

CHAPTER 1 THE JOB

Overview: the beginning

You've got the job. You've seen others doing it. You have some ideas of your own. Maybe you're a veteran in the chair and open to becoming even better. Now you're reading this book that's jam-packed with more ideas and helpful experiences.

It's a resource for anyone in an executive post in journalism: providing wit and wisdom on managing people, money, publics, technology and bosses. It also gives insight to outsiders who wonder what the job entails.

Underpinning the gems in these pages is a fundamental question: what's the purpose of being an editor?

Of course, there are differences according to whether you're talking a community or a mainstream newspaper, let alone a radio station or a website. But there are lots of general functions common to all editors.

And topmost is that of maintaining and improving editorial values – often in difficult environments that militate against these. Whether for reasons of time, resources, interference or inadequate staff, it's a tough call for editors to do justice to being curators of journalistic content.

In fulfilling that purpose, don't hesitate to call on people for help. Being active in the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) is one way to regularly network with supportive colleagues outside your company. Reading this book, and referring to it when need be, is another way. It's all about being not just a good editor, but a great one.

First days

The Radio and Television News Directors Foundation in the US suggests a sequenced programme for new editors. Amend the plan below as suits your situation.

Week 1: Observation

- Spend time seeing how the newsroom functions, how scheduling works and what systems are in place.
- Survey newsroom staff about their hopes and hassles, and their expectations of you. Let them respond anonymously.
- Formulate your interim goals.
- Meet team leaders or editorial department heads to spell out your expectations.
- By the end of the week, meet the reporters as a group.



It's a tough call for editors to do justice to being curators of journalistic content.





Reporters
convert
facts to
information.
Editors
convert
information
to
knowledge.
And great
editors
convert
knowledge
into
wisdom.



– Neil Postman, 1997,
American professor and
media theorist.

Week 2: Individual meetings

- Meet each staff member separately to discuss roles and get feedback on what works and what needs work.
- Spend a lot of time with the layer of leadership that reports directly to you.

Week 3: Feedback

- Meet the staff in a large group to feed back the results of your survey and your take on it.
- Have individual meetings with deputies and/or reporters that will be formally scheduled once a month to go over their work.
- Hold critique sessions regarding content that will continue weekly.

Week 4: Reinforcement

- Monitor progress on goals set out during Week 1.
- Hold a full staff meeting at the end of the week to see how everyone thinks things are going.
- Start working with people involved in presentation and packaging of the content.

Week 5: Be involved

- Work with the production shifts closely for several days and help improve planning and workflow.

Week 6: Fine-tuning

- Begin fuller reviews that will be held bi-weekly with senior staff.
- Involve them in looking at the competition.

Weeks 7 & 8: Monitoring and accountability

- Everyone should have a clear idea of what is expected. Those who aren't cutting it need reinforcing and to be told that they are accountable for getting up to speed.

– *Guy Berger*

(The Radio and Television News Directors Foundation is the educational arm of the Radio-Television News Directors Association, a professional organisation of electronic journalists in radio, television and all digital media, as well as journalism educators and students, based in the US. www.rtnnda.org)

MY EXPERIENCE

Coming in as an outsider

**Jethro Goko**

Editor of *The Herald* and *Weekend Post*

I cannot believe that it is five years since I left *Business Day*, where I was deputy editor, to take up the position of editor-in-chief of Avusa Media Eastern Cape.

Yes, time does fly when one is busy and having a good time – although my 14-year-old daughter put me down rather savagely the other day by linking my feeling of running out of time to being long in the tooth!

I learnt much and thoroughly enjoyed my five years at *Business Day*. But I can genuinely say that I am even happier today editing the 163-year-old regional daily, *The Herald*, and its sister publication, *Weekend Post* – even though I work harder and do longer hours.

The two titles are published from Port Elizabeth and circulate in the eastern and southern Cape.

But, if the truth be told, my early days in the job were not easy. Morale and confidence levels among my new colleagues were low and the business was not in solid shape at the time for a

variety of reasons. The transition from my predecessor's era to mine also proved a lot more challenging than I had envisaged.

