

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



Worth Doing in Maintaining a To-Do 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. This 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 to your to-do list to be handled during this same day. Sometimes, this is unavoidable, but as often as you can, stick with the items that you first mapped out the night before or early in the morning.
- 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 re-inforcer 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. This may sound like extra work or a meaningless gesture, but countless people have told me that they benefit psychologically 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 to the right person. 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 needs to be addressed the next day? What needs to be added to the list and 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 in Constructing and Executing a To-Do List

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 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: Being afraid to periodically reevaluate your list also ranks high in the group of behaviors to avoid. Although I have emphasized the importance of not heaping on other stuff throughout the day once you've got 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 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.

About the author:

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Davidson has been quoted in the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today*, and has been cited by *Sharing Ideas* public speaking magazine as a "Consummate Speaker." Davidson believes that career professionals today in all industries have a responsibility to achieve their own sense of work-life balance, and he supports that quest through his websites www.BreathingSpace.com and www.Work-LifeBalance.net and through 24 iPhone Apps at www.itunes.com/apps/BreathingSpaceInstitute.