

Good Work Habits

(or How to be More Productive with Less Time)

All of us could be more productive with out time. Here are a few simple suggestions to increase one's productivity in the lab.

PLAN AHEAD

- 1) Have a plan for the week: in general terms, what do you want to complete and when. This can be done Friday evening, or during the weekend. It should not be too detailed nor have unrealistic goals, but have some idea when you would like to complete "X", and when you would like to start "Y". Writing this down is important.
- 2) Sometime early in the day, decide what can get done so there is less to do tomorrow, or so there is less time spent waiting. For example, if tomorrow's experiment requires a PCR product and the PCR takes 4 hours, it would be more productive to get it going before leaving today. Ligations, labeling experiments, PCR, bacterial growth often fall into this category. If you do not have a plan, you may fail to recognize opportunities to make tomorrow easier.
- 3) Before going home at night, know what you are doing tomorrow (writing it down actually helps).
- 4) Is there something one can do before going home? Do you have the necessary reagent? Does something need to be thawed (phenol...)? Do you have the necessary protocols? Is it clear what you will do tomorrow?

GET STUFF GOING

- 5) First thing in the morning start something in the laboratory. That is, instead of going to your desk and (for example) looking at your e-mail or reading a paper, start some laboratory work. For example you could: start spinning down DNA-EtOH, pellet bacterial prep, start a PCR reaction, etc... There are many things you could start that will provide 20-60 minutes for you to check your e-mail or read a paper, etc.
- 6) Multi-task the easy way: You need not do two things at once, but you can prepare for the next step while a process is being completed (for example; precipitate DNA, thaw buffers, check methods, etc.). Additionally, as suggested above, there are often opportunities to get something going or to do routine tasks during an experiment.

THINK

- 7) The unforeseen: Unfortunately much of what we do is unpredictable (something does not work or something unexpected happens). When the occasion requires it, find out what you already know (the ATP is fine...), spend time thinking about the simplest experiments to address the problem, and get someone else's opinion. It is amazing how an uninvolved opinion is often very helpful (if for no other reason than it makes you focus the question/problem). Do NOT just repeat the experiment... troubleshoot.

The ideas here are not to make you work harder, but to use your time more effectively. The most important point is having a plan: For the month, for the week, for the next day (or two), and for the first few hours in the morning.