Planning for Professional Productivity with Bullet Journals

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Abstract

This column outlines the Bullet Journal method of tracking tasks, events, and notes. It includes information about how the method works, how the method has been useful for the author, and what other librarians say about its effectiveness.

Keywords: *bullet journals, time management, productivity*

Introduction

The desire to tame the "to do" list and get more done is a common one. Books about productivity and time management abound, as do smartphone and web apps. Planners come in many shapes and sizes. No one tool will work for everyone, but one popular method, bullet journaling, has found its devotees in the library world.

The Bullet Journal Method

The Bullet Journal Method was created by Ryder Carroll, a digital product designer, who dubbed it "the analog system for the digital age." The system's name comes from the use of bullets and other symbols to demark tasks, events, and notes. The framework is simple and low-tech – all it requires is a notebook and a writing implement. It is also highly customizable.

To set up a bullet journal, number all the pages of a blank notebook in the bottom right hand corner. The first few pages of the notebook will be set aside as the index and the rest are available for topics. You will use bullets and other symbols to organize tasks, events, and notes, which are entered quickly and objectively.

The "•" symbol denotes a task, "°" an event, and "–" a note. Covering the bullet with an "X" indicates that a task is done, while crossing it out indicates it was cancelled or discarded. Tasks that are not completed on a particular day receive a ">" indicating that it was moved to a future date.

The body of the journal consists of several modules, which can easily be expanded to suit the user's needs. The first module is the index, which occupies the first page(s) of the journal. It lists the topic and the page number it is noted on. The future log is a calendar for the year with major events or priorities for that year noted. The monthly log begins each month. The user writes the name of the month at the top and the days of the month in a column on the left. Brief notes about tasks or events

go adjacent to the date. The daily log consists of tasks for a particular day, noted using the symbols outlined above. Topic pages are devoted to a particular focus, for example, notes from a particular meeting or about an ongoing project.

Saying Goodbye to the Post-Its

Like many people, I've been on the search for a way to stay organized for a long time. In addition to Google Calendar, I tried a variety of smartphone and web apps like Remember the Milk, Trello, Asana, and Evernote, but I kept reverting to the old standby – Post-It notes stuck to my three computer monitors and scribbled to do lists on miscellaneous pieces of paper. After accidentally losing notes one time too many, I knew I had to try something else so I asked some of the most productive people I know. To my surprise, the answer I got was surprisingly low tech.

I use a 96 page dotted 5" x 8" notebook, which typically lasts me about four months. After numbering all the pages, I devote the first page as an index and then create my future log. (For my first few journals, I did the full year, but when I begin the next one I plan to switch to a semester system.) Following that, I have a few topic pages that list recurring tasks I need to perform each week or month, then the monthly log for the appropriate month. After that I move into weekly/daily logs and interspersed topic pages with notes from meetings, longer term to-do lists, etc. The page numbers for all of these are added to the index so I can find them easily later.

While Ryder Carroll recommends not doing daily logs in advance, I find it useful to have my week laid out before me. Each Friday, I spend about 15 minutes setting up the next week (and month, when required), which helps me close down the work week successfully. Knowing that I have my Monday laid out for me reduces any back to work jitters I might have the next week. I also enjoy taking

this brief, mindful break in the week as an opportunity for a little creativity with how I lay out the next week, so I use colorful pens and stickers to add a bit of humor.

Why and How It Has Worked

Why does it work for me? The rapid nature of adding tasks strips the moment of emotion, so I don't get caught up in dreading an unpleasant task. I get a sense of satisfaction from putting an X over the bullet for a task when it's completed, and knocking out several smaller tasks at the start of a day – particularly one I'm dragging on a bit – sets me up with momentum for larger projects. Having the log of what I've done makes writing annual reports much easier and make future projects less daunting since I can see how I worked through previous work hurdles.

Stephanie Ard, Social Sciences Librarian at the Marx Library at the University of South Alabama says, "I find bullet journaling useful for several reasons. Writing down tasks makes them tangible and distinct, rather than a stressful whirl of ideas, so I can focus on them one at a time. Bullet journaling allows me to identify what is most important for accomplishing my daily, weekly, and semesterly goals, rather than being distracted by minute and never-ending tasks, such as answering emails. Also, the layout and limited space of my bullet journal forces me to remain realistic about what I can accomplish in a certain period of time. Before I used a bullet journal, I would often make an impossibly long to-do list, only to feel disappointed and frustrated when I could not finish everything. Finally, having a paper planner allows me physically to mark my completed tasks, as well as flip through previous pages to review the work I've completed, cultivating a cumulative sense of accomplishment."

Another librarian writes, "The most helpful thing I found was a new way to approach my weekly to do list. I started using a two-page spread with a section for each day of the week, and one for next

week. When I set up the week's list, I assign items to the best day for them, either based on deadlines or my meeting schedule. It's much easier to manage than a big unorganized list."

Having the past journals also helps me identify where my time has gone, as well as provides insight into dead zones in my week. I've noticed that Thursdays are not as productive for me, and have learned not to schedule deep work for them if I can help it. Instead, I save tasks that need to get done but that don't require a lot of complex thought for then, which frees up more time for deep thought on days that I do tend to be more productive. Since the journal is portable I can unobtrusively add tasks as they come up in meetings without needing to take out my phone or computer, though I am still a devoted Google Calendar user.

With my bullet journal, I am empowered to work towards my professional goals and reflect on benchmarks I've already met. I have seen a noticeable increase in my professional accomplishments, and stress related to feeling unorganized has decreased greatly. No method will work for everyone, but for those struggling with staying organized and on task, the bullet journal may be worth a try.

References

Bullet Journal. (2018). Retrieved from http://bulletjournal.com/