



If everything is critical, nothing is!

Every year I do an informal poll of colleagues, friends, family, students and clients about how they keep their tasks and to dos organized. After all, most people have some kind of system that works for them. Many people respond with:

- Post-It Notes
- Notebook that combines meeting notes and action items
- Microsoft Outlook tasks
- Leather portfolio/padfolio
- Evernote
- iPhone reminders
- Google Tasks
- Whiteboard
- Project management software or SharePoint system
- Sending emails to myself
- Microsoft OneNote
- Calendar entries

...or the latest and greatest app!

Whatever system you use, it is critical to find something that works for you and fits into your life and work style. I personally have gone back and forth over the years between different electronic methods and my old favorite: a **“page per day” notebook** that captures my action items using a tick-mark convention.

Here’s my simple system for coding tasks:

Normal tasks

Import tasks I need to accomplish today

Completed tasks

Deleted tasks

Deferred tasks (Date)

Ordered tasks – do first (1)

Ordered tasks – do second (2)

Ordered tasks – do third (3)

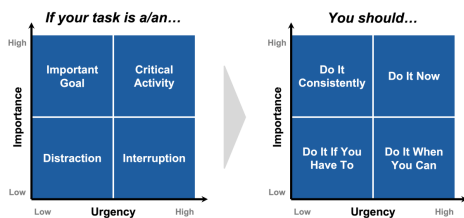
When I used this system, I reviewed my daily task list 2-3 times per day: morning, midday and night. In the morning, I sat down and inventoried everything I had to do that day and also looked at my tasks strategically over the next 2-4 weeks to make sure everything was captured. Midday I revisited the list and checked on my progress. At night, I copied incomplete tasks over to the next day. I also crossed

anything off I completed (and did not previously check off) during the day. *and repeat* I carried my little red book with me to all meetings and transferred action items and to dos over to the book as soon as a new task surfaced. What can I say? The system worked for me!

But alas, I have abandoned my old reliable system in favor of the latest and greatest app! It is called **ToDoist** and man, do I love it! I have it on all my mobile devices and computers and everything is in sync. Task management has become much more real-time and even easier. The interface is simple, clean and very user-friendly. I have used other apps and services before, and in my humble opinion, this app blows them all away. I can't say enough good things about it. From its shared, collaborative task lists to its natural language recognition, it just works! I have recommended it to colleagues and clients and they are instantly hooked. It works for people because it seems to fit into the way we do things and does not force you to change your behaviors (with the exception of entering tasks of course). Regardless of the system or tools you use, it has to work for YOU.

But a list is still a list and it provides you little guidance about what to do first, last or never.

One of my colleagues passed along a framework she uses to think about tasks and demands on her time. She prefaced that she did not invent it but she certainly uses and advocates for it. It's called the "importance-urgency matrix" and it seeks to categorize tasks in those two dimensions, from low to high.

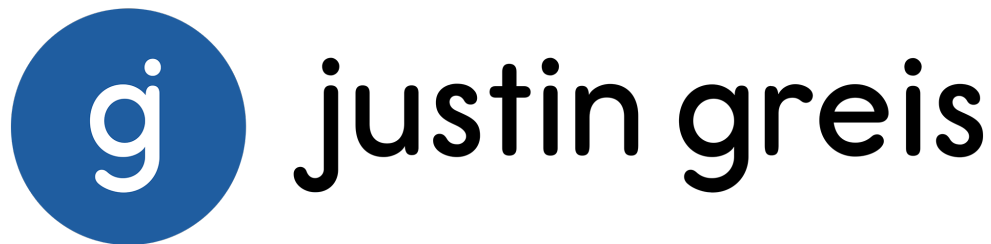


I like this technique of prioritizing one's list and establishing an order. After all, just because you keep a list of tasks, how do you determine what you do first versus last? The problem many of us run into is bucketing our tasks into some kind of prioritized categories. We may work all night on something that is neither important nor urgent and therefore a total waste of time relative to everything else on your plate. Worse yet, what if the task you were working on was not important or urgent for your boss or key stakeholders? Sounds like a potential productivity black hole to me...

One place where the "importance-urgency matrix" can be used is team or project meetings. Bring your list in, brief your boss on what you are working on and bucket the tasks into these categories for him or her. Most staff meeting updates are a laundry list of tasks versus a thoughtful ordered and categorized list of what you are working on. Think of the power of running your prioritization by your boss and validating what you are working on is both critical and urgent in their world.

Without a system for stratifying your tasks, everything on your plate tends to go "high right" and therefore everything becomes critical. And *if everything is critical, nothing is!*

So, how do you do it? How do you manage the seemingly endless pile of tasks in your queue? How do you classify and prioritize them? How do you juggle your day-to-day tasks, look ahead to the future strategic goals and make sure nothing falls through the cracks? For me, it's an ongoing effort to manage the mountain of mayhem. I'd love to hear your thoughts on your systems and techniques for managing your tasks and to-dos.



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(nice to meet you)

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