

Organising the chaos

HOW TO MAKE YOUR TO-DO LIST WORK FOR YOU AND FIGHT THE HIGH TIDE OF DEMANDS

BY LAUREN ENDRODY

THERE IS NO denying that we 21st-century folk face many challenges as inhabitants of this new digital age. We are in constant communication with every one around us, all over the world, and are consequently subjected to a relentless, almost aggressive, onslaught of information on a daily basis. Since the internet, emails and cell phones allow communication to happen in real time, everything is immediate and this culture of urgency has conditioned us to react, react, react... We never actually get a chance to catch our breaths. We can, however avoid falling into this trap by being proactive instead of reactive, and to do that, we need to start prioritising. Here's where the old faithful to-do list can save our day.

HOW TO TO-DO

As anyone who's ever made a to-do list would know, it's easy to simply jot down everything you need to do, but often you feel even more overwhelmed once all your

responsibilities are staring you square in the face. Luckily, there are people who have been studying the art of the to-do list for years, and they've come up with helpful strategies to make it friendlier and to unlock its full potential for productivity. The most important thing to remember about a to-do list is that it's there to help you stay focused on the bigger picture and on what really matters. You will need to be completely realistic and honest with yourself about your limitations. Keep in mind your time constraints, your situation and your resources and then start shaping and moulding your list of tasks accordingly. As writer Merlin Mann says, 'Your to-do list is not the place to park your ambitions or test the limits of your grasp. Constantly break the tasks down to the most atomic work possible, and be ruthless about [re]moving stuff that belong someplace else.' According to Merlin, the most practical types of to-do lists:

- are a physical action
 - can be accomplished in one sitting
 - support valuable progress toward a recognised goal
 - are tasks for which you are the most appropriate person for the job
- Experts have identified several different methods

that can help you effectively manage your to-do lists, each of which presents their own useful and unique approach to tackling the seemingly endless priorities weighing you down. Below are summarised basic principles of two methods you can try out to see which works best for you.

THE EISENHOWER OR Q2 MATRIX METHOD

This is probably one of the most popular methods for prioritising your tasks. It is based on former US President Eisenhower's idea to organise his tasks by importance and urgency and was later further developed into something called the Four Quadrant- or Q2 Matrix. Basically, you have a box divided into four quadrants, the top two called Q1 and Q2 and the bottom two Q3 and Q4. The idea is

that you group the tasks that are important and urgent in Q1 – get to work on these immediately; the ones that are important, but not urgent in Q2 – decide when you'll do these; the ones that are urgent, but not important in Q3 – delegate these; and the ones that are neither important nor urgent in Q4 – forget about these. According to author Steven Pressfield, 'The Principle of Priority states (a) you must know the difference between what is urgent and what is

important, and (b) you must do what's important first.' If you want any to-do list to work, it's essential to be aware of the difference between your important and urgent tasks: Important tasks are usually linked with your long-term, large-scale, valuable goals and urgent tasks are usually short-term, small-scale and insignificant distractions. Remember that if something isn't important to you, then it shouldn't be urgent either. The only reason it seems urgent is because you're being reactive and

falling victim to the above-mentioned 'culture of urgency'. According to educator Scott McDowell, 'The moment we enter "reaction" mode, we've surrendered our day to the whims of others.' So be very wary of the tasks you have categorised into Q3 and focus on Q1 and Q2. As for Q4, Asian Efficiency CEO Thanh Pham says we shouldn't necessarily write these off entirely, as they represent activities that can 'help you relax, rejuvenate, and build relationships with people,' such as drinks with friends or colleagues. We all deserve a bit of time off!

THE GTD METHOD

Developed by David Allen, a Getting Things Done to-do list involves putting all the tasks in your head down on paper before then breaking them into small, manageable steps that can be done in one action. These are what David calls the 'next action'. Once you've identified the different next actions for each task, the way you name them is important, because that will establish whether each is simple enough to do in one sitting. According to Merlin, the name should only consist of a verb, a noun and an object (a necessary resource), for example, if one of your main tasks are to paint the house, your first next action would be, 'buy paint from Midas'. Arrange your next actions into a logical order and then complete them one step at a time.

The completion of each individual next action will gradually bring you closer to finishing that major project that seemed so daunting at first. [▶](#)

DESTRESS AT YOUR DESK

If making your to-do list has left you stressed, try these relaxing methods to help ease you in

- **TAKE DEEP BREATHS**
Focus on inhaling and exhaling slowly.
- **FOR 5 MINUTES, CLOSE YOUR EYES**
Imagine you're in a peaceful, relaxing place.
- **LISTEN TO CALMING MUSIC**
This can also help you escape for a while.
- **DECLUTTER AND TIDY UP**
Get your desk squared away.
- **TEXT A FRIEND**
It always helps to unload.
- **DO A MUSCLE RELAXATION EXERCISE**
Shrug your shoulders and hold them in that position for 5 seconds. Slowly release.
- **DRINK WATER REGULARLY**
It reduces stress and increase energy levels.
- **WORK ON YOUR POSTURE**
Sitting up straight ups mood and confidence.
- **START MAKING PLANS**
Have something to look forward to.
- **TAKE A SNACK BREAK**
A healthy snack will up your blood sugar levels.

PHOTOGRAPHY GALLO/GETTYIMAGES