



BY JARROD SHAPIRO, DPM

Organizing with Time Buffers to Better Manage Your Schedule

Planning ahead reduces stress and improves life.

Practice Perfect is a continuing every-issue column in which Dr. Shapiro offers his unique personal perspective on the ins and outs of running a podiatric practice.

There is an interesting and informative book named *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* by Greg McKeown. This is a book in the self-help realm that advocates simplifying one's life to focus on the things that are most important. It is a fast read and highly recommended. Of the many recommendations he makes, one is of particular interest. His discussion regarding the use of buffers is particularly topical to those of us in the medical profession living very busy lives. Simply put, McKeown advocates for the use of scheduled additional time to help organize our lives. The idea is that in busy lives that are highly difficult to predict, it would be most helpful to maintain a buffer of extra time for those important things in our lives.

This is a very successful—and old—organizational method, and you wonder why you don't see signs of its use more often. Let's take a quick example from the resident education world. Put yourself in the place of a second-year podiatry resident who has assigned surgical cases coming up in a few days.

Most good residents will prepare for their cases at some point ahead of the actual surgery. But ask yourself: would you study for the case the night before or several days ahead? Most residents prepare the night before. But what if something happened that prevents that resident from taking the proper amount of time to prepare the night before the case? The stress level will likely rise accordingly, and they will be less prepared the following day, with a subsequent decline in performance.

On the other hand, what if that same resident began preparing for their cases immediately upon receiving the assignment? You can imagine that many programs assign their residents their elective surgery schedule about a week or so ahead. Starting early will provide a *buffer* that allows enough leisure time to think and prepare carefully



for those upcoming surgeries, while also decreasing stress if something unexpected comes up.

Extreme Preparation

This is the essence of McKeown's message, which he calls "extreme preparation." You can call it a good idea.

There was once a colleague who always seemed to arrive for meetings either just on time or a few minutes late. He never allotted enough time to arrive early. When asked about this practice, he stated enjoying the rush of last-minute preparations. If you are like this person, then this piece is not for you!

Similarly, there was a medical assistant who was repeatedly tardy to work. One typical excuse given was being stuck behind a local train while it was crossing. It was explained to this person that, while it was true that there was a train, simply leaving a little earlier would have created a time buffer, allowing them to arrive on time at work. Additionally, a little forethought might have also resulted in taking an alternative route. Unfortunately, this and other infractions lead to the assistant's dismissal.

You can make this an evolving skill. If you're one of those people that tend to arrive very early to everything, this one is kind of built in. Over time, you learn to look ahead and plan. For example, every Friday can include a

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Douglas Richie, Jr, DPM
Clinical Associate Professor,
Department of Biomechanics
California School of Podiatric Medicine
Clinical Associate Professor
of Podiatric Medicine and Surgery
Western University of Health Sciences
Past President, American Academy of
Podiatric Sports Medicine

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review of the next week to make sure preparations are made for what is coming. Print out your clinical schedules and review each patient, writing short notes about diagnoses and important details. Similarly, review your upcoming surgical cases to make sure everything is in order and make efforts to complete these weekly editorials before the following week.

Now, when the unexpected happens—which it always seems to—there is a little leeway to respond without worrying about those things

Visualizing ahead is a well-known method that the highest-level achievers—Olympic athletes, musicians, surgeons, etc.—utilize to practice their discipline ahead of the actual event.

Since most of us tend to underestimate the time it takes to complete a task, this will give you a little more time.

For those of you who work with residents, you will be aware that teaching may slow your cases down a bit.

C? Will you have the proper supplies to handle a complication? Visualizing ahead is a well-known method that the highest-level achievers—Olympic athletes, musicians, surgeons, etc.—utilize to practice their discipline ahead of the actual event. McKeown recommends asking yourself the following questions:

- 1) What risks do you face?
- 2) What is the worst-case scenario?
- 3) What would be the social effects?
- 4) What would be the financial effects?
- 5) How can you invest to reduce risks and increase resilience?

The final skill to build is to understand that we can't predict every permutation, and sometimes we won't be able to create that buffer. Stuff happens! Good luck with your pre-planning to create buffers to reduce stress and improve outcomes. **PM**

Dr. Shapiro is editor of PRESENT Practice Perfect. He joined the faculty of Western University of Health Sciences, College of Podiatric Medicine, Pomona, CA in 2010.

When doing your time planning, add 50% to your estimate. You will always find something valuable to fill the extra time if it turns out you don't need it.

for which you should have prepared.

McKeown has additional recommendations besides extreme preparation that may also help those of you who want to build this skill further.

Adding 50%

Simply adding a little more time to your current estimate will improve that buffer. For example, if you think it will take 20 minutes to drive someplace, add 50% (or 10 minutes) to your estimate.

Consider adding 50% to your case estimate times. If a procedure is planned to take one hour, add 30 minutes. If you complete the case early, then the OR staff will be happy, you will run ahead, and you might even finish earlier than planned.

Conduct Scenario Planning

Think ahead about your activities and consider ways that the situation may change. Do you have a plan B and