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Life Admin When Life Turns Upside Down: A Book Review (of sorts)

Dyane O’Leary and Sarah J. Schendel*

Monday Nov. 2, 2020 2:45 p.m.

Sarah hears an email ping about acceptance of her “Life Admin” proposal. She stops drafting an email to her 2-year-old’s daycare teacher about new COVID protocols and opens a new one to her colleague and co-author Dyane to let her know of the acceptance. Dyane responds with enthusiasm in the midst of moving files to a Blackboard committee page at the request of a department committee chair. The two plan to “check in later.”

Friday Nov. 6, 2020 8:05 p.m.

Dyane texts Sarah that she’s starting the book. Sarah responds (toddler on her hip) that she’ll start a shared Google Doc early in the weekend when she can catch some extra work time. Dyane adds “read Life Admin” to a new hard copy weekend to-do list, right after the note to call Marriott about cancelling a timeshare because of travel restrictions and a reminder to grab flowers for a quarantined neighbor. Sarah adds “Admin Doc Dyane” to her GoogleCal. She’ll probably remember what that means.

Monday Nov 9, 2020 5:45 a.m.

Dyane wakes before her three children to grab quiet time to write. Glancing at her phone first, she responds to a text from her sister about an anniversary gift for their parents and a note from her husband that the hot water wasn’t working and so “we [read: YOU] might want to call a plumber.” Sullen at the idea of a cold shower, she adds those items to her daily Outlook calendar reminder to pop up mid-morning. Meanwhile, at her house, Sarah goes through the morning checklist in her head: pack lunch, daycare COVID attestation online, kid’s breakfast, coffee for her, check weather, stick masks in each bag, check work email (oops, I need to get back to that student. When are grades due?), check personal email (confirm phone date with mom!), send the Thanksgiving grocery list to her husband, and . . . is that her daughter crying?

If any one of these scenarios feels familiar, chances are you’ve dealt with life admin, the “office work of life.” The list making, paperwork organizing, calendar maintenance, task assigning details that clutter our minds and our calendars. Not only the scheduling and paperwork but the mental commitment, decision making, and behind the scenes research those tasks require to run a household and run a life. This essay uses Prof. Elizabeth Emens’ book *Life Admin*¹ as a lens through which to examine the professional and personal stressors today’s law professor faces, especially those who, like us, juggle two full-time jobs: teacher and parent.

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¹ ELIZABETH F. EMENS, *LIFE ADMIN: HOW I LEARNED TO DO LESS, DO BETTER, AND LIVE MORE* (2019).

The big challenges in 2020 are clear, but what about the dozens of smaller incremental pulls on our time and energy?² Why does adding even one more to-do to the list feel like the breaking point? Why does a tiny change in our teaching schedule after we've laid meticulous childcare plans reduce us to tears? Are these the same stresses we've always had, simply, suddenly laid bare? By naming the constant chatter in our heads and identifying (indeed, *valuing*) the often-invisible stressors of our everyday workload, we hope readers uncover self-forgiveness and renewed confidence to tackle life's daily onslaught of admin, and some fresh perspective to help students do the same. That onslaught may be heavier and messier during the pandemic but we hope to inspire careful thought (combined with some concrete tips along the way) about how best to use two of life's most magical little words: time and energy.

So, if you identify as someone who feels like they are “always sort of managing”³ life's joys and hurdles (emphasis on sort of . . .), we invite you to read on.

I. Life Admin Unpacked

Feeling constantly bombarded with mundane to-dos is not just a passing feeling that strikes some more than others: the burden of life's “office work”⁴ deserves a definition and recognition of its significance. Only by seeing and valuing this work can we understand why some people are more burdened with it than others, some more invigorated by it than others, and all of us engaging—or avoiding—these parts of life.

In the semi-remote work environment of the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the once behind-the-scenes invisible admin of life has been thrust front and center, whether the fact that a plumber is making noise in our kitchen while we record a class video, or a 2-year-old is interrupting Zoom office hours. Many of us already juggled these competing demands, but we could keep these tasks separate and hidden, even if they weighed heavily on our minds. While Emens wrote her book pre-pandemic, with no intended application to this crisis, it offers plenty of connections. Emens emphasizes how the invisible nature of admin can render it undervalued, and leave those struggling under its weight feeling unrecognized. Similarly, when we reflected on the challenges specific to being a law professor and parent during the pandemic, we saw the tension between the invisible and visible—where once we had been able to keep our home and work lives separate, they were now entwined. Where once we took pride in the way we kept our families' lives (and our students' classrooms) running with ease, our efforts to schedule and plan and prioritize were coming apart at the seams.

² As we dive into later in this essay, the opportunity to write about life admin is itself a privilege. We recognize our job security, salaries, health, and socioeconomic and professional status as law professors. Most of the challenges with our life admin pale in comparison to other problems many in our society face. Our intent is not to complain or compete with real suffering; it is to articulate issues that weigh on us and help readers find personal value in even their most mundane work.

³ EMENS, *supra* note 1 at 34.

⁴ Kathryn Hughes, *The Art of Life Admin by Elizabeth Emens review – how organised are you?*, THE GUARDIAN (Jan. 16, 2019, 2:30 PM), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/16/the-art-of-life-admin-by-elizabeth-emens-review-how-to-do-less-and-live-more>.

Put simply: making invisible admin visible is the first step to move forward. Once we reveal and name this work, we can understand its problems, unpack its nuances and surprises, and explore approaches to the blurry world of professional and personal admin in the days ahead—for us and for our students.

II. Admin Problems

What is Life Admin?

