

Task Prioritization

When faced with an extensive list of tasks, some strive to remain focused on the most important actions only to become overwhelmed, frustrated, and disappointed by a lack of progress. With so much to do in life, career, family life, relationships, health, and many others, it can be challenging to remain focused and identify priorities. Prioritization is the ability to arrange, plan, and address specified tasks and responsibilities in order of importance. This process of bringing order to chaos is a learned behavior that can improve with time and practice. To prioritize effectively, one must master several skills: the creation of a master list of relevant tasks, regular assessment of the current situation, initiation and monitoring of tasks, allocation of resources in order of priority and suspension of low-priority tasks when urgent tasks arise (Middleton, Charnock, Forster, & Blakey, 2018). Prioritization provides structure to decision-making, helping individuals decide what to do - and in what order - until all tasks have been completed, and it is particularly useful for those who find it difficult to manage their time.

According to Covey (2004), having too many priorities is akin to having no priorities at all. While prioritization techniques are myriad, the evaluation and organization of tasks in terms of urgency and importance is one effective method. It is imperative to note that task urgency does not necessarily equate to task importance and vice versa. Important tasks are those that contribute to long-term goals and life values, while urgent tasks are defined by a short completion timeframe and require immediate action (Covey, 2004). The best decision precedes the best action. It is, therefore, crucial to be cognizant of the tasks that are truly important and urgent to facilitate effective decision-making (Makoet, 2019). While each task might require completion, without a clear hierarchy of importance, it will be difficult to maintain focus and make progress.

According to the mere-urgency effect (Zhu, Yang, & Hsee, 2018), the salience of urgency diverts attention away from important tasks toward those that are more time-sensitive. In other words, when faced with tasks of mixed urgency and importance, an urgent task will likely be prioritized even when it is deemed unimportant. The tendency to complete urgent tasks before important tasks may occur because the pursuit of urgent tasks has an inherent appeal that is independent of objective consequences, offering more immediate and certain payoffs (Zhu, Yang, & Hsee, 2018).

Priority matrices help negate the mere-urgency effect by providing a structured process for decision-making and prioritizing tasks. The priority matrix framework (also known as Time Management Matrices, The Eisenhower Method, and The Urgent-Important Matrix) relieves some of the mental burden associated with a confused and disordered task list. By providing a structured approach to ranking tasks in order of importance and urgency, priority matrices can help individuals maintain focus and, when utilized effectively, will assist in the breakdown and prioritization of even the most complex list of tasks.

Author

This exercise was created by Elaine Houston.

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients maintain focus on tasks that matter most through the process of prioritization using a prioritization matrix. By breaking tasks into two dimensions of urgency and importance, clients are presented with a visual representation of truly important tasks and the order in which they should be undertaken.

Advice

- This exercise can be applied in several contexts, including personal, work-life, simple tasks, complex projects, individual, large organizations, and broad productivity plans, for instance, 'How can I best spend my time this week?' and for smaller daily plans, such as, 'What should I accomplish today?'
- The basic premise of this exercise is simple, that is, what is important is seldom urgent, and what is urgent is seldom important. In other words, some tasks are urgent, and others are not - when these tasks are organized and prioritized, clients can make better use of their time and avoid certain actions. With this in mind, clients should be honest when ranking tasks. What is deemed to be important is subjective, and clients should avoid falling into the trap of rating every task as important.
- It may take some practice to evaluate and prioritize a task list accurately. As such, clients should be encouraged to carry out this exercise and review tasks regularly. The more this method of prioritization is practiced, the easier it will be to identify and sort tasks into each quadrant.
- Tech-savvy clients may benefit from using to-do apps, such as Microsoft to-do, which allow tasks to be listed and ordered in terms of their perceived priority.
- It may be prudent for clients to set a limit to the number of tasks they can include in one quadrant. Too many tasks can be overwhelming and intimidating. This exercise is not about collecting tasks but about finishing tasks. Clients should be realistic about how much they can achieve in one day. Being too ambitious may result in frustration, which will only serve to diminish motivation, so a limit of ten tasks is advised.

References

- Covey, S. R. (2004). *The 7 habits of highly effective people*. Free Press.
- Middleton, S., Charnock, A., Forster, S., & Blakey, J. (2018). Factors affecting individual task prioritization in a workplace setting. *Future Healthcare Journal*, 5, 138-142.
- Ngandam Mfondoum, A. H., Tchindjang, M., Mefire Mfondoum, J. M., & Makouet, I. (2019). Eisenhower matrix * Satty AHP = strong actions prioritization? Theoretical literature and lessons drawn from empirical evidence. *Journal for Advanced Research in Applied Sciences*, 6, 13-27.
- Zhu, M., Yang, Y., & Hsee, C.K. (2018). The mere urgency effect. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 45, 673-690.

Task Prioritization

Setting priorities is an important part of getting things done and a skill that can turn a vague list of tasks into a clear, manageable, and conquerable plan. Frequently, tasks that appear to be *urgent* are simply a distraction from the most *important* tasks. When everything seems like a priority, it can be difficult to decide what needs to be done and in what order, meaning we rarely have time to complete all of the tasks and projects on our lists.

This exercise is designed to help you prioritize tasks in order of importance and urgency using a prioritization matrix so that you are better able to determine the areas on which to focus your attention.

