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To-Do List Formula
A Stress-Free Guide to Creating To-Do Lists That Work!

Damon Zahariades | The Art Of Productivity © 2016

Millions of people use to-do lists and understand their value. And yet, those with to-do lists complete only 41% of their tasks. Productivity expert Damon Zahariades reports, counterintuitively, that to-do lists often make you less productive, not more. The task management industry calls it the "productivity paradox." To resolve this dilemma, consider Zahariades's commonsense method. He imbues the task of making to-do lists with purpose. His book teaches you how to plan, create and work from practical to-do lists that encourage you and enable you to recognize, prioritize and complete multiple tasks. Although Zahariades sometimes says things are important, without saying why, or promises to get to something "later," and hopes you find it, you can use his time-management best practices to create a to-do list that helps you to be more effective instead of driving you nuts.

Take-Aways

- Many people don't know how to use to-do lists correctly.
- As a result, their task management lists can sabotage productivity, a problem called the "productivity paradox."
- Most people with to-do lists fail to complete 41% of their tasks.
- Your to-do lists should support and align with your workflow.
- Prioritize your tasks, put them into context and assign deadlines.
- Break your tasks into segments according to project, type or location.
- Include time estimates for tasks to tie your chores to your overall goals.
- Cataloging too many tasks can paralyze you. Short-list only seven per day.
- Any negativity depletes the psychological energy you need to complete your tasks.
- Instead, break down your projects into manageable elements, and create separate to-do lists for each project.

Summary

The Need to Track

Properly set up and used, to-do lists are a basic, effective task-management system. However, many people use ineffective task management strategies that don't help them accomplish their daily chores. Counterintuitively, many to-do list systems sabotage overall productivity, a phenomenon called the "productivity paradox." Inadequate systems waste your time, add to your frustration and create stress. And since they don't help you complete your tasks on time, tasks mount up – which can be overwhelming.

Worthwhile Systems

Effective to-do list systems are out there. They aren't perfect, but they do the job. A quality to-do list system can deliver eight benefits:

1. **Giving you "control over your workday"** – Your to-do lists advise you which work you must do now and which you can do later.
2. **Letting you "meet your deadlines"** – Prioritize your to-do lists so you focus on your most pressing tasks first.
3. **"Working on the right tasks at the right time"** – A good list reduces your sense of being overwhelmed so you can get ahead.
4. **"Getting more done in less time"** – Focusing on "high-value activities" moves you faster toward your goals.
5. **No "putting out fires"** – Fires start because you spend your energies on the wrong tasks and don't address your most important jobs.
6. **Helping you "reduce your stress"** – Stress occurs when you don't meet your deadlines and important jobs pile up.
7. **Learning to "improve your focus"** – An effective lists helps you avoid wasting time on trivial or minor activities.
8. **Being able to "eliminate…frustration and guilt"** – Your to-do lists help you accomplish more. When you succeed, frustration and guilt fade away.

To-Do Lists That Go Wrong

According to I Done This, a productivity app developer, people don't complete 41% of the tasks on their to-do lists. LinkedIn reports that 90% of professionals say they fail to get their to-do list tasks done on time. These statistics signify the ineffectiveness of many to-do lists. But what happens to your unfinished tasks? Do you move them to the next day, put them off for an indefinite period or decide to forget about them altogether? To-do lists are useless if you don't get most of your tasks done. Many people create to-do lists with too many tasks. Put these and other problems together and you end up with the productivity paradox: To-do lists can make people less

productive, not more productive. People fail to complete their daily tasks on schedule for eight main reasons:

1. **"You misunderstand the goal of to-do lists"** – Most people think the purpose of to-do lists is "to get things done." They're wrong. The purpose of top quality lists is to systematize and prioritize your tasks. When handled correctly, a list will help you focus on your most important jobs so you don't squander your time on minutiae.
2. **"You neglect to assign deadlines"** – To-do lists without deadlines are useless. Having no deadline means taking no action.
3. **"Your lists are too long"** – Long lists are distracting and discouraging. They can paralyze you, they don't prevent procrastination and they aren't realistic. You have only so much time available to get things done. Loading up your lists with too many chores is an exercise in futility.
4. **"Your lists have too much variability"** – Are your to-do lists "brain dump repositories?" Do you list every single task that comes to mind, placing a job that will take two minutes next to a job that will take two months? With such disparity, you will either do nothing or attend to the easy jobs while ignoring the tough ones. Too-lengthy lists can cause stress.
5. **"You give yourself too many options"** – This can lead to a dysfunctional state known as "decision fatigue." You tire of all the options on your list and are more likely to choose the easiest actions.
6. **"You neglect to add context for each task"** – Every item should include instructive context including each task's priority, how long it will take, the relevance of each chore to your overall goals, and so on.
7. **"Your tasks are defined too broadly"** – Some tasks have no start or end dates. Because they're so general, it's difficult to know when you must complete them.
8. **"Your tasks are not attached to specific goals"** – People set goals so they can achieve their stated purposes – for example, adding oil to the car so it will continue to run and paying taxes on time to avoid penalties. For your to-do lists to work, associate each task with a specific goal.

Toxic Negativity

Maybe you do create well-structured to-do lists, with only a few jobs, all with deadlines, all in context, not too varied and all tied to goals. But if you pulled your list together in a negative frame of mind, you still won't be productive. Examine why you feel as you do. Your discontent and your to-do lists share a connection: When you're unhappy, you may not have the psychological strength or energy to work diligently from your list, even perfectly organized lists. Try to understand your emotions. Once you do, you can leverage your to-do lists to increase your productivity.