Emens—a Professor of Law at Columbia and a parent—characterizes admin as both a “toxic cloud” and the “[b]igggest [t]iniest [t]hing.”⁵ Life admin is the literal paperwork and to-do list, but also the decision-making, the calendar-updating, and the mental calculation that goes into personal and professional life. No matter the flavor of the task (parenting, retail, social, leisure, death, medical, work, etc.), life admin is an extra job along the margins of whatever our main pursuits might be—for many academics, that’s teaching, service, scholarship, parenting, and squeezing in a dose of self-care when possible. Life Admin is the “track changes” running in the column alongside our day, the “note to self” scribbled in the margins of meeting notes. Life admin pops up at work, in our relationships, and in our hobbies. Life admin is not intrinsically “bad” but without proper acknowledgement, it has the weight and power to (a) interfere with focus on more mindful work and significant projects; (b) impact physical and mental health; and (c) eat up precious time.

And that’s even before a global pandemic hit.

Running Interference

Admin is a potent distractor. In 2020, faculty accustomed to some semblance of a 9-5 schedule in the sanctity of their office saw that dissolve as daycares closed and schools (and jobs!) went remote.⁶ For many, at a time when productivity from home became not just a luxury but a necessity, sustained effort at mindful work on single projects dwindled.⁷ Starting a writing session for an upcoming article? The kid needs a snack. Prepping poll questions for an online class? Oh no, trash pick-up day. Reviewing student work? But the committee reminder email needs drafting. Working on your promotion review packet? First, respond to that Doodle poll about when the Scholarship Committee can meet. Jumping in and out of admin clashes with higher level creativity and focus on work that’s actually compensated or required for promotion or tenure.⁸ The cruel

⁵ EMENS, *supra* note 1 at 3.

⁶ See, e.g., Amelia Nierenberg & Adam Pasick, *When Schools Close, Moms Fill Gaps*, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 18, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/18/us/when-schools-close-moms-fill-gaps.html>.

⁷ Suzanne M. Edwards & Larry Snyder, *Yes, Balancing Work and Parenting is Impossible. Here’s the Data*, WASH. POST (July 10, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/interruptions-parenting-pandemic-work-home/2020/07/09/599032e6-b4ca-11ea-aca5-ebb63d27e1ff_story.html (reporting average length of an uninterrupted stretch of at home parent work time as three minutes, 24 seconds).

⁸ Kara Cutruzzola, *The key to productivity is tapping into your flow state. Here’s how*, TED (May 4, 2020), <https://ideas.ted.com/the-key-to-productivity-is-tapping-into-your-flow-state-heres-how/>; see also Rima Y. Mullins, *Book Review of The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, 68 J. LEGAL EDUC. 768, 768 (2019) (“The idea that a tension exists between endless quotidian work responsibilities and the conditions necessary to nurture intellectual creativity, and to effectively transform that creativity into scholarship, is not new.”).

twist is that life admin drains us when we are doing it (50 minutes on the phone with the insurance company) but also when we aren't (50 minutes telling yourself not to forget to make the call that ends up only taking 10!).⁹ Multitasking efforts to blend admin with "real" professional work can backfire and smother productivity instead of enhancing it.¹⁰ Exhaustion at day's end comes not because of the two things we actually managed to do, but because of the hovering thoughts that we need to do something, we forgot to do something, we didn't do something well, or even that we did too much.

Not Great, Bob!¹¹

Life admin can weigh on well-being. And it's doing so at a time when many lawyers already face challenges to maintaining physical and mental health amid an unprecedented global crisis.¹² In 2020, routine worries were replaced with a barrage of new concerns from stocking toilet paper to homeschooling to whether a face mask fit. The invisibility of internal admin thought rears its ugly head in this context, always "on our minds as we plan and decide" what to get done among shifting priorities and stressors.¹³ The amount of decision making alone has skyrocketed.¹⁴ Is it worth researching which mask is most effective or should you just use the ones your sister does? Should you send your kid to school the week after Thanksgiving? Volunteer to teach that extra class without knowing whether it will be in person?

For many, COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on our admin lives. Those who take comfort in a balanced day of obligations and schedules have watched the pandemic undo our work and create more. Dyane diligently updated her family's schedule to reflect hybrid schooling for her three children but it all fell apart with one email about a close contact classroom shut down and a call from a sick nanny. The tangible schedule disruption is one thing; the intangible impact to our mental state is another. The careful invisible admin accomplishments (and the tiny thrill of success) dissolve; in their place arrive frustration and self-doubt as to the value of our devoted attention to admin in the first place. Although a generalization, those drawn to academia are perhaps more likely than the general population to carry this "A-type" personality Emens identifies as a "Super

⁹ EMENS, *supra* note 1 at 20 ("[O]ur unfinished tasks occupy mental bandwidth even when we aren't thinking about them.").

¹⁰ See generally Shailini Jandial George, *The Cure for the Distracted Mind: Why Law Schools Should Teach Mindfulness*, 53 DUQUESNE L. REV. 215 (2015).

¹¹ A dorky Mad Men reference/meme for which Sarah takes full responsibility.

¹² See *As pandemic grows, ABA puts spotlight on lawyers' health*, AM. BAR ASS'N (May 11, 2020), <https://www.americanbar.org/news/abanews/aba-news-archives/2020/05/spotlight-on-lawyers-health/>; see also R. Lisle Baker, *Integrating Positive Psychology into Legal Education*, 48 SW. L. REV. 295, 296-97 (2019) (noting studies on lawyer well-being showing that "some members of the legal profession are not thriving, but also potentially in distress.").

¹³ Elizabeth Emens, *The Invisible Labor of Life Admin*, PSYCHOLOGY TODAY (Dec. 5, 2018), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/life-admin/201812/the-invisible-labor-life-admin>.