Step 1: Create a master list of tasks

The first step in effective prioritization is to create a list of all the specific tasks that you want or need to complete. Having too many tasks in your head can be a source of stress; however, the creation of a written list gives you a complete overview of your tasks, frees your mind from constant memorization of all that you have yet to accomplish, and allows you to begin to prioritize these actions coherently and consistently.

On the worksheet provided in Appendix A, write down ten tasks and activities that you want or need to complete. At this stage of the exercise, items can be listed in any order. Next, identify the due dates or deadlines for each of the tasks and add these to the '*Due dates and deadlines*' column of the worksheet. This will help you work out the urgency of each task in the next step. If any tasks do not have specific dates, you may use estimates. Please refer to the completed example worksheet in the appendix if necessary.

Step 2: Rank each task in terms of importance and urgency

Now that you have prepared a comprehensive list, it is time to prioritize tasks by ranking each item in terms of importance and urgency. This will help clarify the order in which tasks should be completed and allow you to plot specific activities into the appropriate quadrant of the priority matrix provided.

Importance:

Important tasks are those that have the greatest effect on your long-term goals and/or life values. These can be considered critical tasks and create the most significant results. The importance of any task is subjective and depends on your values and personal goals: only you can define what is most important to you.

It is now time to rank the tasks listed in the previous step in terms of importance. On the worksheet provided in Appendix A, rate each task from 1 (least important task) to 10 (most important task) in the column marked 'importance' on the worksheet in Appendix A. These scores will allow you to see the order of importance more clearly. Please refer to the completed example worksheet in the appendix if necessary.

Urgency:

Urgent tasks are not necessarily important, but they do require immediate attention and action. A task may be viewed as more urgent if it is overdue, has an approaching deadline, or when the consequences of not doing it are negative and immediate. While urgent tasks are unavoidable, spending too much time on tasks that are urgent *and* unimportant can cause a great deal of stress.

You will now rank the tasks listed in the previous step in terms of urgency. Rate the information entered in the 'due dates and deadlines' column of the worksheet on a scale from 1 (the task is not urgent at all) to 10 (the task is extremely urgent).

The task with the closest date is most urgent and should, therefore, be assigned a 10 on the scale, the task with the longest deadline is the least urgent and should be rated as 1. Use these rankings to fill in the 'urgency' column of the worksheet provided. Please refer to the completed example

Step 3: Fill in the Priority Matrix

A priority matrix is a powerful time and project management tool that can help you focus on what is most important. You may now use the ratings from the previous step to plot each task in appropriate quadrants of the Priority Matrix provided in Appendix C. Please refer to the completed example in Appendix D if necessary.

Step 4: Take action

Now that you have completed the priority matrix, you should aim to work through the 'urgent and important' tasks first. With only a limited number of hours in the day, it makes sense to spend your time completing the most important tasks. Then, when each task in this quadrant has been taken care of, you can then focus on the items that are 'not urgent but are important.' These are the tasks that are easy to put off because there are little or no time constraints but provide lots of value when they do get done. For obvious reasons, tasks that fall into the 'not urgent and not important' quadrant should be avoided as much as possible. You do not need to spend your time and energy on such things.

Multitasking is a misnomer, when we think we are doing multiple things at once, our attention swings back and forth from task to task, so try to focus on one task at a time before moving on to the next. Generally, you should ensure that "urgent and not important" tasks never get in the way of those that are "important and not urgent."

Appendix A: Blank worksheet

TASK	DUE DATE/ DEADLINE	URGENCY 1 = furthest deadline, 10 = closest deadline	IMPORTANCE 1 = least important, 10 = most important

Appendix B: Blank priority matrix

IMPORTANCE (1 = LEAST IMPORTANT, 10 = MOST IMPORTANT)	10										
	9										
	8										
	7										
	6										
	5										
	4										
	3										
	2										
	1										
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
URGENCY (1 = LEAST URGENT, 10 = MOST URGENT)											

Your key to interpreting the priority matrix is as follows:

TOP RIGHT QUADRANT

“Important and Urgent” tasks are the highest priority and should be completed as soon as possible.

TOP LEFT QUADRANT

“Important but Not Urgent” tasks are important but do not have a firm deadline yet. These tasks should, therefore, be scheduled promptly.

BOTTOM RIGHT QUADRANT

“Not Important but Urgent” tasks should be completed only after the first and second quadrant tasks have been completed or can be delegated to others.

BOTTOM LEFT QUADRANT

“Not Important and Not Urgent” tasks should be eliminated and avoided completely.

Appendix C: A completed example of the worksheet

TASK	DUE DATE/DEADLINE	URGENCY 1 = furthest deadline, 10 = closest deadline	IMPORTANCE 1 = least important, 10 = most important
Job application	Next week	6	9
College deadline	This week	7	10
Submit report	3 days	8	8
Renew car tax	Next month	2	6
Redecorate spare room	Before Christmas	1	1
Plant vegetable patch	3 weeks	4	3
Mow the lawn	Overdue	10	2
RSVP to Toni	30th June	5	5
Hair cut	Overdue	9	4
Submit proposal	15th July	3	7

Appendix D: A completed example of the priority matrix

IMPORTANCE (1 = LEAST IMPORTANT, 10 = MOST IMPORTANT)	10							College Essay due			
	9						Job App.				
	8								Submit Report		
	7			Submit Proposal							
	6		Renew Car Tax								
	5					RSVP Toni					
	4									Hair Cut	
	3				Plant Veg Patch						
	2										Mow Lawn
	1	Re-decorate									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
URGENCY (1 = LEAST URGENT, 10 = MOST URGENT)											