

SOLUTION BRIEF

How to List and Prioritize Daily Tasks for Greater Productivity

A Prioritized To-Do List Moves You Towards The Goals That Matter To You.

Prioritize Your Day as Easily as 1-2-3 and A-B-C



Like many organized people, I never felt I needed a to-do list. After all, I knew perfectly well what I had to do and when. Then something happened that changed my mind.

I had just finished a perfect day at work: I had answered over 50 e-mails, sat in on three meetings, and updated my project files. However, even as productive as I felt, I couldn't help thinking there was something I had forgotten to do. Shortly after arriving home, my phone rang and my boss was asking, "Why am I still standing here at the airport waiting for you to pick me up?" That's when I realized it was time to start that to-do list.

Keeping a prioritized to-do list can help you remember important tasks but you also need a strategy. If you don't prioritize, you'll inevitably fall into one (or all) of these three traps:

- You'll do what you like before you do what you don't like
- You'll do the easy things before doing the hard things
- You'll do things that require a little time before you do things that require a lot of time

1-2-3: Knowing What You Could Do



Your first step is simple: Brainstorm everything you could do in a day and make a list. If any task is too big to tackle in one day, break it down into smaller tasks.

There Are 3 RULES for Your To-Do List:

- 1. Create your list every day at the same time—** preferably just before you go to sleep at night. At the end of the day, you know what you didn't get done and can combine those unfinished tasks with tomorrow's planned tasks. By doing it at the end of the day, you can "sleep on" your to-do list and review it in the morning. In that morning review, you may wake up with a new idea of how to proceed with some of your tasks.
- 2. Keep your list in immediate view at all times.** Often, we get caught up in our lives and lose track of what's important. Seeing your list throughout the day keeps you focused on what matters.
- 3. Your to-do list brings clarity about the relative urgency of your tasks and it helps you track your achievements.** As you check off the tasks that contribute to your goals, your to-do list motivates you by seeing how much you've accomplished.

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Don't panic if your list is very long—the goal is not to do everything on your to-do list. Instead, your goal is to do what's most important to you. To find out what the important things are, you shuffle the items on your list into three levels using A-B-C.

A-B-C: Doing What's Important



Classifying your tasks into A-, B- or C-level priorities lets you manage them in relation to value (making a difference in your life) and time (urgency and importance). If, for

some reason, you can't work on any of your high-priority tasks, you want to make sure that you're working on your most valuable lower-priority task.

“A” PRIORITIES: Absolutely Must Get Done—Now!

“A” priorities yield the most value for your time.

These are the tasks that support your professional or personal long-term goals or relationships, so place an “A” next to every item on your to-do list that is urgent. If you're unsure if a task is urgent, ask yourself, “What are the unpleasant consequences if I don't do this today?” If you can't come up with at least one serious consequence, then this task is not “A” priority material.

Next, take all the “A” tasks and organize them by importance by putting “1”, “2” or “3” next to each one. The “A-1” items are the ones you're going to do as soon as you can. Only when your “A-1” tasks are done—or you're prevented from working on them—will you move on to “A-2” or “A-3” tasks. For example, picking up the boss at the airport is an “A-1” because forgetting it could be a career-limiting move. However, you can work on your “A-2” tasks until then.

“B” PRIORITIES: Better Get Done Soon

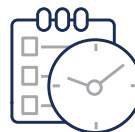
“B” priorities are of medium value to you. While important, they are not as urgent as your “A” priorities. Typically, these tasks have no severe consequences for not acting on them. For example, talking to a coworker in IT about a way to save time by using folders for e-mail files is a “B” priority task because it can be postponed. You should only work on your “B” tasks if all of your “A” tasks are done.

“C” PRIORITIES: Can Wait for Now

“C” priority tasks are things you would like to do and probably won't get around to. Reading those professional journals stacked on your desk is a “C” task because it can be put off without creating dire consequences.

In most cases, what is a “C” on your to-do list may be postponed for a few days or weeks. In the process, you may realize the task no longer is valuable and take it off your list completely.

The Importance of Flexibility



Even with your prioritized list, you need to remain flexible. **Your to-do list can (and should) change as new situations arise. Projects change, people aren't available, and some tasks take longer than you planned.** When a new, unplanned task comes up, put that new task on your to-do list and rate it by priority.

When you're not trying to remember everything and able to work on what's important to you, you'll eliminate stress and, as a result, you'll be happier, healthier, and able to think more clearly. It's as easy as 1-2-3 and A-B-C.

About the Author

*James L. Haner is an instructor for Learning Tree's leadership and professional development curriculums. To learn more about prioritizing and maximizing your time, check out **Course 344, Time Management.***