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## **12 tips for mastering your to-do list**

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*This is a guest article by Jeff Davidson*

Some people are highly effective at maintaining a to-do list and executing the items on the list. Here are a number of do's and don'ts gleaned over the years from my observations on what makes for a successful career professional.

### **Things to do with your list:**

1. **Think ahead.** Draw up your list at the end of the day for the next day, or very early in the

morning for the day that will unfold. That gives you the best opportunity, free from interruptions, to jot down those items that are current and vital.

2. **Stick with the plan.** As much as possible, refrain from adding items for the same day to your to-do list after you have written it. Sometimes that is unavoidable, but as often as you can, stick with the items that you first mapped out.
3. **Cross it off.** By all means, when you do finish a task, joyfully cross it off your list. Reducing the number of items remaining on the list is a positive reinforcer that will help you continue on in productive ways.
4. **Acknowledge other completions.** If you happen to accomplish something during the day that wasn't on your to-do list but was important, feel free to write it on the to-do list and then immediately cross it off. That may sound like extra work or a meaningless gesture, but countless people have told me that they psychologically benefit from acknowledging completed tasks that might not have appeared on the list but needed to be handled.
5. **Reevaluate.** Once or twice throughout the day, perhaps mid- to late afternoon, reassess what's on your list. Is it all still appropriate? Are some items better handled at another time because they do not merit your attention immediately?
6. **Take a closer look.** Continually monitor whether the items on your list need to be done at all. Sometimes situations take care of themselves. Sometimes someone else in your office completes part of a project that might minimize what you need to do on your end. Sometimes you can delegate a task. And, sometimes you can automate tasks that previously required manual and individual attention. The key is to constantly assess whether a task needs to be done at all, whether it needs to be done by you, and whether it needs to be done today.
7. **Make refinements.** As the day comes to a close, hone and refine your list. What's left over that you must address the next day? What do you need to add to the list that merits your attention for tomorrow? In other words, it's okay now to heap on new tasks that you refrained from putting on today's list.
8. **Tidy up.** Clean up your list. Put the items in the order that you want to tackle them, make everything concise, and you'll be on your path to normal productivity again tomorrow.

## Things to avoid:

9. **Procrastinating on the big stuff.** One of the biggest traps that people fall into once they begin executing the items on their to-do list is postponing the item or items that they know are the most important. They have it on the list for a reason, and they know they need to tackle that task right away, but the procrastination beast rears its ugly head and gets in the way of things. Resolve, at the start of the day, that you will take the appropriate action to complete the task(s) you classified as important and meriting attention.
10. **Being afraid to rethink.** Although I have emphasized the importance of not heaping on other stuff throughout the day once you have your list squared up, sometimes situations do merit a fundamental change in how you're going to spend your time over the next couple of hours. Sometimes the task is so compelling that you have no choice, and so, to-do list or not, you plunge headlong into it.
11. **Refusing to shift gears.** From a strategic standpoint, when a significant change occurs in your external environment—such as when a prospect becomes a client, your boss issues an edict, something you thought was completely done gets thrown back in your lap, and so on—then it's relatively easy to shift gears. What's more difficult is recognizing when to shift gears, simply because it makes sense, not just in an emergency situation. Don't be afraid to shift gears when you need to, regardless of the external circumstances.
12. **Ignoring your energy level.** In executing the items on your to-do list, it's also important to pay homage to your own energy level. It would be wonderful to tackle the most important thing first, the second-most-important thing second, and so on. Sometimes, however, your physical or mental energy is not all it needs to be as you approach the next item on the list. At that juncture, tackle anything that you can. Completing a small task at this point can provide the mental victory that will propel you on to a more difficult or involved task.

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