Episode 112: Melanie Nelson

# KL: Katie Linder

**MN:** Melanie Nelson

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode one hundred and twelve.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On today’s episode, I am joined by Dr. Melanie Nelson, a project manager with more than 15 years of experience in the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries. She has a Ph.D. in biochemistry from The Scripps Research Institute and currently works for the scientific software company Dotmatics. Over the course of her career, she has managed projects and teams in small and mid-size biotech companies and served as a contractor and consultant for academics, government agencies, and large companies. She has a long-standing interest in techniques to improve time use and productivity, both for individuals and teams and is the author of *Taming the Work Week: Work Smarter Not Longer* and *Navigating the Path to Industry: A Hiring Manager’s Advice for Academics Looking for a Job in Industry*. You can find her online at BeyondManaging.com and on Twitter at @melanie\_nelson.

Thanks so much for joining me on the show today, Melanie.

**MN:** Glad to be here!

**KL:** So I am super excited to talk with you about all things project management. This is a personal passion of mine as well, but especially because I think it can be so helpful for researchers. So to kick us off, let’s just start by defining it – and we here this term all the time, but what are kind of the boundaries we can set around what is project management?

**MN:** So my real short answer to that is usually, project management is just kind of the art of getting things done. That’s maybe not useful in setting boundaries though, so uh – this may be more useful to think about what is a project in terms of when you’re talking about project management. A project is a defined scope of work, that is a little bit jargony, but it’s just something that you’re trying to accomplish that has a definite start and a definite end. So in research I often tell people you can think of it almost as a research paper – would be a good project. What gets used kind of colloquially in science is more like program management. So like when I was in graduate school and I would say, “I’m working on – this is my project, it’s on [*indiscernible*] calcium binding proteins” they were actually what I would now consider several different projects in that big project that eventually became my dissertation. And if I were to now go back in time and use project managing techniques on that, I would actually be bringing in some program management as well.

**KL:** Okay, so why is project management important for effective research? I mean, other than the fact that we all want to get things done – I mean, certainly this is something that we’re all interested in. Um but why do you think that this is especially important for researchers to consider?

**MN:** Um. Well because we’re not used to considering it, right? We’re used to thinking that all that matters is having good ideas, but a great idea is really no use if you can’t execute on it and get it out into the world. And I think particularly as research projects get more interdisciplinary and teams get bigger, um learning how to work effectively together and bring different people and resources together to get things done, is almost essential for being effective in research.

**KL:** Okay so, what are the more basic elements of project management that researchers should be paying attention to?

**MN:** Um, it’s really hard to kind of break things down into basics, I tend to then start giving people the entire background of “here’s how you do project management.” But I think the most important basics are knowing what your milestones are as you work toward your final goal, having a realistic estimate for how you’re going to hit those milestones – how long that’s going to take, and having a system by which you’ll notice when you’re missing those milestones. So that’s all around being able to keep track of your work. And that’s really important in project management, because one of the main goals is that you want to know when you’re slipping off your original estimate schedule so that you can address it earlier, and not wait and address it when it’s become a raging fire, and now everyone has to work ridiculous hours to get stuff done. Um another really important element of project management that I think people don’t think about enough just kind of naturally is risks. So we all of a tendency to ignore risks, because who want to think about all of the bad things that can happen? But if you think about risks, and especially how you might mitigate some of the risks that are going to be most likely to occur on your project, you can actually be much more effective and be more likely to reach your long term goals.

**KL:** So I have heard this component of risk called by some people ‘conducting a pre-mortem’, so instead of a postmortem after a project is done where you’re like, “Oh these are all the things that went wrong that I want to try to mitigate in the future” you start a project by saying, “What are all of the things I think could go wrong, and how do I set up the project in a way that that doesn’t happen?”

**MN:** Yeah. That’s one good way to think about it. Another thing is to think about, you know, sometimes you can’t keep something bad from happening. Um, you know, like people are going to quit your research group, or new requirements are going to come in from your administrators, and you can’t really stop that from happening, but if you think about it ahead of time – how might I respond? Um you can often come up with better ideas of how to respond to risks by thinking about it early, because then you have more time to think about it, and you’re not dealing with something when it’s like a raging fire and everybody’s in crisis mode.