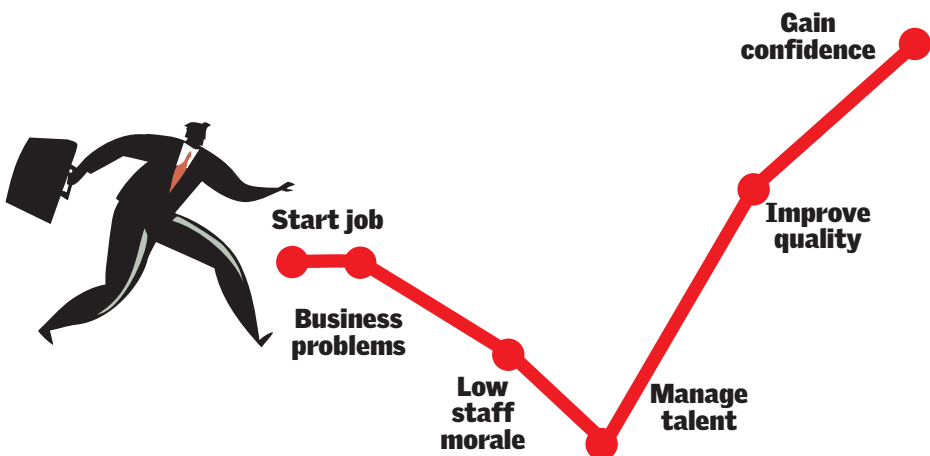
The good news is that we all eventually adjusted to the new demands, found the necessary balance and are now speeding ahead at full throttle. I want to believe that pound for pound our titles are currently among the best and most commercially viable newspapers in the country.

I have learnt two very important lessons in the past five years.

The first is that while the size and perceived prestige of titles are major issues for some journalists, our audiences frankly don't care a hoot about this: all they want is quality conversations and journalism – whether you are in Johannesburg or in Port Elizabeth.

The second is that leading newsrooms is largely about managing talent, egos and emotions. To that extent, one of the editor's biggest tasks is to make sure that s/he understands that they are dealing with human beings, not just news copy or brands.

If you lose the support and confidence of your colleagues, the editing job becomes a painful one. If you gain their confidence and trust, your top-dog position and influence is cemented – and you will have a long life!



Moving up in the company



Zingisa Mkhuma

Editor of the *Pretoria News*

No one ever tells their successor that the job they are excited about might nearly kill them, otherwise there wouldn't be any takers.

Be that as it may, even if briefed about a new job, the smartest thing to do is to interrogate your predecessor about the challenges ahead. You may get some truth, and more, if your predecessor has left the company; however, it would be naive to expect him or her to tell you the whole truth while they are still employed by the same group.

A great lesson for me was: don't believe everything you are told. You have to go into a leadership role without prejudice about the people you are going to lead. Be independent and show it from day one, and try and start on a clean slate.

I do a lot of consultation with my two mentors, one male and one female, who are outside the organisation. They have

decades of media experience between them. It is important to have mentors, preferably including men if you are a woman. Newspapers, like the rest of corporate South Africa, are a men's domain: you need someone who speaks their language to advise and guide you.

The biggest issue is that suddenly you realise being at the helm means the buck now stops with you; you can't shift the blame any more. You also realise that the luxury and independence that previous editors enjoyed, which inspired us and for which we strove, has gone the way of the dodo.

Gone are the days of one national, dominant newspaper. Today's editors have to contend with bottom-line issues caused by shrinking advertising, and a migration of readers to other competitors including television, radio and internet. So it becomes a balancing act where one has to constantly strive not to compromise editorial independence in one's quest to grow the bottom line.

More than a decade ago we were taught, at the Argus School of Journalism, that newspapers make profits to stay independent. But now as an editor I can safely say newspapers have to make profits to stay in existence.

Suss out yourself before you start

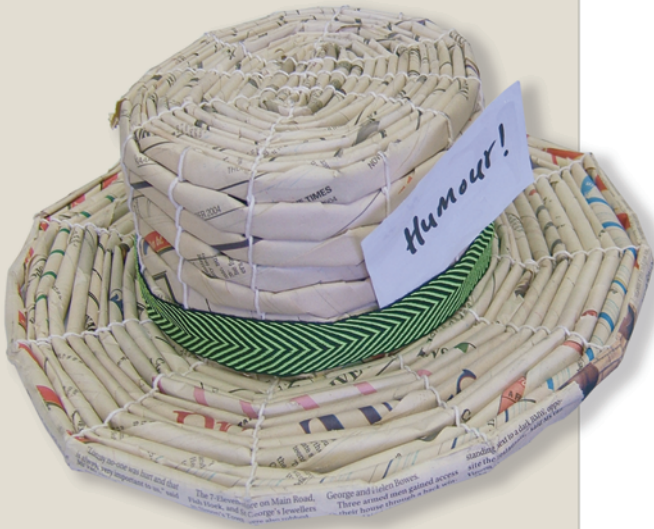
1 **Define definite objectives**, and keep doing so: these will change as you go along, but you need to have a starting point if you're just coming into the job. What would you personally like to achieve in the post? Write it down as a list.

