CREATING A GREAT DAILY TO DO LIST

BY JAMES LAWRENCE

Introduction

There are a whole variety of lists that we might use (check lists, projects lists, task lists, waiting for lists – see last month's article on managing tasks) but the most commonly used one is the daily to do list. This article offers some ideas on how to construct and use a daily to do list as part of the process of identifying how we use our time and energy on any particular day.

Principles for To Do Lists

- There is no one way of using a daily to do list: the key is to find a way that works for you, and master it.
- Lists are susceptible to 'planning fallacy', we think we will do things more quickly than is realistic, so be prepared to renegotiate your list through the day.
- Don't put other items on your daily to do list, for example additional things that you remember you have got to do later in the week, or a great idea for another project you are working on. Have a separate way of recording these things
- Try to find a way of creating a daily to do list that is attractive for you (post-it note, Bullet journal, App, paper, screen etc.). I chose my App on this basis over against other possibilities. I liked the font, layout and colour scheme as well as the functionality. This means it has 'drawing power'. I like using it.

It's Purpose

A daily to do list guides us in our tasks for the day alongside the things that are already in our diary. It doesn't have to be very complicated (a post it note may well be sufficient).

'Guides' is an important word here. If we create a to do list and then ignore it, rarely accomplishing anything that is on the list, there is little point in creating it in the first place. We will not only end the day with lots of things still to do on the list, but also a sense of frustration or disappointment.

However, if we create a list and only ever allow ourselves to do the things that are on our list, we may miss some wonderful opportunities to serve others, to be spontaneous, to create surprises. A daily to do list is a guide, a strong guide, but a guide nonetheless.

How we use a to do list will be shaped by whether we see our primary ordering tool as the diary or our task management tool. Those who use their diary as their primary ordering tool are likely to have most of their big pieces of work in their diary, leaving relatively little space for other tasks. Most of the items on their daily to do list will probably be quite small.

Those who use their task management tool as their primary ordering tool are likely to only have meetings in their diary, and their

> 'No approach to organising your lists will work if you do not regularly review those lists.'
> **MATT PERMAN**

daily to do list is more likely to include some big items.

And obviously on any given day if your diary is packed with meetings you will have less time to do other things, whereas an emptier diary provides an opportunity to work on more items or larger items.

A Process

Each day identify the things to do that day. What we decide to add to our daily to do list is best informed by two 'reviews'.

- **Weekly review** Many find a weekly review a helpful way to plan their work for the week, taking into account (a) how much space they have given their diary commitments for that week and (b) their larger goals for the period of time they are in (discerned as part of a wider process). A weekly review typically takes between 10-30 minutes.

- **Daily review** This enables you to plan what you are going to do today. It doesn't take long, but does ensure you are (a) clear about your actions for the day ahead, (b) identify when is the best time to do them (according to complexity of task, personal resistance to doing it, and the level of focus you need to do it), and (c) how they will fit in with existing diary commitments for that day.

Tips for Your Daily To Do List

WHEN TO DECIDE YOUR LIST

It is best to decide your daily to do list at either the end of the previous day or first thing on the day.

The list may well need reviewing as the day progresses, and changes made to it in the light of (a) things taking longer than expected (b) unexpected opportunities (c) changing priorities (d) changing mood, energy level, or

personal circumstance. However, over time, hopefully we improve our ability to set a realistic, appropriate and sensible list for our day so changes become less common.

HOW TO WRITE YOUR LIST

When adding items to your to do list ensure you write them as an action, not information. Each action ideally describes exactly what you need to do.

Clarity here makes a big difference, as it ensures you know exactly what has to be done when you look at your to do list. Two things can help gain this level of clarity.

- Use the structure of verb, followed by a subject and an object.
- Try to picture yourself doing the action, something physical that involves an action. For example 'follow up N about the report.' becomes 'Call: N to finalise report.'

For some it may help to nuance your list by identifying alongside each item:

- The energy level required to do the action. Through the day our energy fluctuates from high to low and this impacts our ability to focus on any given task. Simply writing next to the item on our to do list whether it is a high (H), medium (M) or low (L) energy task can guide us as to when is the best time to do that task in the day.
- The time you think it will take to do it. Some items on the list may be very quick (5 minutes), others may take substantial amounts of time (60 minutes).
- The importance of the task. It may help to grade the importance, either using a scale (for example 1-5) or a colour scheme (this can often be done in Apps using a priority grading system).

For example 'H/30/1' might indicate 'high energy level for a task taking 30 minutes, which is high priority'. This can help you work out what to do when i.e. if you have 30 minutes available when your energy level is medium you can look at your list and decide to do two 15 minute tasks requiring medium energy level.

RECORDING WHAT IS DONE

Ticking items on our to do list provides a small hit of satisfaction. It provides a sense of momentum, of completion. Some people find it helpful to take this a little further and keep a bigger 'done' list or done wall. It provides motivation and energy for further work. This might be a list of all the things you have 'done' that

'To a large degree, your productivity depends on identifying and using the best tools for the job and then growing in your skill in deploying them.'
TIM CHALLIES

week, or a post-it wall where all the done items are 'posted' as a visual reminder of progress made.

Linked with above, when things come in that aren't expected that you have to do, after you have done them add them to your to do list and then tick them off. It helps show the reality of most people's working day, that we might not actually get everything/most things on our to do list done, but that doesn't necessarily mean we haven't done anything.