¹⁴ Author Emily Oster is beloved by many parents because her approach to raising children is focused on informed decision making. In the pandemic, the economist (and professor and mother) has seen a spike in popularity as she applies "economists decision asking principles . . . to help people think about two of the most vexing issues of the Covid-19 era: how to stay safe, and how and when to reopen day care and schools so America's 74 million children, their parents, and the economy can reclaim some semblance of normalcy and productivity." Esmé E. Deprez, *Emily Oster's Pandemic Parenting Guidance Is All About the Data*, BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK (Oct. 8, 2020 5:00 AM), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-10-08/economist-emily-oster-is-helping-parents-stay-sane-in-the-coronavirus-pandemic?srnd=businessweek-v2&sref=MyGN3MNu>.

Doer,” accustomed to high achievement and timely completion of tasks.¹⁵ Thus, as the hamster wheel of reminders and to-do lists and daily planners spins with the unpredictability of the pandemic, that resulting motion can usher in pressure, anxiety, guilt,¹⁶ and feelings of overwhelm or depression. The irony is that it can be hard for us to tell when life admin is the problem and when it is the solution. Some days, a well-curated to-do list brings a sense of calm in the midst of the storm; other days, the attempt at rigid structure for our children or cleanly outlined syllabi for our students feels false in the face of the “real world.”

✓ *Emens suggests a standing “Admin Study Hall” to share the burden of admin by completing it (remotely) with others who are doing theirs, too. Consider incorporating a mindful minute breathing exercise or pair an admin session with a reward at completion (Starbucks, anyone?!).*

The Clock is Ticking

The foremost problem with life admin is that it takes time. A lot of it. And unlike professional work demands, it steals minutes without compensation or supporting resources.¹⁷ For many faculty, professional admin in 2020 has skyrocketed around the edges of core teaching responsibilities. Gone (or at least on hold) are the days of waltzing into a physical classroom with a dry erase marker and lesson plan; instead, faculty today spend hours posting files, reading about best practices for hybrid/hyflex/asynchronous teaching, preparing screencast captions, completing technology trainings, and deciding what music to play in their Zoom waiting room.

✓ *Always ask the “what admin is involved?” question and be purposeful about when you launch new admin tasks. Calendar not only concrete commitments such as class teaching time but block off time for prep, grading, etc. Make your schedule reflect more invisible commitments, too. If not, you might always feel behind and not know why.*

As Emens notes, tracing patterns and understanding the minutes and hours spent on admin is next to impossible because in many ways, it’s done all day with a “catch-as-catch can” approach.¹⁸ Making admin visible and acknowledging it as a time-consuming effort can be the first step to overcoming resentment of it, understanding its impact, and forging a personal plan for how best to manage it. At its core, life admin consists of “decisions about how we spend our time and about what demands we place on others’ time. Few things could be more important.”¹⁹

¹⁵ We revisit Emens’ Super Doer below in Part II. As one sociologist recognizes, “today’s aspirational class, many of whom have built themselves up through hard work, infuse even their leisure time with productivity in value.” ELIZABETH CURRID-HALKETT, *THE SUM OF SMALL THINGS: A THEORY OF THE ASPIRATIONAL CLASS* (2017).

¹⁶ Life admin combined with remote technology can create a perfect storm of guilt: ever been the subject of rude glares from a stranger when out with your children but using a remote device? They assume you are scrolling through social media for fun; in fact, maybe you’re spending a few valuable minutes ordering your daughter’s contact lenses or signing your son up for piano lessons. See EMENS, *supra* note 1 at 22 (describing the dilemma over when the “right time” to do admin is).

¹⁷ EMENS, *supra* note 1 at 19 (“Time is money, yet time is not fungible. We cannot really get it back.”).

¹⁸ *Id.* at 20-21.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 4.

III. Admin Surprises

Beyond the challenges of life admin lie some nuances and surprises, too—especially for those of us enjoying a career in academia.

The Secret Joy of the Super Doer

As stressful as admin is, for many “Super Doers” it’s gratifying. With humility and a bit of self-deprecation, we both recognized ourselves (and each other) in Emens’ definition of Super Doer (hence, why we paired up to work together in the first place). For the so-called “type A” lawyer personality, accomplishing tasks breeds not resentment and procrastination but self-competitiveness and self-fulfillment.²⁰ It’s the “done-it pleasure”²¹ Emens describes: defining success not by how we feel but by how much we do. For the Super Doer, crossing off completed tasks prompts a desire for more—the next presentation, the next essay acceptance, the next committee task. The act of doing feeds more to be done. Super Doers may envy those Admin Deniers who don’t even see admin as “a thing” and even forge connections with Reluctant or Avoidant Doers. Ideally, all embrace these personality differences and acknowledge when one partner or colleague is doing more of life’s to-dos. It may also behoove Super Doers to pause before they hit send or accept on that next application: is it really a commitment they want to make, or just an impulse to go, go, go towards the feeling of success?

Admin v. Chores

A distinction Emens makes for any type of “Doer” is that between admin and chores. While “admin doesn’t include chores,” “[m]ost chores have an admin dimension [:] the ‘mental load’ of that chore.”²² She offers grocery shopping as an example: making the list is the admin of the chore of shopping. As with many of Emens’ observations, simply noting the existence of these different categories is useful (it’s not just the person who goes to the store who needs a thank you—it’s also the one who looked through the fridge and wrote the list!). One example: Sarah recently became the chair of her daughter’s childcare center council (of course). On paper, the demands are as minimal as the chore of attending a monthly meeting. However, the invisible mental load soon became clear. Parents with concerns (not an uncommon occurrence these days) ask Sarah to communicate information to and from the center; she feels an obligation to stay up to date on statewide day care policies; and managing her own relationship with the teachers, admin, and other parents became more important and purposeful due to her role. Simply looking at the chores (meetings) told Sarah little, but naming the related admin revealed why the job “feels” big. Recognizing this divide is not easy; admin can be “murky.”²³ But doing so compartmentalizes the clog in our days and what we might hand off. As explained below, chores are easier to outsource

²⁰ *Id.* at 160 (“Super Doers at their best seem to make an art form of interactions around admin. They are firm, humane, engaging, determined. Not imperious.”).