2 **Do a SWOT analysis** of yourself as editor: what are your strengths and weaknesses, and what opportunities and threats do you face out there? What special skill strengths do you have which will help you in this job: previous work experience, educa-

tion and training, technical skills, editorial skills, communication skills, contact base? What experience do you lack, what negative personal characteristics do you need to watch (for example impatience, disorganisation)? On opportunities: what is it about this particular job or company that will help you achieve your goals? Threats: what conditions of the job might trip you up?

3 **Now focus on yourself** as a leader: where have you done well in the past, and where have you made mistakes or had problems? Go through any previous assessments

AS I SEE IT



I had shadowed an acting editor for almost three months, so my first day was not really a train smash. I knew where to start and that was striving to woo the staff and get them to work in sync with me, before I could introduce my visions and strategies.

I have learned from my short experience that editing a daily is like nothing you have read in textbooks. It requires flexibility, a bit of entrepreneurship, an open mind and managing on your feet. And you certainly won't survive without a sense of humour.

HANDY HINTS

or personality tests you have done. How do others see you as a leader: hard, soft, micro-manager, providing opportunities and giving confidence to others, or leading by downplaying or criticising others to make yourself look better? Are you best leading from the front or from the back – and how can you be flexible enough to do either of these depending on the occasion?

Pause and remind yourself of who you are, and who you want to be, before jumping in or blithely continuing as before.

– Elizabeth Barratt



When I was first in the television business I used to respect those in high places in television because I thought 'they must know'.

Having now done those jobs myself I realise my confidence in them was misplaced. No one knows: you just pretend to know.

The great myth of management is that somehow you know more than those you are leading, whereas the only real advantage you've got is the position and the power.



– Greg Dyke, former director general of the BBC

Setting your leadership style



Khathu Mamaila

Editor of *City Press*

The curse of any good reporter is that he or she may eventually rise to become an editor. While being an editor is growth, it is quite different from being a reporter.

As an editor one is mainly confined to the office, commissioning and editing news reports instead of chasing sources for that scoop.

One of the first things I discovered in my new role was the difficulty of translating a brief into a story.

There was often a gap between what I had conceptualised and the final story. I felt I should have done the interview myself, as I would have got more facts from the sources. I frequently found that young reporters behaved like secretaries, taking notes without seriously engaging with the source – so when I asked them a pertinent question, the response was simply that: this is what the source said.

Furthermore, I generally felt the story could have been done better. At first I was tempted to speak to sources myself. I was also tempted to do a complete rewrite, often without involving the writer.

I later realised I was wanting to remain a reporter and not be an editor. If I were to try to do this with all the stories that the newspaper published, I would not be able to be an editor.

I began to brief the news editor

more on what I thought the story should be about. I released the power of delegating authority. I just had to make sure he had a thorough understanding of the story, clear information on all the sources to be interviewed and, more critically, an awareness of the point of dispute which would be tested with all those involved.

It is not possible for anybody to write what is in my mind: I had to let go and accept that people will approach the same topic differently.

The critical thing was that I learned to do proper briefings and let go of the illusion that I was a reporter.

The other adjustment I had to make as a new editor was to actively develop an interest in the newspaper as a whole. For most of my reporting years, I was more interested in politics than anything else: there was a temptation to transform my paper into a political discussion forum. So I focused on other sections such as sport and lifestyle to ensure I addressed my shortcoming.

These are the three main things I think a new editor should do:

- Accept that he or she is no longer a reporter and **delegate** the work of news reporting. Refuse to write stories and even when information is

received, pass it on to a reporter.

- Focus on the **broader issues** and try not to micro-manage news generation.
- Write a **column** to help readers understand his or her thinking about general issues. This helps to develop the character of the editor but, more importantly, gives the newspaper a soul.

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HOW WE DO IT

Managing multiple titles



Esmare Weideman

Editor of *You*,
Drum and
Huisgenoot

If ever there was an opportunity to experience, communicate with, influence and reflect the lives of the full spectrum of South Africa's "Rainbow Nation", it is to edit the country's three highly influential mass-market weekly news and entertainment titles: *Huisgenoot*, *You* and *Drum*.

