

Somewhat organised: Strategies from seven years of postdocs

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Preface

I was awarded my PhD in 2008 and I've been a postdoc in the area of psychology ever since. It's now 2015 and I feel like I'm somewhat organised. Last year I returned from parental leave after the birth of my second child and my brain reminded me of a few things that I've been trying to put into practice and I wanted to write them down so that I don't forget. They may even be useful to other people.

My evidence for feeling organised this year is anecdotal in the sense that I feel like I'm more consistently spending my time completing projects/papers. More concrete evidence comes my publications this year. It's June now and I've had two first-author and five co-author publications. I'm also putting the finishing touches on another first-author paper and, perhaps optimistically, think that there's another two in me before the end of the year, not to mention the four-or-so other co-authored papers. Anyway, that's my evidence.

The way I organise myself has evolved in lots of ways and, in the following words, I attempt to describe the way I go about business in its latest form. I've had conversations in which I've professed a wish to have had been taught, or at least offered guidance for these sorts of things. It's something I encourage my students to think about and will offer this document as a starting point. Although I feel like it might have saved me time to have received some clues, it's possible that you need to hit upon and develop strategies like these for yourself. Adopt, adapt, and improve – or something like that.

My electronic files

Folders

My general plan is to setup my folder/directory structure using intuitive labels so that it's obvious to anyone what's inside (still a work in progress). I also like to keep the structure as shallow as possible; that is, I don't want to have to click through too many folders to get to what I'm looking for.

General stuff

In an attempt to manage my stuff, I have a bunch of directories in 'My Documents' (or some syncing application: Google Drive or Dropbox). This is where I keep everything (except confidential files and large data files – see below). I keep everything in the following folders. The 'n' at the start stands for Nic: I include it from a search perspective to make these folders unique.

These general folders are for documents that I access on a regular basis.

nEthics

I lead a number of broad ethics applications that I amend regularly (> 4 times per year) so keeping these in a single folder, with year-month project specific folders within (and amendment folders within this), works for me.

For example: ~/nEthics/2015-02 lateralisation/201502_lateralisation0original/

I've found it best to keep advertisements and approvals, labelled by date and amendment in a folder separate to the amendment folder.

For example: ~/nEthics/2015-02 lateralisation/advertisements/

nMoney

This relates to grants, spending, and conference travel (separate folders). I've found it useful to label these by year and scheme. I also have an excel file in here in which I keep track of my spending.

nIdeas

I keep a collection of word documents in here with brief descriptions and references to ideas that come up when reading, in discussions, or when listening to talks.

nPapers

Year and project name labelled folders that contain folders belonging to a particularly project publication. This makes it a one-stop folder for completed projects (see Project folders, page 6). I'm not overly happy with the name but it works at the moment.

nPeople

I work with a lot of people, particularly students, so I keep a folder for each person in here, which contains CVs, references, drafts, and work associated with them

nProjects

In here I keep a collection of the projects that I'm currently working on. This is always many more than I'm willing to admit...

nRecord

In the 'nRecord' folder I have a collection of folders containing documents about myself. A good example of this is the 'certificates_qualifications' folder, which contains copies of first aid certificates, my university qualifications, and courses I complete. Most frequently accessed is my 'vitae' folder: here I keep my current CV, along with old versions in an 'archive' folders; i.e., ~/nRecord/vitae/archive/.

nResources

The 'nResources' folder contains teaching materials, hints, and tips for myself and students. These fall into further sub-folders such as 'advice', 'statistics', and 'writing'.

nTalks

I keep copies of power point presentations files in the 'nTalks' folder. These are either the raw files or folders including images or data associated with the presentations. I label these by date and title.

I have seen others sort with respect to conferences as well but I haven't given enough presentations at the same conference for this to be useful to me as yet. I wanted to add this as a reminder for future changes to the structure.

nTeaching

Course-related teaching materials for units that I have taught in.

nWorkYEAR

The label 'YEAR' of this folder is replaced with the current year. This is a store for things that I don't need regular and ongoing access to (e.g., nEthics or nMoney) or return to infrequently. For example, 'nWork2015' contains: 'awards', 'conferences' (that I organised), 'job_applications', 'misc', 'review' (peer review manuscripts), and 'workshops'. After each year, I then archive this in 'nWorkArchive'.

nWorkArchive

This is an archive folder and contains my 'nWorkYEAR' folders from past years.

tmp

This is a temporary location for documents that I want to share or work with for a short period of time (< week). This is a habit from using Dropbox and wanting to share files with people via links on a temporary basis; i.e., once accessed/used, I delete them.