**KL:** Right. Okay so I want to circle back to this idea of milestones, and let’s take an example of just working on an academic article. What are some things that you would say might be common milestones - just to give people some examples of what we’re talking about here?

**MN:** Wow that’s hard to say without know the details of someone’s research. But let’s take an example, say you’re working on a paper and there’s often this idea I heard a lot when I was still in the lab of, what are the four figures in your paper, right, that you’re going to have to publish? Each one of those four figures could be a milestone – if that sort of paradigm works for your research. Another thing that was familiar for my research – I worked in protein structure and function, so I had to produce the proteins I was going to study. So one of my milestones might have been getting enough purified protein that I could then go ahead to my next milestone, which probably would have been collecting MNR data on it, and then my following milestone would be actually analyzing my data and going ahead from there.

**KL:** So it’s interesting, because milestones it seems like some depend on others. So you can order them to say - what would happen first in order to move this along?

**MN:** Yes! And that’s actually something I chose to leave out of my basic elements, but I tell people if you are good at estimating and you understand your dependencies, which is just when one task or milestone depends on others, that’s when you start to be able to make really good decisions – when changes happen. Because change will happen. Alright? That’s kind of a constant in all of life, but especially in research. Things change and you want to adjust to it, but you will respond better to change if you understand, “Okay, what does that change mean for my entire project? Not just what’s right here in front of me right now?”

**KL:** Okay so, let’s talk about some of the main challenges that you see people encountering when it comes to project management. What are kind of the sticking points for people?

**MN:** I think getting the idea to do it at all is hard. For people who are used to working in research, there’s a real tendency to avoid process. People are afraid that if they bring in any sort of process, they will be constrained by it. And I think that’s just a misunderstanding, and it comes from the fact that when we hear about project management or process it’s usually on these big projects where millions of dollars are being committed as milestones past – so then of course you’re going to have a heavy process. But for smaller research project, you don’t have to have a heavy process and so getting past that is one big sticking point. Um it’s – can be hard also to recognize which concepts can be applied to research. So if you go out and look up project management on the web, what you’ll find is stuff geared at people doing project management as a professional, and if you have a professional project manager, it’s usually because you have a big project with a lot of money and a lot of risks, and so what you find isn’t always directly applicable to research. And so figuring out what you can use and what makes sense in research is a little hard, and I find that people kind of struggle with that. The other big one I find people have problems with is if they’re spending time on managing the work, they’re doing something wrong – that this should be easy, and that they should set up a system and it should just run, and that’s just not how it works. Um it doesn’t – it shouldn’t take a huge amount of time, but it will take some time. Um in my experience, once I found a system that works for whatever I’m trying to manage, the time I put in to managing, is paid back many times over in efficiency, but there is still time I put in. And so that’s something I think people forget. I like to joke, because I was a chemist in undergrad, that you just basically can’t break the second law of thermodynamics, right? When you’re trying to manage work, you’re trying to decrease order, decrease chaos, and so you’re going to but energy in and that’s just the way it is. And so you have to be prepared for that.

**KL:** I love that explanation. Okay so hearing you talk about all of this, I’m just curious – why do you think academics are not trained more in project management? It seems like it could be so helpful, and such a skill set that could be leveraged to really make research more effective and more efficient.

**MN:** I think it comes back to the idea that when project management first became a field, it was – it grew out of these larger projects with really heavy process and people would look at that and think, “That is not applicable at all” and so it just never came in. There’s also a tendency to think that research projects can’t be managed because they involve so much change, and that’s just a misunderstanding of what project management is trying to do. Even the old fashioned, very heavy processes all acknowledge that change happens and it’s about managing change. My favorite quote about that is from Dwight Eisenhower. It says, “In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is essential.” And what that gets to is the fact that change is constant, and that project management – even the old kind of heavier processes recognize that change happens, and the fact that once you make a plan it’s almost immediately out of date, but the act of making the plan gathers information together that you can use in responding to change. And that is what’s essential. And that’s what you want to use. But I think people don’t understand that, and so they think, “Well this is just not applicable to me, because there’s so much change.” And like I’ve said before, project management is most visible on these big complex projects like building a space shuttle, or in my field, getting a drug through development and regulatory approval. And those are projects that at each milestone you’re committing millions of dollars, and so there is this really big process, and a lot of that just doesn’t seem to make sense if you’re running a three person research lab and I agree – it doesn’t. So I think when someone brings in a trainer into academic – into an academic setting, if they’re not careful they bring someone in who brings in project management as if you were building a space shuttle, and that’s not appropriate. And so then people think “Well we tried it, it didn’t work. So never mind.”