²¹ *Id.* at 106.

²² *Id.* at 9.

²³ *Id.* at 212; *see also id.* at 3 (“Admin seems trivial. This is part of its dangerous logic. By appearing to be small and unimportant, admin rarely commands our full attention.”).

than admin because the latter often requires transferring a personal bank of unique knowledge.²⁴ After all, Dyane's husband might be able to complete the chore of driving a child to the pediatrician, but she's the one who remembered to make the appointment in time for year-end deductible coverage and will be the one hunting down the vaccination form to scan and email for summer camp admission in a few months.

✓ *Identify the item on your to-do list that's been lingering the longest. Take 5 minutes to look at it and write down a sentence about why it's hard or annoying or scary to do. Does it bring guilt? Embarrassment? Is it a task you need help with? Tell a friend or partner you are avoiding it and ask them to check in, or consider something that might soften the ask. Murky admin might not take up as much time as avoiding it does.*

Admin Privilege

Having life admin in the first place can be a privilege, and so too is the opportunity to pivot after an interruption, smooth the path to completion, or get rid of it completely. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to reveal countless societal inequities and one example is who has had the means to adjust on-the-fly amid ongoing change, whose lives were able to accommodate more admin, and whose buckled under the pressure and lack of external support. Though not the focus of her book, Emens importantly touches on the "Admin of poverty" and the ways illness and disability impact both the amount of one's life admin, and the way that one is judged for completing—or not completing—these tasks.²⁵ For some, completion of life admin is a matter of recreational pleasure (online sign-up for that yoga class). For others, it's a matter of life or death (filling out eligibility paperwork for SNAP benefits so a family has food on the table). Emens usefully ties this discussion back to the work of many lawyers who realize that an unexpected part of their job is addressing the admin of poverty faced by clients: Sarah recognized tasks from her own experience, like helping clients navigate overdue phone bills so that they are better able to keep in touch service providers, lawyers, and the courts. It may not be part of the job on paper, but it's critical to reach the clients' (and attorneys') goals.

Realizing that admin is often itself a sign of privilege is one step; realizing a certain flexibility in the face of change is another. Instead of being frustrated when her children interrupted a remote faculty meeting, Dyane recalled Emens' discussion and recognized her privilege at having the \$11.99 to pivot and stream a new kids movie. Or how fortunate she was to navigate Instacart account set up to avoid in-person contact at the store and instead pay a delivery charge. Seeing those tasks as admin and recognizing the privilege to complete them during a pandemic transformed mundane tasks into things Dyane was lucky to get to do.

Besides viewing admin as a privilege to make it less daunting, Emens suggests making it "smoother" by removing decisions where possible. In other words, instead of crossing things off

²⁴ "Gaining skills can make you sticky. Admin is information-heavy, whereas chores are often skill based. That's why you can do dishes in a stranger's home with greater ease than you can make someone else's grocery list." *Id.* at 140.

²⁵ *Id.* at 18-19, 25 (noting interviewee's observation that "[p]eople think impairments like cerebral palsy are limiting, but . . . [a]lot of it is bureaucracy, not really disability.").

the list, don't add them in the first place. Avoid the stack of overdue bills by spending upfront time enrolling in automatic bill pay. Avoid choosing which yoga studio to go to by getting a monthly pass. Avoid the ongoing reminder to call an extended family member by setting up a standing Zoom date.

The problem with such "smoothing" efforts in 2020 (especially for Super Doers) is that the pandemic couldn't care less. We've lost the confidence and comfort we once found in our privileged capacity to lay advance admin plans. Dyane's scheduled carpool unravels after a child tests positive. Sarah's set class prep day may or may not happen if daycare closes.

If smoothing doesn't work, Emens' final tip for those privileged to entertain the idea is to shift your admin: outsource what we can. This is a conundrum for several reasons, chief among them the moral and ethical implications²⁶ of outsourcing and other issues Emens tackles such as the rise in virtual administrative assistants²⁷ and the "outsourcing gender gap."²⁸ More superficial and immediate is the so-called "problem" of deciding how, when, and to whom to outsource—and then managing it. Even if you outsource a chore, the mental admin might stick: many teachers who have passed tasks on to a Teaching Assistant know that sometimes more work and time goes into managing the delegation than is saved by the delegation itself. On the home front, Sarah recognized that her occasional house cleaning service was creating more stress in the form of (what felt like) constant scheduling and rescheduling emails. Emens' work helped her identify this as "sticky admin" hovering around the outsourced "chore" of cleaning. So, she emailed the cleaners and said that the rescheduling was not working for her family and they figured out a more workable solution together that required less back and forth.

✓ *If you shift and outsource admin, keep a shared electronic or hard copy folder with contact information (plumber, event planner, etc.). Provide those people a contact person at home in addition to you so admin management doesn't "stick" solely to you when the electrician needs a decision made. Be explicit so a partner or others in the home know who is managing what.*

Let's all remember it takes time and energy to save time. Doing so is both a pain and a privilege.

