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A typically untypical day

Catherine Cotter wonders whether project management is following her or vice versa.

The task of describing a typical day in your professional life is not that simple when every day is so different.

I work as an information development team lead with TWi (Technically Write IT), based in Cork, Ireland. I lead a team working on a range of documentation solutions for one of our long-term partners — a large, multinational software provider. I manage the relationship with this partner and the day-to-day management of its projects.

In terms of direct people management, I act as line manager for eight information developers. However, as project lead, I manage a larger team that expands and contracts according to the partner's project requirements.

I love the fact that no two days are the same, it's one of the things that attracted me to this role in the first place. Another was the flexi-time, of which I make good use.

I'm not a morning person and never have been. To be honest, I'm purely ornamental before 9am and am more productive when I start later.

Generally, I get to the office around 9:30am. While enjoying breakfast 'al desko', I set about planning my day, noting what meetings I have lined up and weaving my other tasks around those fixed points in my schedule.

I check my emails to see if there are any urgent issues to be addressed. One of the challenges of working with multinational clients is that your mailbox never sleeps. Getting through emails and making a to-do list can take up to an hour in the morning when things are busy. I use Outlook and OneNote task management tools to keep track of everything, although I often prefer a pen and paper.

> **With multinational clients, your mailbox never sleeps.**

Today, I need to check on the induction of a new information developer who started with us this week. I contact the team members delivering training and support. Everything is on track, so I move on to planning a new project focused on adapting training materials for online delivery.

I call my point of contact (POC) in the partner company to gather information about requirements, deliverables, and timelines. Afterwards, I meet our service delivery manager and business development manager to devise our solution. We consider which team member is the best fit for this project, taking into account skillset and availability. We review our overall resourcing across projects in our central resource tracking spreadsheet and pencil in the proposed project. With our resourcing plan agreed, I finalise and send off the proposal to the partner POC. Once we get approval from our partner's procurement team, the pilot can start within a fortnight.

> **Pivot tables allow me to extract and sort relevant information quickly.**

Next is a weekly project meeting. This is a large project to which 12 information developers are currently assigned. The project involves the creation of DITA-based educational content. Project meetings are important for communicating process changes and discussing improvements that could increase efficiency. Today, we also address some recent technical issues with the authoring environment and I take an action item to follow up with the technical support team.

After the meeting, I have lunch. I try to fit in a bit of a walk at lunchtime (Irish weather permitting), to avoid the afternoon slump. On returning to my desk, I spend another twenty minutes responding to emails, and reviewing and reprioritising my to-do list.

I then turn to my next task, one of the most challenging for the day – calculating resource allocation. As it is the midpoint of the month, I need to review how much effort my team has spent on projects (compared to our projections) to ensure that we are within budget. This involves generating Excel reports from our time recording system and analysing the data. Pivot tables are invaluable for this task, allowing me to extract and sort the relevant information quickly. One of the most beneficial things I've done in terms of developing as a project manager is to advance my Excel skills – it's the tool I am most reliant upon in my daily work.

> **In one-to-one meetings we discuss issues, concerns, or suggestions.**

My final meeting of the day is a one-to-one with a team member working on an internal project to improve training resources. We agree a strategy and target dates. One-to-one meetings are essential to progress projects, and provide an opportunity to discuss issues, concerns, or suggestions. Besides, it's important to engage with colleagues on a personal level and get to know a bit about their lives outside work. Not to mention the fact that these meetings are my main source of book and movie recommendations.

It's almost the end of the day, so I return to my inbox to try to clear the decks for tomorrow morning. Finishing up at about 6pm, I leave for a non-work-related meeting. I dedicate much of my spare time to several voluntary groups and am currently helping to organise a local agricultural show. It seems that project management even follows me home — or maybe I follow it. **C**

Catherine Cotter joined TWi in 2014. She holds a BA in Applied Languages with Computing from the University of Limerick. She previously worked with SAP for eight years.
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