

Getting Things Done

Most people find they have more things to do in a day than the time to do them, and when you are very busy it is easy to forget even quite important things you need to do.

There are three basic tools to help with this: a diary or date planner, a to-do list, and a prioritisation planner. All three tools come various in electronic formats as well as paper versions and you should experiment with some of the options until you find what suits you best.

The diary or planner

By completing a diary or planner you will have three important pieces of information always at your fingertips. To achieve this you need to include:

- The fixed commitments in your month such as lectures and seminars.
- The deadlines you need to meet such as submission of coursework and dates of tests or examinations
- The other things you make a regular commitment to do such as going to the gym or spending time with friends or family.

Once you have done this you will easily be able to see:

- What time is already committed;
- Where you can focus on work and your to-do list;
- When you are likely to be under pressure from deadlines.

Once you know these three things you can start to think about where to schedule different kinds of task.

Things to do

The first thing to do is to make a 'to do' list. This is all the things in your mind that you need to remember from the major (complete the assignment this week) to the small but vital (buy bread and milk). Use a list like this, adapted to your own needs

What do I need to do?	How important is it? A-E where A is most important	Where will I do it?

The two columns on the right help you to prioritise your time and make best use of it.

The first column asks you to say how important a task is. This will help you prioritise the things which will make most difference. Sometimes it is tempting to do the most interesting things first rather than the most important and this column will help you avoid that.

The second column asks you to think about where you will complete that task. So if lots of your tasks involve going to the local shop, your shopping list is already prepared and you will remember everything. If several of your tasks need to be done in the library, then you need to prioritise time there and take your list to avoid arriving home without a vital book. If you need to make several telephone calls, do them at one time while you are in telephone mode.

These two columns will help you focus on what is important and make best use of your time in one location.

Getting the priorities right

You may need to do more work on priorities, and a matrix tool can help here. One of the skills of business leaders is to know the difference between the urgent and the important. Use this table to fit the tasks in your current to-do list into the right boxes.

High

<i>Important</i>	Important but not urgent	Both urgent and important	
	Neither important nor urgent	Urgent but not important	
Low	<i>Urgent</i>		High

Both urgent and important

Are these items here because you did not foresee them, or because you did not plan in advance to complete them? In either case there is some important thinking about what you need to do differently to avoid the point of possible crisis in the future. Of course there will always be unexpected events to respond to, so keeping some contingency time in your diary is a wise move.

Important but not urgent

These are the core of your work, the activities to meet future deadlines which you can work through systematically. Making sure you keep moving forward on these will stop them reaching the urgent and important box, and the moment of panic. Most of your time should be spent here.

Urgent but not important

These are the things which get in the way of focusing on your own goals. Are they really so urgent? What if you left them for a time, or even took them off your list? Are they your priorities or someone else's? If absolutely unavoidable, where in your schedule would they fit with least distraction and minimum time?

Neither urgent nor important

Are these your priorities or someone else's? Learning to say no politely but firmly to those things which are not your own priorities is a skill which can be developed with practice.

What can you learn from this exercise?

Now you have completed these boxes, and thought about some of the implications, what general conclusions can you draw to help you in the future? For example, what do these boxes tell you about how well you are currently prioritising? Take some time to think about what you are doing well, what you could do differently, and what you will make a commitment to do differently in the future.