Project folders

I think of project folders in a slightly different way. Some of my thinking was reinforced by a couple of blogs circulated by a colleague (Thanks Anina Rich): one from [Tom Wallis](#) and another from [Nice R Code](#). As mentioned above, the idea is to keep these intuitively labelled, shallow, and also minimalist. With a consistent and intuitive structure, I (or someone else) should be able to look at old projects and efficiently find what I'm looking for.

articles

This holds articles and manuscript files related to the project. I only include the 'articles' folders for collaborative projects. For my solo projects or those requiring less interaction with others, I keep all articles in a bibliography package; Zotero is my current choice.

data

Exactly as the name suggests: raw or summarised data files for the project. This may be within task labelled folders if the project has multiple tasks. This works nicely for behavioural tasks but I keep larger (e.g., EEG) files in a separate location (server or external hard drive), within a 'nData/year/project/' folder.

figures

Image files for graphs related to the project.

manuscript

An appropriately titled Word document lives in here, along with a 'drafts_feedback' folder for, surprisingly enough, drafts and feedback from co-authors.

notes

I attempt to keep an up-to-date record of what's happening and what I've done for the project in a 'notes' file. This is like an electronic lab book. I'm happy to share examples of these... if anyone else is reading this!

scripts

Programming scripts sorted into folders like 'presentation', 'summary', and 'analysis'.

submit

This holds submission information. Numbered folders related to the journal submission; e.g., PeerJ0original, PeerJ1revision etc. Then within each of these I have the associated documents.

I think it's a good idea to include figures and tables within the submission folders; e.g., ~/nProjects/projectName/submit/PeerJ0original/figures/. One reason for this is that the project level figure files (~/nProjects/projectName/figures/) might change with revisions so keeping a copy of what was submitted can be useful. But I'm not perfectly happy with this as I typically try to avoid having multiple copies/versions of the same file.

I may also make sense to put the 'submit' folder within the 'manuscript' folder but I haven't settled on this yet.

tables

Word and Excel documents containing tables for the manuscript.

File names

Please use descriptive file names. When you go to a conference, 'conference_year' will not be an original or useful file name!

The working copy (of a file)

I often see students create multiple versions of a manuscript (e.g., 'honours thesis 1', 'honours thesis 2', 'honours these final', 'honours these final 2', 'honours thesis final FINAL' etc.). I remember doing this but I don't think it's a good idea as it can become confusing and difficult to find the latest versions when you go back. Here's a habit I think is useful.

Within a folder (e.g., ~/projectName/manuscript/) I keep my working copy of the file with a sensible name (e.g., projectName_manuscript.docx). When I send-off/share drafts for comments, I'll add this file with a dated name to a 'drafts_feedback' folder.

So, now we've got "~/projectName/manuscript/drafts_feedback/" and in here, there's "2015-06-01 projectName_manuscript.docx"

Then when some feedback comes in the form of a document (e.g., "2015-06-01 projectName_manuscript_ProfX.docx"), I'll add that to the archive folder. Any updates or changes I incorporate into the working copy of the file in the original directory (~/projectName/manuscript/).

In some circumstances, the changes will be so severe that I'll just replace the working copy with the feedback document, changing the name to the working copy.

My time

My work

I've found that it's important to schedule time for my own work. As strange as that might sound, answering emails and assisting others can very quickly eat up my days. I like helping people but, at times, I found I was getting to the end of the week and not having made any progress on my own work.

I think my best working hours are in the mornings, born in the year of the Rooster as it happens. So, my rough rule is: "Try not to help anybody before 11" or "Pay yourself first" (from Robert Kyosaki, author the 'Rich Dad: Poor Dad' books). I tend to work an 8 to 4 day so I block out 8 to 11 each day for my own stuff. Sometimes I work for longer but I don't usually feel bad about it!

One project at a time

I've found it most productive to work through one project to completion. As I understand it, multi-tasking is a myth. If you're chopping and changing from task-to-task, you're putting a lot of effort into remembering where you were up to. And this is associated with a cost.

