

Secrets of an Effective To Do List

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To-do Lists - *"A list of errands and other tasks – often written on a piece of paper as a memory aid – that one needs or intends to accomplish"* (wiktionary)

Most busy people have a desire to save time and achieve more in less time, and as the above quote suggests, at its most basic level having a list is a simple planning tool to help you remember, perhaps not dissimilar to having a shopping list for your groceries.

On a strategic level, when task lists are part of an effective time management system, they are the result of projects and time based goals having been broken down into appropriate actions. What most people find challenging is that in order to save time, they need to spend or invest time on a regular basis into thinking about their projects and planning their actions.

Regardless of whether you then use a paper or online system to manage your tasks and projects you are demonstrating that you are committed to being both productive and efficient.

The Hidden Benefits of To Do Lists

Without task or to-do lists it is easy to become overwhelmed by the amount of things you have to do and it is also far more likely that you will forget things. Having all your tasks in one place and easily visible, has added benefits:

1. Working steadily through your list keeps you on track and **feeling in control**
2. You'll be **less distracted** or **side tracked** by new incoming tasks which get added to the existing list rather than tackled immediately
3. **You're not stressed** either by seemingly urgent tasks that may take over otherwise
4. In all, you will be **more focused, more efficient and more in control of your time!**

Writing a List and Understanding Your Priorities

There is no agreed and definitive way to do this as it depends entirely on you as an individual. However, as a guide here are tips to help you with your "To do" list.

Start by writing down all the tasks you need to complete, and if they are large, break them down into small chunks that can be done in an hour or two.

This may end up being a rather long list but by prioritising tasks you put some order into it and know what to do first. Otherwise you could end up doing many time consuming trivial tasks that give you the false impression of being busy, when in fact you may be allowing important tasks to fall behind.

Some people like to use mind maps when they plan their actions, but whether you work with a list or mind map, prioritising your actions helps you understand what is important or what can be done later.

Assess every task by deciding its priority. You can do this by using letters, numbers, symbols or colours, according to your preference. 'A', '1' or the colour red could stand for something very important, very urgent and high priority. You can then move to grading less urgent or medium priority tasks as well as unimportant and not urgent or low priority tasks.

Once you have a prioritised list you can start working on it, unless it is very long in which case it may be best to rewrite it in order of priority. This will make it look really clear.

Taking the time you need to plan your lists is well worth it! Remember you will save time in the long run and will feel much more in control.

Using Electronic Planning Tools

There are many computer based task management tools now available to choose from. Microsoft Outlook has a task list you can input all your activities to and set reminders which flash on your computer screen. Web-based solutions allow you to access your list from anywhere you can obtain an internet connection and sites such as www.rememberthemilk.com, www.orchestratehq.com, and www.tadalist.com are a few available for free. Some of these are basic whereas others synchronise with the iphone, PDA and have some funky gadgets to play with. If you want to combine an on-line tool with paper try www.pocketmod.com. This enables you to create a personal organiser out of a sheet of A4 and then folds to the size of a business card! Of course, you can always create your own list with an Excel spreadsheet or Word document.

Keeping on Top of Your To Do List

Everyone has a preferred way of working. You may start each day spending a few minutes checking what must be done for the day, assessing the priority order and analysing what was left undone from the previous day. Or you may prefer to do this process at the end of the day so you are ready to start afresh the next day. Remember, this is your to-do list and it can take any form which is suited to your needs.

Most people underestimate how long a task will take, so try to add 20% for good measure. Always try to build "slack time" into your working day to allow for the unexpected or to give yourself a break.

Whether you are using paper-based or an on-line list once the task is complete, cross it off or delete it. It not only makes your list easier to read, it gives you a great deal of satisfaction being able to strike off the completed task!

What works for Ute:

I have an A4 note book in which I list my weekly and often also daily tasks depending on what I'm working on. I break them down and usually group tasks like contacting people, writing or research, to save time switching between different types of tasks. Crossing things off is satisfying, and any low priority tasks left I usually transfer to a new list. The advantage of a note book is that I have a record of completed tasks which shows me how much I've achieved. My paper lists work well in conjunction with Microsoft Outlook Tasks, which I use for bigger projects. Here is where I find technology really helpful in setting deadlines, reminders and progress updates. I update both systems regularly, at least at the beginning and end of every week.

What works for Gerry:

I use an Excel spreadsheet with two headings: "task" and "date of action". I put all my tasks onto the spreadsheet with the date I want to action them and sort everything into date order. I always schedule tasks with plenty of time before the due date to allow for unforeseen events arising. At the end of each day I add all my new tasks (unless I have been at my computer all day and can input as I receive them) and check to see what I have scheduled for the following day. I make a conscious decision on what is achievable and reschedule what I won't have time for. I then print the whole list so I have an awareness of what is coming up and I can scribble on the list during the day.

Ute Wieczorek-King is an experienced teacher, trainer, mentor and coach. Passionate about helping people unlock their potential, she specialises in career & business development, as well as time management & personal effectiveness. Having many years of experience in balancing a busy family life with her own business, she also co-founded Success Network in 2005, a not-for-profit business support organisation for women. Ute is an expert in juggling different commitments and is therefore able to help other busy women achieve more in less time, with less stress. Success Network can be found at <http://www.successnetwork.org.uk>

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