

To-Do List Formula: Zahariades, Damon

Backdrop regarding Lists

Few “crises” are true emergencies; seem so when we react to them emotionally (5).

Focus on high-value activities that help you to accomplish your goals. Focus is where the battle is won (6).

41% of to-items are never completed; 50% of completed to-do items are done within a day; 18% of completed to-do items are done within an hour; 10% of completed to-do items are done within a minute (7).

Task management systems often fail to specify the amount of time individual tasks will take, people tend to pick tasks that appear easy to do, approach fails to address task priority (7).

Many to-do lists are too long. 90% of professionals admit to not getting through their task lists on a regular basis (8).

Main goal of your to-do list is to help you organize your tasks and projects and highlight the important stuff (9).

Your task list isn't a tool for getting everything done. It's a tool to ensure you get the right things done (10).

Without deadlines there is little impetus to act (11).

By failing to complete your to-do list items day after day, you train your mind to accept the outcome (12).

Many people do a brain dump of every task they need or want to get done. They record everything on a single list. They neglect to categorize according to context, priority, and urgency To-do lists that only serve as a brain dump become too broad in scope (12).

All decisions, simple and complex, take a toll and eventually can lead to decision fatigue. This in turn can lead to decision avoidance (15).

Most to-do lists fail due a lack of context for individual tasks. Items are written down without any indication about the time needed to complete them, their priority, and the roles they play in achieving goals. It's difficult to know which tasks deserve your immediate attention (15).

Many lists have broadly defined tasks that are too large in scope. Many lack a clear starting point and ending point. As a result, there's no way to properly measure success (16).

Projects masquerade as tasks when they haven't been broken down to their constituent parts (17).

Goals spur us to take action. We're less inclined to procrastinate when we're able to predict the positive result of completing a specific task. All other variables being equal, the more certain we are of the outcome, the greater the likelihood we'll act (18).

It's worth evaluating the effectiveness of your current lists. It's not enough to know that you never complete them. You should have a good idea concerning the reasons (19).

If you're having trouble staying productive during the workday, take stock of your emotional state. Pinpoint the reasons you're experiencing these feelings. Once you've identified whatever is triggering your negativity, you can take steps to change your circumstances and relieve the pressure (23).

Doing a brain dump is an important step toward creating an effective to-do list, but it's a first step. Then, it needs to be organized according to importance, priority, and context (26).

Master List and Daily Task List serve different functions. The Master List helps capture the thoughts in your head, so you can reduce stress having to remember them (28).

Allocating time boxes for work helps minimize task switching, which reduces switching costs and loss in productivity (30).

MIT approach earmarks the "Most Important Task" (34).

Helpful apps for organizing based on "To Do", "Doing", "Done": Trello, KanbanFlow, LeanKit, and Kanbanore (37).

Color-coding can be an effective solution for organizing (37).

Matrix Systems identify four quadrants: Important-Urgent / Important-Not Urgent / Not Important-Urgent / Not Important-Not Urgent. Helps focus on tasks that are consistent with goals. Time is spent on high-value items (38).

Creating an Effective To-Do List

1. Isolate Current Tasks from Future Tasks
2. Define Tasks by Desired Outcomes
3. Break Projects Down to Individual Tasks
4. Assign a Deadline to Each Task
5. Limit the Number of Current Tasks to Seven
6. Organize Tasks by Project, Type or Location
7. Prune Your List of Unnecessary Tasks
8. Estimate the Amount of Time Each Task will Take to Complete
9. Lead Each Task with an Active Verb
10. Note which Tasks Require Input from Others

Use a "current task" list to decide how to allocate your time and attention each day. This list will carry the to-list items that must be completed before the day ends. Use a "future task" list to keep track of all the items that will need your attention at some point. You won't use this list during the day. You'll refer to it at the end of the day to create the next day's to-do list (46).

We take action to effect specific outcomes, so assign a "why" to each item on the list (47).

You must write down the reasons for the tasks to make it material (48).

Tasks must be actionable, independent of the others (49).

If an item requires more than one action, it is a project that should be broken down (50).

On the master and daily to-do lists, deadlines should be assigned. On the master list, it does not need to be precise, and it can change. This deadline helps assign the daily to-do list (50).