**KL:** Okay well. Melanie, I could talk about this all day long, because I am such a process-oriented person. But we’re going to take a brief break, when we come back we’re going to talk a little bit more about effective process management with collaborators. Back in a moment.

The Research in Action Podcast is just one of the many projects we work on here at the Oregon State University Ecampus Research Unit. A project we’re particularly excited about is our OSU Ecampus Research Fellows Program, which funds research for Oregon State faculty that is actionable, impacts student learning online, and encourages the development of a robust research pipeline for online teaching and learning at OSU. Recently our first cohort released a series of white papers on method and design for distance education research. See the white papers at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/white-papers.

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Melanie, I would love to talk with you more about effective project management, especially with collaborators. And I know you’ve worked with a lot of teams and environments – I’m wondering when you’re looking at research collaborations in particular, are there common challenges that people should be watching out for in terms of project management?

**MN:** I think a lot of them are in the early phases, right? When you’re just getting a project started, a lot of people don’t spend enough time there. And so one of the ones is knowing what each group is looking for out of the collaboration. Uh knowing that up front, so when you’re negotiating these little problems that come up, you have an understanding of what would be a won for both sides. So you get to better conflicts, and that’s a big one. Also I find that different groups and different people have different schedule expectations, and there’s a tendency not to talk about that upfront, and I am a big proponent of “No. Just get it all out there!” It’s better to have it out there and deal with it – so be open with what schedule you’re expecting and what kind of response time they can expect from you, and that will just make things move more smoothly. And finally, I think this is more of a problem in interdisciplinary collaborations - which I run into a lot because I work in industry and so it’s almost always interdisciplinary. Uh there’s a tendency to assume that the other people’s work is easier than your work, and so that can lead to kind of dismissive comments, or just without even meaning to - unrealistic schedule expectations. A joke I always had was I would be working with a software team and then scientist would be like, “Can’t you just ask add a button?” and I’m like, “No I can’t just add a button. It’s not that simple.” And on the flip side, the software would be like, “Well why can’t they just change their work flow?” it’s like, well – no they can’t just change their work flow! It’s not that simple. So I always tell people, “Assume your part of the project is the easiest part and that’s going to help a lot with smoothing the communication and collaboration.”

**KL:** Okay. So I’m curious to what degree when it comes to project management with collaborators, you feel you need to know kind of the personalities of your collaborators well, because I would imagine some people get kind of thrown into these projects with other people that maybe they don’t know very well, or new people get added to a lab, or something like that. How well do you need to know each other to be able to effectively work on these projects?

**MN:** It’s easier when you know people well. Um, it’s easier when you share a culture – that’s something I tell people to really think about. And even if you share a language, you don’t share a culture. So my favorite example of this was when my projects in my first biotech company, we were collaborating with a group in New Zealand and yeah, we both speak English and it’s a very similar culture, but their sense of humor is much drier than our sense of humor. And so they would say things that – they we’re joking, and we would just not realize they were joking. Um and so, you have to be kind of aware of that on both ends, and when you don’t know each other well, realize that it’s – you know, actively try not to take offense. You know, when something’s a joke and you don’t realize it’s a joke, just try not to take offense about it and just bring the communication more open I guess - would be a way to out it. I mean, that collaboration worked out well and in the end I became good friends with the people I was working with in New Zealand, in fact, such good friends that I’m now married to one of them. But uh – it was a rocky start, because we did not have similar expectations about how communication would go, and when you first start off you don’t. You don’t know what’s funny to the other person, you don’t know what’s normal and expected business behavior. So another example of that is that Americans tend to talk over each other, we don’t consider that rude, right, when we’re in a group we’ll just start talking and we’ll just be talking over each other. In some other cultures that’s very rude, and can be very – lead to a lot of problems in the communication. And once everyone starts to get to know each other that’s fine, but in the early stages when you don’t know each other well you just have to be much more careful and much more sensitive to it.