Naturally it poses many challenges, from the obvious time-management issues to the question of whether one editor can accurately interpret the needs of and deliver to three distinctly different target markets. We believe it entirely possible, provided you use some important tools. I would like to highlight two:

- We use our **market research** and other research tools such as TV audience ratings (ARs) to determine what is of interest to our readers. If we as an editorial team would love to feature an actress in a particular drama or soapie but the ARs show our target market doesn't watch that particular show, we don't feature the actress, finished en klaar.
- We regard our three editorial teams as a **microcosm** of our hugely varied target market. What gets them talking is often exactly what our target markets regard as important or interesting. In fact, on the odd occasion when I battle to make up my mind about, for example, whether a particular celebrity would be a popular cover face, I ask

the secretaries: after all, they deal with our readers every day!

Editing multiple titles means you have access to a wealth of articles and images you can repackage for each magazine. Naturally an article on award-winning actress Brenda Ngxoli's antics on *Strictly Come Dancing* would be very differently packaged for *Huisgenoot*, whose readers don't know much about her, as compared to *Drum*, whose readers are familiar with her and would expect new information.

You could write a thesis on the different markets we cater for – ever wondered what the differences are between black South Africans who prefer *You* to *Drum*? But at their most basic, all three magazines have built their mass circulations on the unique human-interest articles that form such an important part of our editorial recipe



One editor, three distinct target markets: *You*, *Huisgenoot* and *Drum* magazines.

and mix.

We all love a good story, whether we live in Krugersdorp or Khayelitsha. We love reading about the trials and tribulations of people, ordinary or famous. We cry with those who suffer, we are inspired by those who triumph over life's hardships. We like a peek into the lives of the rich and famous, we despair about crime and bad performances by our sporting teams.

And this human-ness, thank goodness, is the fabric that binds us all together.

New product in a special market



Philani Mgwaba

Editor of *Sunday Tribune*, founding editor of *Isolezwe* and adviser on *Isolezwe ngeSonto*

Sceptics were many. They said it could not be done; the 100-year-old bi-weekly *Ilanga* was entrenched, there was no “culture of reading” in the Zulu market and the desire for a daily was just not there.

It was in this environment of widespread scepticism that *Isolezwe* was launched in April six years ago.

Today the title sells around 100 000 copies daily. A Sunday edition, *Isolezwe ngeSonto*, has been launched, to great reader reception.

I’d spent nine years on *The Mercury* – two and a half as news editor – and done stints at a television station and a PR firm. This background stood me in good stead for the challenge ahead. During those first few years I visited ad agencies with sales reps, badgered our circulation division for new distribution routes and pushed our marketing team for more exposure and activity.

My conviction that the venture would succeed was based on my understanding of the people of Kwa-Zulu-Natal. Born in a Durban township, I had also had the privilege of spending a great deal of my youth in rural Zululand – an experience which gave me invaluable insight into issues of importance and relevance to rural folk. This was also critically important in a politically divided province, split between the ANC and IFP.

To succeed, *Isolezwe* had to convince the target market, through its editorial content, that it was politically independent. It had to avoid being seen as the mouthpiece of a political party, and be the voice of the people.

So if a government minister was



Preparing to launch a new title: Slienky Ntombela (left) and Lungile Ndlovu go through a dummy of *Isolezwe ngeSonto*.

opening a new clinic in an area, the focus of the coverage would not be on him. Instead, we would seek the views of the residents, letting them tell us what the clinic meant to them: how it improved their lives, if that was the case. If promises were not kept, *Isolezwe* was the forum to air grievances to indifferent officialdom. It was always about ordinary South Africans, not the powerful.

Reporters were encouraged to get out of the office and report from the scene. This built contacts but also, more importantly, helped us get the story right. This earned *Isolezwe* enormous credibility and trust.

Though part of the Independent Group, language meant we could not fully benefit from being in a large company. We could not just lift stories, say from *The Star*. And even when a sister newspaper had a story of interest to our readers, an *Isolezwe* reporter would often have to find a suitable angle. Relevance was the watchword for every story.

We took the views of our readers seriously, and acted on them. Periodic reader research to establish our content relevance was an ongoing project. Before launch, potential readers had told us what they wanted to read. Their views formed the bedrock of *Isolezwe*’s editorial recipe. The rest, as they say, is history.

MANAGEMENT VS LEADERSHIP

What you need to lead

It's possible to be a good leader without being a good manager, or to be a good manager who isn't a leader. The two roles have different designations. But they are usually complementary and mutually reinforcing.

