

Working Your To-Do List: The Value of Alternating Large and Small Tasks

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You are a competent professional, you consistently get a lot done, and you are adept at composing and executing the items on your to-do list. Yet, there is a simple technique that can help you be even more effective than you might not have ever considered. This technique involves alternating both large and small tasks on your to-do list for the natural energy that engenders.

The more productive you are, the more inclined you might be to tackle one big task after another. This seems like a productive if not admirable way to proceed. When you finish one big task, why not keep the ball rolling, and turn to the next big task?

The problem with this way of proceeding is that eventually you can lose focus, experience an energy drop off, and proceed at far less than your best. When you intersperse large and small tasks on your to-do list – especially those that require a heavy concentration of brain power, energy and effort – with those that are perhaps automatic for you, you actually increase the chances you'll be able to turn to another challenging task after having completed the minor task.

This occurs because the minor task not only affords you some separation between the two large tasks, thereby serving as a buffer, but you also invariably begin that next important task with more energy, more focus and more direction.

In this respect, the small tasks that you get out of the way between large tasks take on an added measure of importance. Psychologically, you are “clearing a runway” so as to have the best chance of the next large task coming in for a smooth landing.

The most successful executives among us routinely practice the art of alternating large and small tasks. Even the president of the United States, or whoever makes the president's schedule, recognizes that it's appropriate and useful to schedule visits from the latest national championship team, in-between hosting foreign dignitaries, meeting with cabinet officers, and other more noteworthy and compelling tasks.

On any given day, you may choose to proceed from one major task to another, and on some days you may be compelled to because of circumstances. For a successful, long-term career, however, it is to your advantage on most days that easily completed, no-brainer tasks are interspersed among the “biggies.”

All major tasks, all day long, with no let up in sight, leads to drudgery. People who pursue this path end up questioning why they got into this line of work in the first place. They are susceptible to burnout. They are less than their best when interacting with others. So, starting right where you are, and exercising as much control over your to do list as you can, strive each day to ensure that some easy tasks are spread among the heavy duty issues that you will be facing, and you'll be even more effective at handling the big challenges.