What Friends are For - Thank You Admin

Perhaps few tasks contain both highs and lows quite like "Thank You Admin." It can be powerful and sustaining or cumbersome and time-consuming. On a good day, expressing appreciation to a friend, family member, or mentor can improve everyone's mood. But if you've received a gift you

²⁶ See, e.g., Alexis Madrigal, *The Servant Economy*, THE ATLANTIC (Mar. 6, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/03/what-happened-uber-x-companies/584236/> ("The haves and the have-nots might be given new names: the demanding and the on-demand. These apps concretize the wild differences that the global economy currently assigns to the value of different kinds of labor. Some people's time and effort are worth hundreds of times less than other people's. The widening gap between the new American aristocracy and everyone else is what drives both the supply and demand of Uber-for-X companies.")

²⁷ EMENS, *supra* note 1 at 48-49; see also Nathan Heller, *What if You Could Outsource Your To-Do List?*, THE NEW YORKER (Nov. 30, 2020), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/12/07/what-if-you-could-outsource-your-to-do-list>.

²⁸ EMENS, *supra* note 1 at 48-49.

didn't want and don't appreciate, or you've missed the acceptable window to say thanks and now are laden with guilt (or can't find someone's mailing address), thank yous can feel annoying and even oppressive. In her chapter "Admin to Win Friends and Influence People," Emens addresses these phenomena: "Giving Thanks Better."²⁹ At a time when personal connection with friends and colleagues is challenging given the socially-distant COVID miles between us, Emens' suggestions resonated. For example, we recently sent a gift to a wonderful colleague and his husband who welcomed their fourth child, and we explicitly told him not to send a thank you note. As Emens notes, such a forthright effort to save a friend from admin requires a certain level of comfort and familiarity but as fellow busy parents and professors we felt we could extend this offer. If you are reading all this and realizing your spouse or research partner is the Super Doer in your relationship, this is another place where you can shine: Emens distinguishes between Admin Deniers and Admin Avoiders by noting that the latter "often says thank you to whoever handles the admin."³⁰

✓ Identify admin that can be completed in less than a minute or two, and get it done in "real time" instead of adding to a to-do list. For example, if a friend asks for a quick dinner recommendation, instead of saying "I'll send you that tonight!" take 30 seconds and do it in front of them. Or schedule the next committee meeting while in the current one, avoiding the "schedule meeting" or "send Doodle poll" recurring calendar nag.

Technology, and When Sticky Admin is Sticky for a Reason

Technology can fuel any type of Doer—and not necessarily in a good way. But it can also help us be purposeful with designing our admin stickiness. The ever present and all-powerful smartphone makes admin available anywhere, anytime. Waiting in a car pick up line? Why not make a quick payment on the credit card bill or confirm a dentist appointment via text? Emens discusses the way tools like GoogleCal and the Notes app have helped (and hindered) attempts at life organization. Us Super Doers purport to have it all together but it can be hard to tell whether a brief inventory of our life technology shows mastery or chaos: work email on Outlook, student scheduling through YouCanBookMe, family calendars via GoogleCal, personal email on GMail, daycare paperwork uploaded via UpBup, home mortgage payments via WellsFargo app, cleaners paid on Venmo, kids' basketball schedule tracked on TeamSnap, work resources shared on BlackBoard, Slack, Twitter, Teams . . . ok, that's enough.

Less is more, perhaps. Emens suggests we give up "the search for a magic tool and embrace a simple to-do list." When Sarah was still in practice and had 183 open cases at her job as an immigration attorney, she lived in fear of forgetting an important task or deadline. On top of multiple complicated calendars and management systems, she realized she had to go back to basics: she would leave one note on her desk each night with the two most important things written on it to help start the next day with greater ease. A low-tech approach provided consistency, removed decision fatigue, and smoothed out the invisible admin hurdle of remembering where she had stopped in her workload and making the decision about where to begin.

²⁹ *Id.* at 117-18.

³⁰ *Id.* at 37.

✓ *On days you wake up feeling overwhelmed, try forgetting all the reminders and electronic calendars and instead grab a blank piece of paper to write down 3 top tasks for that day. Simple confines can create simple successes.*

Technology is also guilty of creating more admin. Even before the remote work world of 2020, more life and work administration was pushed to individuals via new tools. Instead of completing a hard copy form in person at the elementary school open house, please now take 45 minutes to set up an account on a lunch payment portal and could you link it to your checking account for payment, too, and add to the balance every month so your kid gets a hot lunch? Technology has made us mini-administrators³¹; instead of dropping a pile of receipts on someone's desk following business travel and getting a check a few days later, now we say hello to the 16 different fields in the online financial reimbursement portal that will take more than a cup of coffee to navigate. And that's only if we happen to actually remember one of our 29 passwords.³²

And finally, we can be strategic about using tech to navigate admin.³³ Emens helped Sarah be purposeful about where she wanted to make admin smooth but also where she wanted to make it “sticky.” For instance, saving credit card information on devices makes purchasing smoother (one click, purchase done). For Sarah, it was *too* smooth—the credit card bills were proof. So, she created some resistance. To help control spending, she deleted saved credit cards from her phone, iPad, and laptop. This makes the admin of impulse buys “stickier” because she has to get up off the couch, get her card from her wallet in her purse in the other room, etc. While it wouldn't work for everyone, for Sarah, identifying the admin that would create an insurmountable hurdle (who wants to get off the couch?!) was a small step toward achieving financial goals. On the flip side, Sarah avoids electronic financial tracker tools and assigns herself the admin of recording account balances in one document twice a month. This is more work but entering it manually and seeing it in one place helps Sarah view progress, cut down on spending, and stay motivated to save. Savvy decisions about tech or no-tech echo a more macro theme of Emens' book: know yourself, recognize what motivates you (or not), and figure out when and where you need to make spots on your admin path smoother or stickier to meet your own unique goals.