**KL:** Okay so I’m curious if when you’re working with a lot of collaborators, or even with a small team on a research project, how important is it to have a project leader?

**MN:** Well it depends a lot on how the project and the collaboration is set up. Um it doesn’t always have to be like one project leader. So the example I gave before, right, where we were collaborating with this group in New Zealand, my boss thought I was the lead, my colleague’s boss in New Zealand thought he was the lead, and um – it worked out okay though because we were clearly the points of contact. And so I think what’s more important than having a leader is having a communication plan. Having an idea of who do you contact about these issues, who is the main point on each side, who makes the decisions on each side, and how will disputes get resolved? Is there a clear hierarchy or is it going to have to be negotiated out, and that’s more important than having one clear leader. I would say though that someone needs to be in charge of tracking progress. This might not be the same person who has the decision making authority, but someone needs to do the work, of keeping the work going, right, and that takes work – you need to know who’s job is that?

**KL:** Okay. So you brought up this idea of communication, which seems like it would be a thing in terms of project management with collaborators. I’m wondering if you have particular strategies for effectively managing communications about projects when you’re working in a team environment.

**MN:** I mean, really it comes down to talking about it up front. And a lot of my answers would be, well that depends on the details of the people and the project, just talk about it upfront and agree. But the basics are agree up front on how you’re going to communicate – are you going to have a standing meeting? How frequently will that meeting be? Who needs to be in that meeting? If someone has to – can’t make it, can the meeting be rescheduled or do you go ahead? Who’s going to take the minutes – are you going to rotate that around or is someone going to be the minute taker? Uh who schedules the meetings? That sort of thing, just talk about it all up front. Um there are project management tools that can make day to day communication easier, but everyone has to buy into using them. So I love Trello, I know people who love Basecamp, um I know people who love Asana. They’re all great tools, and what matters is not which one you pick, but that everyone on the team thinks “Yeah that’s how we’re going to do this.” Um the one main thing I would say is, you want to share document repository and there’s almost no excuse not to have one now that Google Drive makes it so easy. Dropbox also works. Whatever you want to use, but it needs to be a place where people put the documents that are shared across the collaboration and where the one true version lives, right? So you’re not going, “Oh gee. Are we working on version 7.1\_mn?” or you know, “What version are we on?” There needs to be a document repository.

**KL:** Okay so I want to dig a little bit deeper on this, and we will link to all of those tools in the show notes for people who may not have heard of them or want to check them out a little bit further. But I feel like when you start to work in a team environment on a research project and especially if you’re working with people that maybe you haven’t worked with before, who are coming from different institutional settings, often people come with their own project management tools, and ideas, and things that they’ve done in the past. So I’m wondering what you could recommend for even that initial conversation of, “How are we going to do this? How are we going to work together? Which tools are we going to use? Where are we going to deposit things?” Like – is there some kind of like checklist of like how do you work through these issues in a way that you know you’ve kind of covered your bases before you get started?

**MN:** I don’t know about a global checklist, but the idea of a checklist is a good one, especially if you’re someone who does a lot of collaborations – to have a list of things to talk about at the beginning, because it’s really easy to forget. Also, especially if the things are a little uncomfortable, it’s really easy to just conveniently forget, right? Its like, “Oh, I’m not going to talk about that!” but no – it’s better to talk about it. Um so no, I don’t know like one thing I could point to. Uh I would just say the general thing is do it early, have it up front, and be really open to taking in ideas and thinking about ‘would that work for me?’ So as a project manager, I have used so many different processes, because my general philosophy is I go in and I want to do what works for that team. No sometimes I’m in a company that says, “Well this is the way we work, and this is your framework.” And that’s great, but I’ll still kind of customize and work, and figure out how is this particular team going to work together? Because each team is different – even if the leads have worked on it before, the people are different, and have different strengths and different needs, and so you need to think about it. Um so yeah, really it’s just do it up front, and the other thing would be in that upfront conversation being really clear about what are the parameters for when shared information can be shared out more broadly. So I think a lot of times we make assumptions about – well if it’s in this free document repository it’s free for me to share in my own presentations, and maybe the opposite team made an assumption that no, you would never share this without checking with me explicitly first. So have those sorts of conversations upfront to kind of decrease your risk of having a big blow up later.

