

What To Do When There Is Too Much To Do

Effectiveness

Time is precious. Schools are busy places. There is almost too much to do and not enough time. No matter what time of year it is, the problem is the same: our list of tasks is never-ending and our time available is never enough. How can we deal with this in a sane way?

Realise That You Can't Do It All Right Now

You might have 20 things to do or 100....but you can't do all of them right now. How many can you actually do right now? ONE!

Realising that we can't do everything right now is an important step in having realistic expectations about what we can achieve. Research shows that most people UNDER estimate how long tasks actually take to complete. This creates unrealistic expectations about how much can be achieved in a day.

PRIORITISE and FOCUS

With so much to do and so little time, multi-tasking might seem appealing. However, it may not be the best answer as it can lead to us being frantic and fried. Whilst people claim to be multi-tasking they are often task switching. They have two or more tasks underway at the same time and alternate between the tasks, progressing each. This can be more draining than completing the tasks separately, as it requires cognitive capacity to work out where you are up to when you switch between the tasks. Ruthlessly prioritising and focusing on each task can help.

Lost time is never found again

Benjamin Franklin

Here is the process I follow:

Brain Dump

Make a list of all of the tasks that I need (or would like) to get done in the next day or two. This can be a traditional pen and paper TO DO list or I choose to do it in an excel spreadsheet. Writing down the list removes the need to allocate cognitive capacity to remembering everything and reduces the chances of tasks being forgotten.

Allocate each item a priority according to importance and urgency

- A MUST be done today
- B SHOULD be done today but not the end of the world if it doesn't get done today
- C WOULD BE NICE to get this done but it isn't essential that it is done today

Plan the sequence of the 'A' priorities

Consider each of the 'A' priorities on your list and plan the best sequence for doing them. The factors to consider include how urgent the task is, as well as the best time of the day for you to get that type of task done.

For example, trying to call a parent before school is hit and miss. Some will have already left for work, some will be in the middle of the crazy and stressful rush hour trying to get out of the house. The task of talking with the parent about an issue is therefore not likely to be successfully resolved and will remain on your TO DO list.

Number each of the 'A' priorities according to the sequence that is likely to be the most effective, after considering urgency and importance. If you have five 'A' tasks that MUST get done today, number them from 1 to 5.

Repeat the process to sequence the 'B' priorities. It was a waste of time prioritising the 'C' priorities as I rarely had time to get to them.

Start with task 'A1'

The benefit of making the list in an excel is that you can use the spreadsheet to do the sorting. List the tasks for your TO DO list in column B and then use column A to allocate the priority (A, B and C) then sort – all of the 'A' tasks come to the top of the list. Add the number to sequence the 'A' tasks and press sort again and the tasks are sorted A1, A2 etc.

To meet deadlines and get more of the important tasks that MUST be done, rather than the easier tasks that you LIKE to do, get done, it is important to be disciplined and use any available time to complete higher priority tasks. Always try to start with your A1 priority.

Key points

Time is precious

People underestimate how long tasks take

It is vital to prioritise and focus

Mutli-tasking isn't the answer as it is really task switching

Task switching takes time and cognitive capacity to work out where we are up to on each task

To prioritise list all tasks to be done

Allocate according to importance and urgency

Sequence the 'A' tasks into the order you will complete them

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