Life Admin in Legal Academia

The final “surprise” of Life Admin in this section is perhaps not much of a surprise to readers. The entire symposium of which this essay is a part centers on awareness of the COVID crisis' impact on academia; the life admin concept is but a small piece to that complicated puzzle. Admin connects to (and creeps into) many aspects of academic life: schedule flexibility, institutional and national service obligations and interests, and deep-rooted disproportionate faculty gender roles. Just as viewing it as labor in our personal lives helps assign it value, so too can we aim to

³¹ *Id.* at 183 (noting “self-serve admin has become the norm.”).

³² We've heard rumblings about success with online password management systems and don't doubt they far exceed our very 1990s Post-it Note or “send me an email to reset 20 times” unimpressive and inefficient methods; however, we have yet to investigate them ourselves (add that to the to do list . . .).

³³ Especially today during the pandemic, “technology-preference mismatch” can be a “major cause of admin friction” as Emens described it in her book. *Id.* at 195. Friendships or work relationships that existed over water cooler chatter or dinner or at the playground must now explicitly (and often awkwardly) navigate what tech tool to use, when, and how often to continue communication while social distancing.

understand in our professional environment “how this work is created, how its demands find us, and how the pathways of these demands can be interrupted or redirected.”³⁴ As some have noted, even the way we refer to service can devalue it: while we *work* at teaching and scholarship, we “*perform*” service.³⁵

The flexibility an academic schedule offers is a double-edged admin sword. Our autonomy allows us to fit in more “to-dos” at varying times, but for many (Super Doers especially) the open-endedness means never really shutting off the mental load. This summer, Dyane’s sister was confused and critical of her spending a few minutes at the beach on vacation setting up course management files and completing a mandatory workplace harassment training “just to get it out of the way” before classes started. Dyane’s sister is a nurse who, when she leaves the hospital, actually leaves work. Truly “leaving” tasks related to academic work can be difficult for some Doers, and even more so now that the COVID-19 pandemic keeping us home has caused whatever clear boundaries we used to have separating work, play, and family to disappear.

We also spotted Emens’ life admin themes relating to service obligations and interests as junior faculty. Senior faculty have some power to give important (and less important) tasks to junior faculty both as admin work but also as opportunity. For example, one tenured colleague invited Sarah to present an invited faculty speaker at a lunch and explicitly told her “this is a good opportunity to get your face and name in front of people [read: senior faculty] you might not know yet.” Prepping for that task took time, but it was generous and intentional and worthwhile. In this way, “academic admin” might actually impress (or at least be seen and appreciated). It’s why Deans should be thoughtful about committee chair assignments. It’s why all faculty should track these professional life “extras” and include them in annual reports or tenure applications. It’s why Dyane’s third year tenure review summary noted, “does what she says she is going to do; time consuming projects.” It’s why Sarah added a section to her annual report listing the number of individual students she met with beyond the standard category asking about credit hours taught.³⁶ It’s why faculty colleagues can highlight the work of junior faculty instead of keeping it confined to the invisible, or make sure junior faculty are given not only the undesirable service obligations but also those that provide an opportunity to appear before the faculty as a whole, or get to know members of administration. By no means should academic admin replace excellent teaching and scholarship, but that doesn’t mean the hours spent on it should be ignored.

³⁴ *Id.* at x-xi.

³⁵ “Service, first of all, is usually (and implicitly) distinguished from more obviously necessary activities like teaching; service usually means simple helping or participating. In its traditional sense, service is less work than, say, teaching because its demands are occasional and its duty generally passive. It apparently needs no training or evaluation. We perform service but we work at writing and teaching. In that perspective, service cannot count much.” ROBERT BOICE, *ADVICE FOR NEW FACULTY MEMBERS* 254 (2000).

³⁶ One professor tracked the “voluntary” parts of her job on a spreadsheet for 4 years, acknowledging “it is pretty awesome getting to have a career where you can, in many ways, choose what you want to do” however, “The problem is, some of us ‘choose’ our way into time management nightmares, hurting our families and letting people down when we can’t deliver.” Kelly Dombroski, *Saying yes, saying no: 4 years tracking my voluntary academic activities*, THROWNTOGETHERNESS BLOG (May 27, 2019), <https://throwntogetherness.com/2019/05/27/saying-yes-saying-no-4-years-tracking-my-voluntary-academic-activities/>.

✓ *When possible, avoid saying yes to service requests for “the immediate satisfaction of saying yes.”³⁷ The initial thrill might not be worth the long-term admin headache you’ve just taken on. Avoid saying “yes” right away and try out a 48-hour self-imposed waiting period. “I’ll get back to you on that” will give you time to consider the admin and make a more purposeful decision.³⁸*

We’d be remiss not to acknowledge the gender lines at play with admin in legal academia, although this essay doesn’t purport to dive deep into that complex topic. At many schools, it’s not unusual for female faculty (many of whom may be skills professors and/or non-tenure track and/or women of color) to perform more traditional female roles of service and teaching.³⁹ While it is widely accepted that teaching and service are necessary for student success, those roles remain undervalued in the academy, “which often promotes scholarship as the coin of the realm. The gender differential vis-à-vis the tenure-line faculty can contribute to gender-based devaluation of junior faculty admin work, thus exacerbating the respect issue.”⁴⁰ Emens devotes an entire chapter to the question “if admin were a movie, would women play all the lead roles?”⁴¹ Today, scholars examine the pandemic’s still-unknown impact on women who work outside the home and whether it is “compounding inequalities”⁴² we’ve long faced. A Dec. 2020 faculty survey at Stanford University explored the impact of COVID on faculty and reported troubling data on effects on childcare and dependent care, likelihood of leaving work, satisfaction with the University’s response, ability to complete work, and reported stress. As one faculty member noted, “[I]f [during COVID] consists of nothing beyond work and child supervision. In short, nothing about academic life has slowed down but everything has gotten so much harder to do. It’s not sustainable. And yes, I’m female and I do almost all the child supervision at home.”⁴³ In short, too many

³⁷ Boice provides suggestions, especially to newer faculty wading into the waters of service: “Moderation,” “Balance,” “Letting go....[of] the immediate satisfaction of saying yes,” and thinking about what service tasks might provide “[b]enefit for self and recipient” both. BOICE, *supra* note 35 at 256.

