

To-Do Lists Don't Work

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by Daniel Markovitz | **Comments (221)**

Stop making to-do lists. They're simply setting you up for failure and frustration. Consider the to-do lists you're currently managing: how many items have been languishing since Michelle Bachman was leading the field for the Republican nomination? How often do you scan your list just so that you can pick off the ones you can finish in two minutes? How many items aren't really to-dos at all, but rather serious projects that require significant planning?

There are five fundamental problems with to-do lists that render them ineffective.

The paradox of choice. Barry Schwartz (http://www.ted.com/speakers/barry_schwartz.html) and Sheena Iyengar (http://www.ted.com/speakers/sheena_iyengar.html) explored the problems created by having too many choices. Schwartz points out that increasing the number of choices we have — Single-ply or two-ply? Quilted or flat? Aloe-infused or extra soft? — actually increases our negative emotions [PDF] (<http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/bschwar1/Sci.Amer.pdf>) because our sense of opportunity cost increases. In complementary research (<http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=buy.optionToBuy&id=2000-16701-012>), Iyengar has shown that our brains can only handle about seven options before we're overwhelmed. It's easier for us to make decisions and act when there are fewer choices from which to choose. Looking at the 58 items on your to-do list will either paralyze you or send you into default mode: checking email for an hour instead of doing real work.

Heterogeneous complexity. When your list contains some tasks that are three minutes long and some that are 33 minutes, you'll invariably focus on the shorter one for the psychological payoff and dopamine release that comes from crossing an item off your list. That means some of those tasks — proofreading the 135 pages of the new employee benefits handbook — will wait for a long, long time.

Heterogeneous priority. When your list comprises items of varying priorities, you tend to take care of the "A" priorities and let the "C" priorities lie fallow...until it becomes an "A" priority itself. But would you rather take care of your car maintenance when it's a "C" priority, or when it's an "A" priority: when your car breaks down at 3 AM outside the Mojave Desert, 175 miles from home?

Lack of context. To-do lists don't provide sufficient context for the tasks to help you determine what you should work on. All tasks look the same on paper — three or four words on a line. But it doesn't capture or display the vital bits of information you need: how long will each task take? And the corollary: how much time do you have available? If you can't answer these questions, you can't intelligently decide what you should be working on.

Lack of commitment devices. To-do lists don't prevent you from choosing the most pleasant tasks over the most important (and often most difficult) ones because they lack "commitment devices" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/18/magazine/18wwIn-freakonomics-t.html>) that lock you into a course of action that you might not otherwise choose. The Chinese general Han Xin used geography as a commitment device: he positioned his soldiers with their backs to a river so they couldn't run away from the enemy. Much less dramatically, software that disables your internet access for a predetermined time period acts as a commitment device.

The alternative to the feckless to-do list is what I call "living in your calendar." That means taking your tasks off the to-do list, estimating how much time each of them will consume, and transferring them to your calendar. (Don't forget to leave time to process your email. And leave some empty space — one to two hours — each day to deal with the inevitable crises that will crop up.) In essence, you're making a production plan for your work.

Deciding which item to handle at what time (<http://blogs.hbr.org/bregman/2011/02/a-better-way-to-manage-your-to.html>) overcomes the paradox of choice, compensates for the intrinsic heterogeneity of your work, provides the context of deadlines and other commitments, and provides a (soft) commitment device to help you do the right thing

at the right time.

It's an eye-opening exercise: you'll probably find that it's tough — if not impossible — to find a place for everything. But this is the reality of your life. You've simply used the calendar to paint a true picture of the time commitments you have on your plate. And whether or not you make these commitments visible, they're there. After all, if you're going to be run over by a truck, you might as well get its license plate.

Putting your work in the calendar enables you to better determine whether or not you can (or should) say yes to a new project. And if you do say yes, you can better determine when you realistically might be able to get it done.

You might think, "There's no way I could tell my boss that I can't do this by mid-February." But I'd argue that you *have* to say no (<http://blogs.hbr.org/schwartz/2012/01/no-is-the-new-yes-four-practic.html>) . The CFO says no when the president wants to move into a new building or hire new people, and the company can't afford it — that's part of her fiduciary responsibility. You have the same kind of responsibility — to set expectations about what can be accomplished with the amount of production time you have available.

So do yourself a favor: ditch the to-do lists, and start living in your calendar today.