**KL:** Well I think you’ve given us some ideas for what to do, and a lot of really good practical solutions in this segment. We’re going to take another brief break, when we come back we’ll hear a little bit more from Melanie about personal management. Back in a moment.

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Melanie, because you are such an expert in project management, I’m curious about how you’re applying what you’ve learned from being a project manager to your own personal time management.

**MN:** Well I find I actually apply it a lot. It’s very hard to turn it off, and so I end up project managing my entire life, but you know – there’s some good things. So I would say there are kind of three big lessons I’ve taken from project management into my own personal time use. The first is knowing the value of what my milestones are along the way to some end goal, and being able to track against those milestones, so if I’m slipping and I’m not going to make my goal, I have time to make up before it becomes a crisis. So that’s become really important now that I have kids - I have two kids that are in elementary school now, but when you’re managing the schedules of four people – my husband, myself, and our two kids, and everybody’s got things going on, just know your milestones can help you keep things on track. Um.

**KL:** So I have a quick question about this, because I think this is something that people can be very interested in, and if they’re thinking about project managing not just their work, but their personal lives. At what point are you doing this process of setting the milestones? I mean, do you ever get into something and realize, “Okay I don’t have clear milestones, I need to backtrack and kind of figure out what’s going on here” or do you have a pretty set process for identifying what that looks like?

**MN:** I would say that I’ve been a project manager for so long now that I can’t not do it. And so even to the point of, “Okay we’re going to go to the park in my head.” in my head I’m thinking, “Okay so the milestones are we need to find their sand toys, the kids need to get their shoes on, we need to put sunscreen on” right? I just can’t not. So I don’t really have a process so much as it’s just become second nature. I would say that for bigger projects, things like if you’re doing a room remodel or something, thinking about it upfront is what I would do. I would just sit down and think about it. Um one thing that my husband and I do to keep these things up front naturally, we have a habit on Friday nights after the kids are in bed, we open up a couple beers and we sit on our sofa and kind of talk over, “Hey how did our week go?” but also what’s coming up for the weekend. And that’s when some of those milestones come out.

**KL:** Okay. So it’s kind of a collaborative project within your family as well.

**MN:** Yeah you got to feel sorry for my kids. They got a project manager and an engineer for parents, and so they get a lot of structure. We try not to overdo it, but yeah it’s kind of the whole family does it now.

**KL:** Well I’m sure it will serve them well as they continue on into whatever they end up growing up to be. Okay so, you said there were three things. What’s the second one?