Deadlines should be realistic, and a genuine reason for the deadline should be identified (51).

Give yourself less time that you think you need. Parkinson's Law states "work expands so as to fill the time available for completion." (51).

Tasks should require at least 15 minutes to complete. "Tiny Tasks" don't belong on the daily to-do list and can be kept on a "batch list".

Categorize each task on your master to-do list using the following three contexts: 1. Project; 2. Type; 3. Location. Keep a separate list for each project, type of task, and location. Doing so helps select and complement activities based on your circumstances. Some tasks should be assigned to more than one context (55).

An online tool, Todoist, helps tag and label tasks (55).

Prune your list of unnecessary tasks: 1. Wishes; 2. Unclear Tasks; 3. Trivial Tasks; 4. Resolutions (56).

In order to calculate a task's estimated completion time, you must know what is required to do the task, including the tools, information, and input from others (58).

We tend to be overly optimistic regarding our ability to get things done. We underestimate the time we need (59).

Verbs tell us exactly what to do without ambiguity. Choose the precise verb that defines the task. For example, Contact Bob is not as clear as Send Bob a Text Message (61).

Write a short note next to each to-do item for which you're waiting for input, along with the date you expect it to be delivered. The expected delivery date will prompt follow-up (62).

Tips for Effective To-Do Lists

1. Keep a "Tiny Task" Batch List
2. Remain Vigilant Against Feeling Overwhelmed
3. Define Your To-Do Lists by Content
4. Conduct Weekly Reviews
5. Update Your List of Goals
6. Avoid Getting Bugged Down in Methodology
7. Build and Follow a System that Works for You
8. Be Consistent

The purpose of the batch list is to organize all of your tiny tasks in one place. Tiny tasks are items that take less than 10 minutes to complete. The idea is to batch them together and address them during a single work session (65).

When you deal with tiny tasks throughout the day, you risk become distracted. A batch list identifies mini activities that coupled together can be done during an earmarked time box or 30-60 minutes. When possible, batch tasks together by related context (66).

Every task on your master list should be accompanied by contextual details. Specify the project with which the task is associated: the type of activity; and whether there are any location-based constraints attached to it (68).

Hold a weekly review session to evaluate the extent of progress and to reprioritize tasks.

Weekly Review Steps:

1. Gather all of your to-do lists (master, context, and daily)
2. Do a brain dump into your master list of what tasks and projects are in your mind.
3. Break projects into tasks.
4. Separate new tasks according to context (project; type; location)
5. Clear out your email inbox. Send responses when necessary. If an email requires action but it isn't urgent, put it on the master to-do list and archive the message. Archive emails that could serve as a resource later. Delete the rest.
6. Review your master list and context-based lists. Purge tasks that are no longer necessary or important.
7. Note the tasks that are important and urgent. Consider these for your daily to-do list.
8. Note the tasks for which you're waiting on input. Indicate people involved and the date expected to receive input. Use the date for follow-up purposes.
9. Review your current deadlines for high-value tasks.
10. Assign deadline to new tasks.
11. Review your calendar for the coming week. Create your daily to-do list based on your availability (71).

Review your list of goals on a monthly basis. This list of specific goals helps create to-do lists driven by what you want to accomplish in your life.

Facets of an effective to-do list that are critical: deadlines; task-level context; separation of current and future tasks. Other areas can be flexible based on preference (75).

Use an annual calendar that fits on a single page to "x" every day where the daily task list was accomplished to create a visual "chain" strategy. This will create consistency and habits (77).

When you falter or are inconsistent, assess the reason and make changes to correct the underlying problem (79).

Writing list can be helpful, and online versions work as well. Pick which best suits your style. For personal use Todoist is a tool. For management of projects and teams Trello is a tool (84).

Maximize your output by combining your to-do list and calendar. At the end of the day, review your calendar for the following day. Estimate how much time you can allocate to your to-do list items. Leave yourself time for lunch and breaks. Pad the estimate for unexpected delays. Then, build the following day's to-do list. Think of your day as a series of 30-minute time chunks. Schedule time to work on your to-do items during the period that are not blocked off (86).

A "Done List" is not required but can help those who are inspired by seeing accomplishments. Look at it at the end of the day and the beginning of the next day to propel motivation.