³⁸ Knowing your limits/admin style also helps you avoid failing at a task because you’ve overcommitted (a common occurrence for Super Doers). As Emens notes at page 117, “[i]f you aren’t going to do it, don’t offer.” EMENS, *supra* note 1 at 117. We can reframe saying no something not as failure but as a better outcome for everyone.

³⁹ See generally Kristen K. Tiscione, Ruth Anne Robbins & Melissa H. Weresh, *Structural Barriers to Gender Integration and Equality in the Legal Academy*, VILL. L. REV. (forthcoming 2021); Renee Allen, Alicia Jackson, and DeShunn Harris, *The ‘Pink Ghetto’ Pipeline: Challenges and Opportunities for Women in Legal Education*, 96 U. DET. MERCY L. REV. 525 (2019); MEERA E. DEO, *UNEQUAL PROFESSION: RACE AND GENDER IN LEGAL ACADEMIA* (2019).

⁴⁰ Darby Dickerson, *Abolish the Academic Caste System*, ASS’N OF AM. LAW SCHOOLS (AALS) NEWS (Fall 2020), <https://www.aals.org/about/publications/newsletters/aals-news-fall-2020/presidents-message-abolish-the-academic-caste-system/>.

⁴¹ EMENS, *supra* note 1 at Chapter 4: Who Does Admin?, or Is Admin for Girls?; see also *id.* at x (noting the “second shift has become the term for women’s household labor after a day’s work outside the home. Admin—with its pervasive presence in the margins of everything else—should be understood as everyone’s parallel shift. Admin is like a second (or third or fourth) job we are each asked to do in the margins of our other roles.”)

⁴² Amanda Taub, *Pandemic Will ‘Take Our Women 10 Years Back’ in the Workplace*, N.Y. TIMES (Sept. 26, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/26/world/covid-women-childcare-equality.html>; see also Naomi Cahn & Linda C. McClain, *Gendered Complications of COVID-19: Towards a Feminist Recovery Plan*, 22 GEO. J. GENDER & L. (forthcoming 2021), available at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3689285.

⁴³ *COVID-19 Faculty Survey*, Faculty Women’s Forum Steering Committee, Stanford University (Dec. 10, 2020), available at https://facultydevelopment.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj9996/f/fwf_covid-19_survey_results_and_discussion_as_presented_december_10_2020.reduced_0.pdf at 15, 21 (“Increased childcare

parents (mothers especially, we fear) are “blaming themselves for their ‘failures’ in this pandemic” and perhaps shining a light on admin’s value can help stop (or at least slow down) the unattainable pursuit of perfection.⁴⁴

IV. Admin Futures: Making the Invisible Visible For Students

As the personal lives, schedules, and Zoom home backgrounds of so many professors have been revealed, so have our students’. As we reflected on lessons learned from *Life Admin*, we (teachers to the core) inevitably returned to our students. Emens notes that while “[e]veryone above a certain age faces admin demands of one form or another” so much so that “admin may define adulthood today. . . school provides no training for this work.”⁴⁵ Both Dyane and Sarah work closely with students: Dyane teaches the smallest class 1Ls have, meaning these nervous and new students often turn to her for support on any number of fronts. Sarah works primarily with students who are struggling and require frank communication and close relationships. Much of what we do with these students is about admin: we help them understand why law school (and life) can feel so overwhelming, and suggest tools and approaches to lessen the burden. We do this in small ways (helping them use calendars and craft study schedules) and in large ways (helping a student find resources to deal with the estate of a deceased parent or figuring out who to contact to get help for mental health struggles). As we reflect on our own admin management, we’d like to pay it forward and offer a few ideas for how to help students understand and get a handle on their own:

- A syllabus can acknowledge out of class time, and estimate how much work is required on watching videos, reading, doing research, etc. We tell students to be specific when putting things in their calendar (“Do 3 Crim Pro Essays (4th Am)” v. “Study”). This helps students plan beyond the “chore” and consider the emotional and mental admin as well (if you’re doing essays on Tuesday at 4pm, will you find them before then? Do you know where? Will you print them out or complete them online?).
- Tell them why it matters. For law students, admin will become a matter of professional responsibility. Deadlines, due dates, and communication are core to being a lawyer. If Sarah tells students to put deadlines in their calendars, they roll their eyes. Instead, she tells them about her experience as an immigration attorney when it was not unusual to receive a court date two or three years in the future. She explains that when she got a notice for a hearing in June 2022 she didn’t just stick in the calendar and be done—she also put a note in May 2022 saying “One month till Client’s hearing,” a reminder when it was “Six months

demands, coupled with increased departmental administrative demands, have reduced my research and writing hours to zero. And there are still not enough hours in the day to fulfill my basic professional and family obligations.”)