**MN:** My second one comes from a project management technique called Kanban, which came out of Toyota manufacturing of all places, but it’s a really great technique. And I think actually if I were a research scientist with a small lab, it would be what I would look at first for bringing project management in. But briefly, the idea is that you map your work flow. And for personal use it’s as simple as – my backlog, here’s what I need to do, here’s what I’m doing now, here’s what’s done. I tend to break my backlog into like the deep backlog which can grow really, really long, and then my prioritized ‘here’s what’s coming up next’ but you don’t have to. So you have this simple work flow, and then you can basically limit the amount of things that you allow in your ‘in progress’ column at a time. And I first discovered this when I was looking at a problem at work. At that point I was actually a group leader, and my boss was this idea generating guy, right? So he would come into my team and say, “How about this? How about that?” and it was great – they were great ideas, but the team was getting kind of overloaded and kind of getting the dear in the headlights look of, “Oh my God there’s so much!” And so I found Kanban and the idea of limiting work in progress, and I thought that might work, but I wanted to try it out on myself first before I hoisted it on my team. So I tried it out on my personal work and I said, “Okay. I’m going to say I can’t have more than five things in progress at once.” Like five – not necessarily projects, but five, you know, medium sized tasks. And I was just blown away by how much more productive I got, and at this point I had already thought I was pretty productive, so I was like “Wow this is amazing!” And I thought about it a lot since then, and I think the thing that limiting your work in progress does is it overcomes procrastination, right, because you can’t start that shiny new thing until you finish that thing that’s been on your list for a while. It also really kind of helps with perfectionism, because again you’re seeing, “Okay I have these other things that I want to work on, but I’m just polishing this other thing. Can I let it go? Can I move on?” And it – for me, my big problem I’m not much of a perfectionist or a procrastinator, but I am someone who says yes to too many things, and so having a limit on my work in progress keeps me from doing that, because if I do say yes to too many things, even if I can fit it into my calendar and my schedule, my brain just gets over loaded. It can’t hold that much in my head at once. And I find that for me, five kind of projects at a time is all I can do, and so that’s been really effective for me in making me more productive and feeling less stressed. Even when I’m quite busy. And I – for me five is my limit. I know people who have used this who say two is their limit. It just depends on, do you like to work on a lot of things in parallel or are you more of a serial worker? Finish this, and then move on to the next.

**KL:** Okay. So the combine you’re describing sounds very similar in some ways to agile methods, which I want to point our listeners to a previous episode that we did with Rebecca Pope-Ruark, talking about agile methodology in research and the idea that having the backlog in progress and done columns.

**MN:** Yeah, and in fact, Kanban is one of the two big agile methods used in software development. The other one is Scrum. And both of them have really good use – um ideas you can pull for use in research. For personal use I find Kanban more relevant. But yeah.

**KL:** Okay. We will definitely link to information on that in the previous episode in the show notes as well.

**MN:** The third one is recognizing the risks posed by getting over worked. I actually figured this one out kind of naturally before I became a project manager, but becoming a project manager really helped me better understand what was going on there. So I like to say over work is a random risk generator on my project, because overworked people are – people who have worked past what kind of their limit is, they make mistakes. And mistakes generally turn up as things that are going wrong in your project. And so since I do a lot of software project management, mistakes turn up as bugs, and bugs can be very expensive. They can throw you way off track. They can put you way behind schedule. Um the most kind of striking example I saw of this was – I actually know of a case where an overworked lab technician poured the cells that he had just isolated and was ready to start purifying protein from – he poured them on the wrong first column, and destroyed that entire prep. And this was a very expensive prep, because the protein in there had been labeled, and it cost the company hundreds of thousands of dollars and put the project several months behind schedule, and it was just heartbreaking because everybody blamed the technician, but I looked and thought that’s not the technician’s fault, it’s the people who let him get so over worked. So bringing that into my own life, is I’m really careful not to overwork. Like anyone I’ll have crunch times where I accidentally said yes to too many things, and all of a sudden I’m behind schedule and I have to work on weekends or work more at night than I normally would, but I try to limit those. I recognize that I can maybe do that more six weeks, and then after that I’m just going to stop being as effective. And you might think you’re working as much, but you’re just not producing enough, and so you get into this really terrible cycle where you’re overworking to catch up, but you’re less effective because you’re so tired and overworked, so it just kind of cycles. So I have started doing this thing where if I know I’m coming out of a crunch period, because you kind of get in a habit of working all of those hours, is I will actually schedule in and on my to do list, “Go read a book in my hammock” or something to just kind of force myself to break. And that’s really important. I’m really protective of my weekends, and I was even before I had kids. I’m really protective of having true downtime at least a bit at night – because I have kids in elementary school, sometimes I end up with that split shift where I have to work, and then I pick the kids up, take them wherever they need to be, then after their having dinner or doing their homework, I come in and I finish my work. But I am protective of having some real downtime, because I think that makes me more productive.

**KL:** One of the things that you said that I think is really interesting is when you realize you’re in a period of overwork, and you had said for up to 6 weeks, you know, like I know I can do this, I can handle it for a period of time – I think some people see over work and they think “I need to stop this immediately”, but you had said, “Now it can happen for a period, but it needs to be a limit that you set on that.” And I think that’s really interesting. Because you can get into certain periods with your work that are very busy, and that’s okay. Like – but it’s a period. It’s a defined period that will need to come to an end at some point.

