Scheduling: Time to take control

PDA- and Internet-based programs can help avoid double-booking.

John Luo, MD

Assistant professor of psychiatry UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute and Hospital Los Angeles, CA

Like many doctors, you often feel the need to be two places at once.

The trick is to avoid *scheduling* two commitments at the same time. Anyone who has had to manage a busy practice schedule *and* remember his or her child's soccer practice knows this can be challenging.

If you're looking to organize your schedule, the Internet or your personal digital assistant (PDA) may hold the answer. This article will review scheduling solutions and help you decide which is right for your practice.

PDA SCHEDULING-PROS AND CONS

Both Palm and Pocket PC devices offer very good scheduling capabilities; your choice of operating system depends upon whether you need to use Microsoft Outlook. In my view, Palm is simpler and more reliable, whereas I have had more trouble connecting a Pocket PC device to my desktop computer.

Keeping a calendar in a handheld computer can be quite handy. Simply pull out the PDA, click once or twice, and view your daily schedule. Used properly, this can help prevent scheduling conflicts.

This feature, however, may be less helpful if your office staff maintains your schedule. For one, no one else can access the PDA while you're carrying it. Second, if you do not regularly synchronize your PDA to the office computer, the staffer can make in-office schedule changes that are not recorded on the PDA version, possibly leading to double booking.

To prevent such mixups, assign one office assistant to update your schedule, and allow *only* that staffer to make changes. Also, be sure to double check the schedule before booking an appointment on your own.

Many major personal information managers such as Microsoft Outlook and Lotus Notes can be synchronized to a handheld. This allows your staff to view and simultaneously edit your schedule in the office, which is then synchronized onto the handheld. What's more, users who cannot access your computer but have the proper privileges to your information can still connect to your schedule.

If a significant other uses a Palm OS device and you need to coordinate your schedule with his or hers, WeSync provides a solution that synchronizes both schedules via an online server and displays them side by side on your Palm OS PDA. Although WeSync no longer provides tech support for it, the software and service (which PalmOne owns) is still available.

Schedule synchronization between Pocket PC users is tricky: It cannot be done via an Internet server because each device has a one-to-one relationship with Microsoft Outlook, the desktop schedule software.

ManyPartners overcomes this limitation by allowing users to connect two Pocket PC devices to the same desktop scheduling software. Both users then must share information on one profile in Microsoft Outlook and must enter information in a way that avoids confusion, such as "John: doctor's appointment" and "Mary: lecture on Monday.")

MAKING YOUR DAYS COLORFUL

Third-party software can make your calendar easier to use by employing color and icons to designate types of appointments

([Table](#)). This software also provides quick access to other information, such as task lists and notes.

For Palm OS devices, products such as [Agendus](#), [DateBk5](#), and [Beyond Contacts](#) provide a different and enhanced way to view your data. Similar software for the Pocket PC or Windows Mobile 2003 devices include [Ulti-Planner](#), [Pocket Informant](#), and Agenda Fusion and Agenda Today from [DeveloperOne](#).

Some programs use the PDA's built-in database while others have a proprietary database. This difference is important because it affects your ability to "beam" information from one device to another. For example, a proprietary database can facilitate data exchange, but only if the user to whom you are sending the data also uses a device with a proprietary database.

ONLINE SCHEDULING

Internet-based scheduling programs can also prevent double-booking. The user enters prospective meeting dates into the online form; the software then checks the dates against the calendar for conflicts and selects the best date. These schedules can also be synchronized to a PDA.

One drawback: changes to the online and PDA schedules must be entered separately, creating the potential for double booking. To avoid this:

- assign one staff member to make schedule changes

- or use a wireless PDA or one with a built-in cellular phone to allow instant schedule updates and prevent miscommunication.

[Appointmentquest.com](#) and [scheduling.com](#)-two services geared toward health care providers-provide online schedules, can handle multiple service locations and personnel, and will generate reminders for patients. Scheduling.com also can track multiple types of insurance and can provide billing systems with patient registration information to generate statements.

Schedule enhancement software options

SOLUTION	WEBSITE URL	OS	COST
WeSync	[www.wesync.com](#)	Palm	Free
Beyond Contacts	[www.dataviz.com](#)	Palm	$49.95
Agendus	[www.iambic.com](#)	Palm	$25.95 standard $39.95 professional
DateBK5	[www.pimlicosoftware.com](#)	Palm	$24.95
Agenda Fusion	[www.developerone.com](#)	Pocket PC	$29.95
Pocket Informant	[www.pocketinformant.com](#)	Pocket PC	$24.95
Ulti-Planner	[www.uglybass.com/ultiplanner](#)	Pocket PC	$14.95

If you have any questions about these products or comments about Psyber Psychiatry, [click here](#) *to contact Dr. Luo or send an e-mail to* [Current.Psychiatry@dowdenhealth.com](#)*.*

Disclosure

Dr. Luo reports no financial relationship with any company whose products are mentioned in this article. The opinions expressed by Dr. Luo in this column are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of CURRENT PSYCHIATRY.