⁴⁴ Anne Helen Petersen, *Other countries have social safety nets. The U.S. has women*, CULTURE STUDY (Nov. 11, 2020), <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/other-countries-have-social-safety> (“As a sociologist, it’s easy for me to see how that blame is deeply misplaced—how women should be blaming our government for failing to stop the spread of the virus, for failing to pay people to stay home, for failing to provide an adequate social support system with affordable childcare, affordable healthcare, and sufficient financial protections for people who can’t make ends meet . . . how women should be blaming their employers for putting profits before people, for setting unrealistic expectations, and for failing to provide the support that workers need . . . how women should, in many cases, be blaming their own spouses or partners for prioritizing their own careers, for not doing enough at home, and for denying the science about COVID-19.”).

⁴⁵ EMENS, *supra* note 1 at xiv.

till Client’s hearing.” She suggests students do the same for their large assignments. Legal writing memo due in November? Put a reminder in your October calendar that you have one month till it’s due, and then go beyond that. What should be completed one month out?

- Encourage students to be honest. If a student is never going to miss a New England Patriots football game (sorry, we live in Boston), that’s good to know: Saturday studying will be busier than Sunday. It is only if we are honest with ourselves about what we value that we can be honest with how we choose to spend our time. Our students’ lives are not only school, and their to do lists and calendars should reflect that.
- Some admin is simply worse than others. When Sarah was in practice and struggling with the responsibility and anxiety of the job, she wondered aloud why so many lawyers were stressed. A more seasoned attorney responded, “Clients pay us to take on their stress.” For some lawyers, part of the job is doing what Emens terms “Awful Admin.”⁴⁶ This high stress admin involves contentious issues like child custody, death, and divorce. Some people are more stressed by this than others. Digging into the parts of jobs that require different types of admin might help students understand why certain legal jobs might cause more unhappiness, or, conversely, more satisfaction. Some lawyers love advocating with the government on behalf of their clients, or jumping into tense situations. Others are particularly gifted at communicating with clients in crises. Some lawyers enjoy the more solitary process of filling out paperwork and doing research, whereas others find it painfully boring. Encouraging students to understand what sort of admin they like, hate, or can at least tolerate, can help.
- As Annie Dillard famously wrote, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”⁴⁷ A schedule and a to-do list can be, like a budget,⁴⁸ a statement of values. Members of the legal profession are notoriously bad at caring for our mental health. By helping students find balance, we can teach them that valuing time allows us more time to dedicate to our values. The hope is not to better understand admin so that we can . . . do more admin. The ideal is to do a frank evaluation of what is holding our time and energy so we can make the most of life.

✓ *What’s your “yes”? Emens quotes author Stephen Covey with the helpful advice, “Keep in mind that you are always saying ‘no’ to something.”⁴⁹ Instead of feeling guilty or conflicted about what asks and tasks you are saying no to, be clear on what you are saying yes to. More time with family? More time on writing and research that sustain you?*

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 11.

⁴⁷ ANNIE DILLARD, *THE WRITING LIFE* 32 (1989) (“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing. A schedule defends from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days. It is a scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time. A schedule is a mock-up of reason and order—willed, faked, and so brought into being; it is a peace and a haven set into the wreck of time . . .”).

⁴⁸ As a pastor once reminded Sarah during a sermon on finances, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” *Matthew* 6:21.

⁴⁹ EMENS, *supra* note 1 at 82.

V. Conclusion

If a conclusion is the spot for grandiose answers to the questions at hand, well, frankly, we have none. 2020 has ended, the pandemic continues, and life admin trickles on. Emens' book didn't give us all the answers, nor does this essay offer a perfect blueprint for navigating thorny issues of life's work along the margins. But what we can do, and what Emens' book did for us, is bring comfort in numbers. We are not alone in juggling mental burdens, and they are not light. At least now we have some definite terms and visible markers for invisible stressors, some perspective to re-shape our privileged outlook, and some confidence to make and ask for changes at work which, in the past, might have felt too personal.

Let's keep making the invisible visible. For faculty and students, COVID has forced this hand: the challenges of balancing parenthood and a full-time job without usual childcare, the politics and distribution of service work among faculty, the dicey assigned domestic roles in families and partnerships, the awkwardness at disclosing childcare problems with deans, and the socioeconomic privilege or lack thereof of our students Zooming into class from a comfortable home office swivel chair or next to a utility closet on the basement floor. There are particular stresses to both parenthood and academic life that often breed perfection, and the expectation that both should appear effortless. Parenting and teaching during COVID is anything but. The mental load of admin is real, and if faculty can "start talking about it, the more we don't have the shame associated with it and the better we can get together."⁵⁰ This symposium demands we give space, value, and attention to the admin of life in legal academia for so many, and the very real threats posed to the output of women and caregivers should these issues remain unaddressed.

This is not just about individual changes. As Emens writes, "[a]dmin is not an individual problem, and its solutions are not primarily individual."⁵¹ The change we seek, rather, is about changing the way we view the systems we operate within, how we engage with them, and whether we let them define our worth. Examining the many roles mothers in particular are taking on right now—and which ones we want to drop—writer Anne Helen Peterson concludes: "[u]nlearning ideas about who we should be, what our posture should be towards others, and all the self-abnegation it requires—it's hard work amidst so much other hard work. But sometimes, I've learned, you have to work hard to actually start working less."⁵²

⁵⁰ Beth McMurtrie, *The Pandemic Is Dragging On. Professors Are Burning Out*, CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUC. (Nov. 5, 2020), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-pandemic-is-dragging-on-professors-are-burning-out> ("It's survival mode we're in.").

⁵¹ EMENS, *supra* note 1 at 153.

⁵² Anne Helen Petersen, *The Mom Does It*, CULTURE STUDY (Dec. 2, 2020), <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/the-mom-does-it>.