**MN:** And all often if I’ve gotten into a crunch time, then I’ll schedule myself a day – an extra day off to recover. I think a lot of people end up doing that kind of naturally, but without officially acknowledging it, and then there’s some guilt that kind of builds up because you’ve just hit your wall – you’ve done as much as you can, you’ve made your deadline, and now you’re just mush. So you might as well not try to work, take a break, take a day off, go to the beach –wherever you are, I don’t know. I’m near the beach so I go to the beach. But – and recognize that “Now I need to recover.” And I learned this when I was at SAIC – I was at a government contractor called SAIC. It was before I had kids, I wasn’t even married yet, and I was at a time in my life when money meant more to me than my time. I was trying to save up, and I got put on a project that was behind schedule. And they did this thing called ‘extended work week’ where they would say, “Okay. You can work more hours than your 40 hours - and your salaried so usually you work more than 40 your hours” well, “That was nice of you. Thank you.” But now they say, “You charge those hours and we will pay you for them.” because they were trying to incentivize the team to catch up, and it was like “Alright! Money!” And I tried, and there was plenty of work, so I tried to take as many hours as I could, and I found out I maxed out at 55 hours. Because we had strict ethics about what you could charge for and what you couldn’t, and I realized after about 55 hours in one week I couldn’t ethically charge, because I wasn’t producing anything. And that was a real eye opener for me, and I realized, okay so – and I was able to do that for about 6 weeks, and then I realized “No. I can’t keep doing it.” Um and luckily for me that project at that point was kind of back on track and I went back to my normal schedule and it was all good. But recognizing that, yes there’s limits – which we’re humans and we have limits, and just recognizing that.

**KL:** Well that is such a good reminder, Melanie, I want to thank you so much for taking your time to come on the show, and share your expertise about project management. It has been super fun to talk with you.

**MN:** You’re welcome. Thanks for having me!

**KL:** Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week’s episode of Research in Action. I’m Katie Linder, and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

# Show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor’s guide for incorporating the episode into your courses, can be found at the show’s website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast).

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# Bonus Clip:

**KL:** In this bonus clip for episode 112 of the Research in Action Podcast, Dr. Melanie Nelson Shares tips for working with disorganized collaborators. Take a listen.

Okay. So I feel like one of the assumptions we’ve kind of glossed over maybe a little bit is how project management is about organization, and about like knowing the milestones, and like knowing the deadlines, and creating timelines and things like that. I’m wondering if you have suggestions for people who are working with a collaborator or more than one collaborator who are kind of disorganized, or who are maybe not liking this project management stuff as much as maybe you or I do. What would you do to kind of work with someone – or maybe this just doesn’t come naturally to them. How would you engage them in these conversations?

**MN:** I guess the first thing I would try to figure out is, is it something they are willing to do, but just don’t feel they have time for? Is it something they are actively opposed to? There are people out there who are very actively opposed to project management as an idea, and then I just tend not to call it project management, and bring in the organization – I think we need under other guises. And then there are other people who would be thrilled out of their minds if someone else comes along and does this for them. Um you have to be careful with that because I find that that last groups tends to mostly be men, and they tend to be men who are used to having someone junior to them organizing everything, and that’s fine if that is a role that someone is being acknowledged for and paid for, but it’s not fine if you’re peers and they are just pushing work off on you because they – “Oh yeah well I’m just so disorganized. I can’t do it.” Um so it’s really a negotiation, and being clear about why won’t this other person do it, and am I okay with taking on this work for them. Or do I need them to step up and some way? And I don’t have any magic solutions, it is always kind of an uncomfortable negotiation, and I think in academia where you’re more likely to have equal collaborations between two research labs, it gets a little more fraught. So I’m afraid I don’t really have a great answer other than to say it’s a problem.

**KL:** You just heard a bonus clip from episode 112 of the Research in Action Podcast with Dr. Melanie Nelson sharing tips for working with disorganized collaborators. Thanks for listening!