OVERCOMING RESISTANCE TO DOING THINGS

If you find yourself resisting doing things on your list, ask yourself why? Normally it is because we have too many tasks to do, or we find a specific task somewhat overwhelming, or a tad boring.

Too Many Tasks

For some people having too many tasks on their list leads to a kind of paralysis, 'where do I start?' But the reverse can also be true. If we have too few tasks on our list we may never get round to doing any of them. There is some research that suggests that five or six seems to be the optimum number. It is enough to mean you know you have to get on with stuff, but not so much that you feel overwhelmed, (see the flexible five approach below for a nuance of this approach).

Feeling Overwhelmed

There are a variety of helpful ways of approaching 'overwhelming' tasks.

- Check you haven't listed a 'project' on your to do list i.e. something that requires multiple steps to complete and is fairly complex. If it is a project, transfer it to your project list, and identify the next action to take and put that on your daily to do list.
- Break the task down into smaller actions. For example, if you have to write a report, say to yourself 'I'll just get those jottings I made about it out of the drawer', then say 'I'll just write a few notes on a possible structure for the report,', then say 'I'll just write the first section' and so on.

Work on the task in short bursts, perhaps using the Pomodoro technique listed below. This means that you know you aren't trying to do the whole thing, just a part of it.

Feeling Bored

Some things we have to do are boring, we simply don't enjoy doing them but they still need to be done.

- Some say it is best to do these tasks first, get them out of the way, otherwise they just 'hang over' you for the rest of the day with a sense of dread. Others find it easier to do these after they have done one or two tasks that they enjoy doing because these

provide a sense of movement and energy to tackle the more mundane task. There is no one right way. Find out what works for you, and then be disciplined in using that approach.

- Limit the amount of time you are going to spend on a dull task and then reward yourself with a short break (see the Pomodoro technique for a clever way to do this).
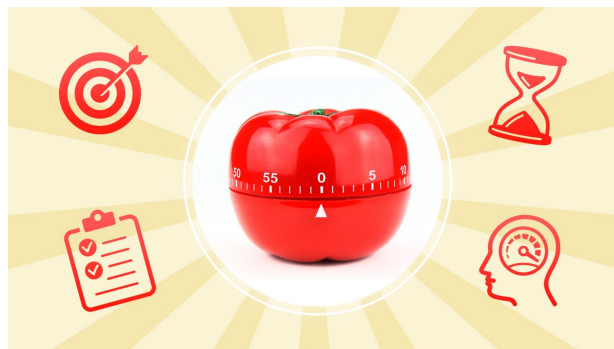
OTHER IDEAS

Here are a variety of other ways of shaping your daily to do list. Again, there is no one way of doing this, find a method that works for you and master it.

Eisenhower Matrix

Popularised by Steven Covey in Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, this matrix helps you identify the importance and urgency of a particular action. The image below is from James Clear's helpful article on the matrix, where he explores the origins of the matrix and how to use it when trying to prioritise what to do on any given day. There are different approaches to the matrix, so don't be surprised if you come across other ways that people suggest you use it.

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	**DO** Do it now.	**DECIDE** Schedule a time to do it.
NOT IMPORTANT	**DELEGATE** Who can do it for you?	**DELETE** Eliminate it.

1 – 3 – 5

Write down one big task, three medium tasks, and five small tasks. Depending on your preference (and procrastination tendencies), either knock off some of the small tasks first to begin to build momentum in your day, or dive in straight away with the big task to ensure it gets done first. This approach can also be adapted to 1–2–3, one big task, two medium tasks, and three small tasks. For a template for this approach go here, and to this website to use an online version on any device.

The Flexible Five

If you struggle with procrastination you may find this approach to your daily to do list helpful. It is adapted from Secrets of Productive People by Mark Forster, chapter nine.

- Write out a list of five tasks. Tasks can be any size, but write them so it is clear what finished means for each task.
- Do the tasks in order, you don't have to finish them – just do some work on it.
- If you finish a task cross it off your list.
- If you work on a task and don't finish it, cross it off the list and re-enter at the end of the list.
- Repeat this process until you only have two tasks left on the list.
- Add another three tasks and repeat.

Kanban Board

This is a very visual way of seeing the status of your actions on a board. You list them under to do, doing or done, and track their progress. This can easily be done using post it notes and a wall, or you can use online tools or Apps to track your items. Find out more here.

The To Do List

Just about everyone in a leadership role will have a daily to do list of some kind. Two questions might help us as we reflect on our current method:

- How well does my current way of using a to do list work?
- Could I improve the way I use such lists in any way?

It is time well spent to review our practice and try to develop the most effective way to create and use a to do list for ourselves. Perhaps set aside a couple of hours to review and tweak your existing practice. For example, if you use an App like Todoist, their online blog has lots of practical ideas and guides on how to make the most of the App.

SUGGESTED APPS

Todoist Across platform task management App. Can create category, project, task, subsets within tasks. Can sort by date, by priority. Can't add notes in free version. Excellent App for complex list handling.

Swipes Multi platform and web based task management App. No categories, can date, assign a label, add notes. Great for simple to do list.

Asana Ideal for cross team project planning. Multi-platform. Can assign tasks to others, add notes, create sub sets in projects.