"The Top 10 Most Popular To-Do List Systems"

Each of the top 10 most popular to-do list systems in use today has different features, so you can choose what will work best for you:

1. **"The massive, all-inclusive list"** – Under this "brain dump" system, put all your tasks on one giant list. While it's good to get everything out of your head and onto a list, this isn't a functional method. Having all your tasks on one long list will paralyze you.
2. **"The 'task + starting date + due date' list"** – Assign start dates and deadline dates for each task.
3. **"The to-do list twosome: master task list + daily task list"** – This system features one massive, all-inclusive list plus a list of the specific to-do tasks for each day.
4. **"The '3 + 2' strategy"** – List three big tasks and two small tasks daily. The big tasks should take one to two hours. The small tasks should take 30 minutes or less.
5. **"The 1-3-5 rule"** – Focus daily on one major task, three medium tasks and five small tasks.
6. **"The project-based system"** – Create separate to-do lists for each individual project.
7. **"The 3-MIT approach"** – MIT is an acronym for "most important task." Pick three top-priority tasks to complete each day.
8. **"The Kanban method"** – Create three columns on a wall board: "To Do," "Doing" and "Done." List each task on a separate sticky note. As you work on individual tasks, move the appropriate note from one column to the next. This system will give you a great sense of satisfaction that will combat negative emotions.
9. **"The matrix system"** – Create a four-quadrant graphic labeled "Important: Urgent"; "Important: Not Urgent"; "Not Important: Urgent"; and "Not Important: Not Urgent." Assign your tasks to their relevant quadrants, and work on them accordingly.
10. **"Getting things done (GTD)"** – This popular and much-lauded system uses an all-inclusive master-task list, with all actionable tasks segregated by context in separate, refined lists. With GTD, you review your lists weekly. GTD also includes "a 'next-actions' list and a 'someday/maybe' list."

"How to Create the Perfect To-Do List"

Take 10 steps to create a highly functional to-do list system based on both theoretical considerations and elements from some of the most popular systems:

1. **"Isolate current tasks from future tasks"** – Work on your immediate tasks each day. Each evening, move future tasks to your current tasks for the next day.
2. **"Define tasks by desired outcomes"** – Tie each task on your list to a specific goal.
3. **"Break projects down to individual tasks"** – The only way to "eat an elephant [is] one bite at a time." Reduce projects to manageable components. Work on each element in sequence.

4. **"Assign a deadline to each task"** – Prioritize and be accountable.
5. **"Limit the number of current tasks to seven"** – Anyone can manage this number of tasks. Each task should take at least 15 minutes. Don't include "tiny tasks" like making a call. Don't list those tasks anywhere. Just do them.
6. **"Organize tasks by project, type or location"** – Create separate lists for each important category.
7. **"Prune your list of unnecessary tasks"** – Eliminate "wishes" (remodel the kitchen), "unclear tasks" (call John), "trivial tasks" (random little chores that come and go) and "resolutions" (promising you will learn Spanish)."
8. **"Estimate the amount of time each task will take to complete"** – As you learn to estimate more accurately, you will manage each day more effectively.
9. **"Lead each task with an active verb"** – Make each task into an action item – for example, start a load of laundry.
10. **"Note which tasks require input from others"** – Include this context for each chore that depends on contributions of other people.

Tips for Getting Your Most Important Work Done

Try four strategies for maintaining a well-oiled, effective system that won't let you down:

1. **"Keep a tiny task batch list"** – Gather a list of all of your quick, easy-to-do tasks. Each individual task should take 10 minutes or less to complete. Tiny tasks might include emailing a client.
2. **"Conduct weekly reviews"** – Periodically review your to-do lists to assess whether you're achieving your goals. Examine your lists weekly, and look at your overall goals monthly.
3. **"Avoid getting bogged down in methodology"** – Your to-do list activities help you achieve your productivity goals. Don't obsess about to-do list methods. Instead, focus of becoming more productive and getting your tasks done every day.
4. **"Build and follow a system that works for you"** – To-do list systems that work well for others might not work well for you. Combine or modify the elements of different systems that appeal to you to build a personal system that is right for you.

Three Additional Considerations

Although the to-do list is a fairly simple productivity management system, consider which variations will help and not hinder you and how you will design the specifics of your particular system. Consider these issues:

1. **Pen and paper or digital?** – Pen and paper have worked beautifully for people for hundreds of years, and some experts consider physical lists superior to online lists in terms of enhancing how your brain remembers information. Keep a small notebook with you at all times so you can jot down notes whenever and wherever you think of them. However, you can also benefit from

creating and maintaining digital lists. Software applications such as Todoist can help you stay productive.

2. **Synchronize your to-do lists with your calendar** — Your schedule and your to-do lists can mesh effectively. For maximum productivity, work with both.

3. **Should you use a "done list?"** — A list of completed items can help motivate you to stay on track, but it can harm productivity if it becomes one more list to worry about. Experiment: If it makes you more productive, stay with it. If not, get rid of it.

The Importance of Consistency

Now you know how to build and use effective to-do lists to maximize your productivity. However, even the greatest to-do list system is worthless if you don't use it consistently to help you complete your tasks. To maintain your system, regularly update your productivity goals, and guard against becoming overwhelmed by your stack of tasks. If you have a busy schedule, you might slip up and stop working your lists. Think of this as falling "off the wagon." If it happens, get right back on. The more days that go by, the harder it is to return to your lists. Everyone slips up from time to time. When you do, resume your task management activities immediately. Your daily productivity depends on it.

About the Author

Lifestyle management expert **Damon Zahariades** has written several time-management and productivity books, including *The 30-Day Productivity Plan, The Art of Saying No* and *The Time-Chunking Method*. He also produces the *Art of Productivity* blog.

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