I once requested interest for publishing in a special issue. One of my academic heroes (Dorothy Bishop in case you're interested) replied that she would be getting to the work-of-interest in 14-months. I long to be this organised. I'm still finding that I underestimate how long things take. It's a work in progress.

Others' work and meetings

So the majority of my mornings are my own. If I need to meet with people, I aim for 11 or later. And if my schedule's full for that day or week, then I (attempt to) stick to my guns, and say I can't meet until next week. I do the same for reading drafts or reviewing and editing for journals. I've replied to a review request: "I'm happy to review but just back from holiday and won't be able to complete it for four weeks. If that's okay, please assign it to me." Sometimes it is.

Meeting Free days

I once confessed to someone I look up to (Matthew Finkbiener as it happens) that there weren't any days I had to myself. I had scheduled meetings every day of the week. He said I needed to fix that and I more or less have. My strategy is to schedule collaborative activities from Tuesdays to Thursdays, in theory leaving Mondays and Fridays more flexible for myself. In my current world, my two kids have day-care on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, so with flexible Mondays and Fridays, if the kids get sick, it's only Thursday that I struggle to stay home for. This seems to work nicely for the time being.

My inbox

As nice as email is, I've found that I can very easily spend most of my day attempting to clear out my inbox. I definitely recommend aiming for an empty inbox and I definitely recommend setting a time to respond to emails and only turning on your email during this time. I'm currently allocating the final hour of each day to my email. The exciting possibility for this is that it's a task I can complete so, in theory, I could go home early... a relatively rare event in my experience but I live in hope.

5-minute rule

There are books and blogs written about dealing with your email. I like the 5-minute rule that someone mentioned to me: if responding is going to take more than 5-minutes, schedule time for it.

Filters

I also like using filters. Universities, journals, and alerts etc. will send lots of email to you. I've setup filters to skip my inbox and push categories of emails to different folders (or tags in gmail), then I schedule time to look at these folders. This makes clearing my inbox less onerous and filters away the less important things. More or less.

A tip

The best advice I've ever received was from a fellow by the name of Stephen Lewandowsky. He said: "If there are two ways to do something and one involves a learning curve, choose that one." The way I've interpreted/exercised this with respect to organisation is to spend time automating tasks. Programming is a good example. Sure, I can use the dropdown menus in SPSS but creating the syntax or, better still, writing the script in R, will save me time in the long run. I put the 'Styles' in Word and using a reference manager (e.g., Zotero, Mendeley, Endnote) in the same category. Time spent getting on top of these things will be a good investment.

Me Update

I've started a habit of taking stock, and maybe even having a little time to think, on a weekly basis. This involves at least four things. I don't necessarily visit each one each week but certainly cover them all within a month.

Goals/Research Interests

I've always found goal setting a bit unhelpful, I think mostly because I underestimate the time frame of activities. So here when I think about goals, what I've got in mind is my research interests and whether what I'm actually doing it headed in a coherent direction that's what I want it to be. I've been surprised in the past that I was going with the flow and drifting away from what I really felt passionately about.

Having a 'Research Interests' section to your CV and reading/updating this from time to time may be a good strategy to keep on track with this.

Advice

I've received lots of useful advice over the years, recently started trying to collect it in a folder (see nRecord, page 5). Whilst it's nice to have an archive of this, revisiting it as a reminder from time to time feels helpful to me.

CV

This has to be up-to-date. I keep a Google task called 'me update' and make brief descriptions about things that need to be added (e.g., papers, conference talks, etc.), and aim to do this weekly.

I've also found it useful to have a longer look at my CV from time to time and make sure that I'm only holding onto relevant information. And I use the 'The working copy (of a file)' (see page 7) idea here to archive major changes.

Online profiles

In 2015, there are way too many of online tools for academics (e.g., ResearchGate, Academia.edu, LinkedIn, Orchid, Publons, Frontiers Loop etc.) to poke a stick at. As an early career researcher, I haven't decided which will help me get on in my career and/or get me a job in the future. If you do choose to engage with this stuff, I think it's worth making sure you keep them up-to-date. So dedicating some time to management is important.

The 30-second Elevator Summary

Another reminder to myself: you need to be able to efficiently summarise what you're interested in and why it's important. And the time limit you've got for this is 30-seconds. This will take some practice but just might get you a job or funding!