In some views, the difference is that management involves power by position, while leadership relies on influence. Another distinction is that management involves minimising risk, while leadership optimises opportunity. Evidently, there is a need for both capacities in the ranks of a media company.

Leadership identities

To be an editor is to adopt a general role and an identity that goes with it. In the course of a single day, any editor is likely to interpret these in a range of different ways depending on the issue at hand. However, there may still be an overall consistent style of leadership. The five styles below are caricatures, but it is helpful to contrast them and be aware of the limits and potentials in each:

Despotic: Here an editor sees him or herself as a commander and the newsroom as an entity that requires orders. In this dictatorial model, responsibility and initiative are concentrated in the editorship.

Walkover: An editor here is subordinate to the newsroom. Personally indecisive,



Despotic

he/she creates a power vacuum that destroys morale or is filled by a strong subordinate.

Populist: This editor uses charisma and authority to be the source of gravity and champion of the newsroom, but without ever straying from its ethos or making contrary decisions.

Bureaucratic: This kind of editor stresses systems and policies as supreme, is seldom seen at the coalface and is distant from the people working there.

Consultative: An editor here takes decisions, but first solicits and respects colleagues' opinions on various issues and avoids undermining their level of responsibility. This creates a flexibility and openness that is absent in the other models of leadership.

The value of the last style is that it avoids the ego-driven model of an editor, where the newsroom bears the unmistakable stamp of a single individual. In bestowing his or her personality on the media institution, this ego-model editor is indeed distinctive – but a good journalistic news operation can't depend on the drive or talent of a single actor.

Walkover



Getting results of others

“Management of media organisations is something of a special case because it involves the management of creativity,” writes John Prescott Thomas in his *Broadcaster's Media Management Manual*. The implication, in his view, is that encouraging such people is

easy; controlling them can be a problem. “So how can we keep the operation on the road without inhibiting the creativity which is essential to success?” His answer, in effect, is that leadership needs management – there have to be some limits on time and effort.

A long-standing textbook view of management is “getting results out of other people”. The value of this aphorism is in setting up an editor in the role of choreographer. The image requires him or her to realise that the job is less about the self than about the performance of others. It reminds editors to reduce the tendency to try and do it all themselves.

To fulfil such an executive responsibility, a good editorial manager will pay attention to what is often summed up as PLOC.

That is:

- **Planning:** thinking ahead and preparing staff for what’s coming up.
- **Leading:** prioritising, taking decisions, initiating change, motivating, holding aloft the vision, mission and values.
- **Organising:** co-ordinating optimum use of human, financial and technical resources.
- **Controlling:** monitoring progress, acting on problems, rewarding successes.

Understanding these areas of activity is helpful for focusing on what it means to manage. But be aware that it’s a very goal-oriented approach.

Balance it by remembering the **human side**: instead of emphasising the extraction of performance, keep a



Bureaucratic



Populist



Consultative

focus on recognising and developing talent and achievement. The quality of relationships is what underpins the output of product, meaning that an editor as manager should be more of a facilitator than a foreman.

Understand your power

This comes from:

- **Your stripes:** this is the power deriving from your position; you are the boss over other people because your bosses have appointed you to that disciplinary responsibility.

- **Your “sweets”:** you have power to allocate resources (including symbolic ones like rewarding people with compliments, or conversely withholding praise and administering “sours”).

- **Your smarts:** this power comes from your expertise (although if you don’t share this resource, you will end up doing everything yourself).

- **Your synergy:** this is the extent to which people believe in and benefit from you, and refer to you.

Moral of the story? Be sensitive to your mix – don’t overdo the first two (stripes and sweets) and don’t neglect the others (smarts and synergy).

– *Guy Berger*
 (Adapted from Gill Geisler, Poynter Institute, and www.rtnf.org/trades/managing.shtml#00)

SCAFFOLDING FOR SUCCESS

Career paths to becoming an editor

Many young people, in their first interview for a junior reporter's job, are asked: where do you see your journalism career going, what beat or area do you hope to move up to, and what is your long-term goal?

And many answer: I want to be editor in five years' time.

Sorry, but the path to being appointed editor is much longer than that.

Besides building a reputation as a good journalist and a wide range of contacts, any aspirant editor must realise there are many other skills to be collected before an employer will consider them for the top job.

