or

the Art of Juggling

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Professional Perspectives — Tools and Techniques of the Trade. *The Professional Development Committee encourages members to continue to explore topics after presentations at the local, regional, and national levels. We welcome your comments and article suggestions. Please contact Mary A. Hotchkiss at 206/553-4475 or hotchma@u.washington.edu.*

Juggling, as a 1990s metaphor, comes to stand for the attempt to attain a state of dynamic equilibrium in which several ongoing commitments are kept in balance through constant effort.

—Arthur Chandler, Professor of Humanities at San Francisco State University.

As the number of tasks librarians juggle each day grows, and as I continue to juggle three part-time jobs, I find myself thinking about the performance artists who juggle actual objects. What can we learn about project management from the art of juggling? Is the key to focus on one object at a time or on what's in your hand at any given moment? What's the balance between catching and throwing? How do you develop the fluid motion that marks you as a master juggler? How do you minimize the number of dropped objects? Being a librarian, I set out to do some research.

The American Heritage Dictionary, 3d ed. defines *juggle* as

1. To keep (two or more objects) in the air at the same time by alternately tossing and catching them.
2. To have difficulty holding; balance insecurely;
3. To keep (more than two activities, for example) in motion or progress at the same time;
4. To manipulate in order to deceive.

As librarians we are called on to accomplish the seemingly impossible each day: to juggle reference questions, phone calls, book orders, automation deadlines, budget proposals, committee work, and more.

By its simplest definition, juggling means more objects than hands. So, juggling can provide a fitting metaphor for life; we challenge ourselves by taking on slightly more than we think we can handle.

I visited the Juggling Information Service Web page (<http://www.juggling.org>) to learn more about the art of juggling. The consensus is that what juggling boils down to is focus, balance, and timing. The popular publication *Juggling for the Complete Klutz*, 4th ed., assures readers that basic moves can be mastered in a relatively short period of time. The first key to learning to juggle is learning how to make graceful mistakes. No one learns to juggle without dropping objects—a lot! Trial and error is part of the learning process. Juggling takes constant practice. The second key is to stop thinking about catches and concentrate only on throws and timing of throws. It's much easier to learn to juggle first one object, then two, and then three objects. The third key is training yourself to watch the whole pattern while paying attention to each individual object. As your confidence grows, you can take on larger challenges such as juggling with a partner, juggling behind the back, juggling with one hand, or juggling with unfamiliar objects. These larger challenges should be broken down into a series of smaller components that can be learned with more practice. And while practice won't guarantee perfection, practice does lead to success. The more I read about juggling, the more parallels I saw to managing multiple projects. Like jugglers, we librarians hone our skills through



practice. We gain confidence and depth through practice. And focus, balance, and timing are definitely key skills to our professional survival. Even more parallels are explored in *Lessons from the Art of Juggling: How to Achieve Your Full Potential in Business, Learning, and Life* (Michael Gelb and Tony Buzan).

As librarians we are called on to accomplish the seemingly impossible each day: to juggle reference questions, phone calls, book orders, automation deadlines, budget proposals, committee work, and more. Some days we may feel like we're not juggling books or patrons or dollars but unwieldy clubs, knives, or even flaming torches! While we are generally successful in meeting deadlines, responding to inquiries, dealing with constant interruptions, and moving mountains of paperwork, many of us also feel overwhelmed by the quantity and complexity of our jobs.

Many of us have been to workshops and sessions on time management, clutter management, and stress management.

A Desktop Learning Opportunity

Or we've seen our share of the enticing brochures: "Learn to Manage Your Time, Tasks, and Priorities!", "Take Control of Your Day!", "Manage Conflicting Demands!" Those of us who attend these sessions leave with a sense of renewed hope and mission. We set up new filing systems, start activity logs to track our use of time, buy new calendar systems, look into purchasing management software... and yet within days, the feeling of being overwhelmed returns and we revert to old patterns.

Does the art of juggling provide the answer, the magic solution? No, unfortunately there is no universal answer or solution. But juggling can teach us valuable life lessons about multi-tasking, organization, and efficient use of time. And these lessons can be combined with the core techniques I've culled from years of attending workshops, reading motivational articles, and juggling overlapping jobs. Most of these techniques are amplified in Wes Cochran's excellent book, *Time Management Handbook for Librarians*.

These techniques are not revolutionary; much of this is common sense. In school or work settings, we have been exposed to many of these suggestions. So why aren't we all on top of our workload then?! Because project management (and time management or clutter management) is a process that requires constant revision and revising as our lives grow more complex. And as with flossing, we need regular reminders.

First and foremost, you must have a systematic way of noting and tracking projects or assignments. If your current "system" is scraps of paper, piles of files, or all in your head, rethink your system. Recognize that no one system is perfect but *any* system is better than "random"—i.e., scraps of paper, piles of files, or all in your head. Personally, I'm a great fan of two simple tools: file folders and a legal pad. I keep papers related to a particular project in a folder with pockets and I use the legal pad to note project parameters and deadlines, and to keep a running task list. Bottom line: develop a system that works for you. This is an organizational must!

Other core techniques commonly cited in management literature include:

1. Set aside some planning time every day. Use the time to develop a daily plan of action. Planning is an up-front investment in success.
2. When projects are assigned, get an estimate on how much time you are expected to invest in the project. Also establish the interim and final deadlines.
3. Work backwards from the deadlines. Figure out your personal comfort zone and add an extra 24 hours whenever possible.
4. Batch similar tasks and tackle them together.
5. Protect your time. Many articles on time management suggest allocating certain times to return calls, read e-mail, etc. Combine routine tasks. Also consider sorting your e-mail by author or by subject to reduce skimming time.

Part of learning and expanding your repertoire of skills should include the expectation that occasionally things will be dropped. Learn how to make graceful mistakes. For the most part, we need to remember that our transactions are not usually a matter of life and death.

6. Use one master calendar for both work and personal appointments.
7. Start carrying a small intake notebook and write things down. We're all getting older and our memories are overwhelmed with things to remember.
8. Document your successes! Focus on results, not on being busy.

We need to recognize that our work responsibilities are increasingly complex. At times we seem to have taken on more than we think we can handle. When

you're worried about "dropping the ball," think about the metaphor of juggling. Part of learning and expanding your repertoire of skills should include the expectation that occasionally things will be dropped. Learn how to make graceful mistakes. For the most part, we need to remember that our transactions are not usually a matter of life and death.

Yes, the number of tasks librarians juggle grows each day. As law librarians, we continue to attempt "to attain a state of dynamic equilibrium in which several ongoing commitments are kept in balance through constant effort." As professionals, we are capable of great things. Our potential as learners is unlimited and improves with practice. Attitude is everything. I've juggled balls, clubs, and rings. Sure, I'm ready for the flaming torches. My newest mantra? If pressure makes diamonds out of coal, I'm getting ready to sparkle.

Resources:

John Cassidy, B. C. Rimbeaux, and Diane Waller, *Juggling for the Complete Klutz*, 4th ed. (Palo Alto, CA : Klutz Press, 1994).

J. Wesley Cochran, *Time Management Handbook for Librarians* (New York: Greenwood, 1992).

Michael Gelb and Tony Buzan, *Lessons from the Art of Juggling: How to Achieve Your Full Potential in Business, Learning, and Life* (New York: Harmony Books, 1994).

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Joan Howland, "Effective time management: work smarter, not harder." *Trends* 1:8 p 2-6 Apr '88.

Nofsinger, Mary M., "Time management skills: a checklist." *College & Research Libraries News* 57:10 p 648-650 (Nov. '96).

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