On top of news judgement and editorial production skills, which take years to master, there are the essential leadership, staff management, production, administration, budgeting and business skills, and a wide knowledge of media in general, to be acquired. Many of these are described in this book.

However, the "basket" of knowledge, skills and attributes needed to become an editor – the career path needed – cannot be predicted with total certainty.

There are also personality factors, some kind of "fit" between you and your employer or prospective employer, and then just being in the right place at the right time.

And then there's the issue of whether you are looking at a small or niched editor's job, which can take less time to get to, or the job of editor of a major publication or station, which will most likely take much longer.

A quick look at two editors' actual career paths (see boxes) sheds some light on the kind of career choices to be made and how long it takes to fill that "basket" with experience:

In general, there are six or seven stages to becoming the editor of a large station or publication.

Some of them might overlap or be in a different order, but on average each stage is likely to last three to five years.

A. National newspaper editor:

Freelance	1 year
Bureau reporter	2 years
Bureau chief	6 years
Investigations editor	2 years
Political editor	4 years
Deputy editor (weekly)	1 year
Deputy editor (daily)	2 years
Deputy editor (broadcasting)	1 year

Editor**B. National new media editor:**

Radio reporter (general)	4 years
Senior radio reporter	4 years
Parliamentary reporter (radio and TV)	4 years
Specialist radio reporter (in-depth programmes)	2 years
Assignment editor (radio and TV)	2 years
Regional editor	8 years

Editor**Stages to becoming an editor:**

- 1. General news reporting** – do everything (courts, crime, sports etc) to get a good grounding.
- 2. Specialisation** – find a good niche or beat and develop in-depth expertise.
- 3. Multiskilling** – cross over to another medium (optional but advised in this multimedia world).
- 4. Supervising other staff** – responsible not just for stories but for the output of a small team.
- 5. Managing a section** – responsible for staff management and all content for a wider area.
- 6. Deputy editor** – second-in-command of all staff and the whole product.
- 7. Editor**

Of course there are many more junior reporters in the media than editors, so not everyone can reach the top job. But if you do, it's worth having those years of experience and expertise behind you.

– Elizabeth Barratt

Doing it on community papers



Karin Espag

Editor of the
Rekord, Forum of
Community
Journalists chair
2006-8

Everybody knows that a newsroom revolves around deadlines. The more editions, or more pages, the more the available staff members have to do and the more diverse their tasks become.

This is possibly even more so at the community newspaper, where a limited number of editorial staff have to do everything from taking photographs to writing stories, editing each other's stories, page layouts, proof reading and even advertising design, all the while keeping the deadlines in mind ... and meeting them.

The editor has to ensure the system runs like clockwork while performing their own editorial and management tasks.

To achieve this, it is important to prioritise and distinguish between what is important and what is urgent. Focusing on either of the two upsets the balance.

A "to do" list, with deadlines, will assist in achieving this. Then:

- Start any task as soon as possible; avoid procrastination or delays.
- Determine what is required.
- Carry out the necessary research and gather information before finally putting it all together.
- Plan for problems that may arise and have alternative strategies and contingency plans in place.

Unfortunately your own deadlines are just that: your own. Others will not necessarily give one of your deadlines the respect you believe it deserves.

Priorities can also change, and usually do – just when one is deep in concentration and on the verge of solving

a challenge, or have just worked your ideas out.

A reporter/production manager/advertising manager with an important problem will require your immediate attention. You need to retain a presence of mind and shift your focus, never forgetting what you were busy with. Always return to that project as soon as possible.

There is, however, one specific trap all editors should be wary of: taking on too many tasks and thereby broadcasting a message of distrust to the newsroom.

Editors sometimes try to do too much in order to save time – they may have done something many times before and believe they know the best way to do it. They then carry out the task themselves and deprive their staff of the chance to learn and realise their full potential.

This behaviour possibly stems from the high staff turnover that community newspapers experience (reasons for this are part of a different debate). The strict deadlines newspapers operate under create a fast, no-nonsense and merciless environment where many a job needs to be done *now*.

An editor may believe they are the best person to do it, which may be true today but could prove a costly decision tomorrow: a reporter/photographer/sub/designer may be required to do the same job in the absence of the editor, and will not know how.

Organised chaos at the office has the potential of becoming even more intense as we embrace the inevitable conversion to an integrated newsroom.

It is imperative that everyone understands the requirements and pre-requisites prior to implementation, so effective decisions which will affect the staff's understanding of deadlines can be made. Editors need to accept, though, that this will not make the multi-tasking any easier.