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How to prioritize your work: Simple steps to keep on track

Effectively prioritizing your work tasks is important. In fact, it's so important that one of the most common job interview questions is “how do you prioritize your work?” Most people have a generic answer prepared. But how do you actually prioritize your work and get things done once you have a job?

How to prioritize work in the most effective manner will generally depend on your own preferences and workflow. You can mix and match different approaches until you find what works best for you.

Proper task prioritization and time management skills can help you accomplish all of your daily tasks, ensure that the right tasks are getting done, and still maintain a work-life balance.

How should you prioritize your work?

There are a number of strategies that you can use to prioritize your work tasks. Here are some of the top ways that you can prioritize your current workload (or that you can tell potential employers that you will prioritize your work if you get asked during an interview).

Maintain an ongoing task list

In order to prioritize your tasks, you need to accurately keep track of all of them. Maintaining a running list of all of your current tasks ensures that nothing is missed or overlooked.

If you are someone that has difficulty keeping track of all of the tasks on your plate, consider using a to-do list app or a project management software tool. Services like Asana and Trello can help organize and prioritize tasks and deadlines in an electronic format. This is a great approach for people that are more visual and want to see their tasks laid out in an easy-to-view format.

Keep track of deadlines

Most people prioritize their workload, at least in part, based on deadlines. You can track deadlines with a calendar, to-do list, or one of the popular project management tools. Just be sure to choose a tool that you will stay on top of checking and updating each day. People that have a lot of meetings or use their work calendars frequently may find adding tasks to their calendar is most effective. If you get a lot of requests over email, you may prefer a service like Trello where you can forward emails right to your virtual to-do list.

Completing the most urgent tasks first to meet deadlines is a practical approach. Many people also find that they work best on a tight deadline, so working based on task due dates can provide the necessary motivation that you need to get your work done.

It’s important to set realistic expectations in regard to the amount of time that each task will take. If you’re planning to complete your work right before the due date and miscalculate how long it will take, you may not meet the deadline. Try to build some extra time into your schedule so that you can have adequate time to complete your tasks each day. Ideally, try to stay a couple of days ahead on your deadlines. Then, if something isn’t completed, you can work on it the next day rather than working late and potentially burning yourself out.

Understand the difference between urgent and important tasks

One of the most common struggles that people encounter in organizing their workload is deciding how to prioritize the most important tasks and the more time-sensitive but less important tasks. Urgent tasks may not always be the most important, but they still need to be prioritized in order to meet deadlines. On the other hand, you also need to prioritize the tasks that will create the most value for your company.

One popular way to prioritize tasks based on urgency and importance is the Eisenhower matrix. The matrix separates your tasks into four quadrants based on the urgency and importance of the task;

- **Do:** If the task is both urgent and important, it should be your highest priority.
- **Decide:** If a task is important but not urgent, schedule the task for a later date. Consider blocking out time on your calendar later in the week to focus on the task so that it does not get pushed aside.
- **Delegate:** Tasks that are urgent but not important can be delegated if you have an intern or junior team member that can help. Otherwise, add them to your to-do list and ensure that you have time to get them down by the deadline.
- **Delete:** Under the Eisenhower matrix protocol, if it's not urgent or important you can just delete it. Though at work we do sometimes need to complete tasks that don’t feel important or urgent, so think of these “delete” items as your lowest priority tasks.

Assign all tasks a grade based on priority

The ABCDE task prioritization technique is a relatively simple method where each task on your priority list gets assigned a grade. The top priority tasks are assigned an A grade. Tasks decline in importance as you move through the alphabet. This gives you a quick reference of what task you need to get done and which ones need to be prioritized.

This method can be quick and effective, but it does hinge on your ability to create and follow a consistent importance scale. If you aren’t consistent with your grading methods, your final list won’t be as useful when it’s time to actually tackle your to-do list. Consider what an A, B, C, D, and E task actually looks like within your role and try to set some type of set grading scale.

Consider your own work habits

A time management technique that can help you better organize your workday is prioritizing tasks based on your work habits. Schedule your most important tasks during your most productive time of day.

Some people do best if they “eat the frog” and do the hardest or most high-priority task first. This approach allows you to spend the morning on your top-priority task and then spend the rest of the day on low-priority activities that will produce less stress. This is also a good idea for morning people that feel more energized and productive first thing in the morning.

Other people may want to save more challenging tasks for the middle or end of the day. Some people take a little while to fully warm up in the morning and do better by easing into the workday with less important tasks and gradually moving up to high-priority activities.

However, this method won't work in all situations. If you have a tight deadline or know that someone is waiting on you to finish your task or get back to them, that task will need to be bumped up your schedule.

Talk to your boss

If you still need help, talk to your boss. Sometimes individual employees don't have all of the information necessary to prioritize their workload. Your manager likely has a better understanding of where each task fits into the bigger picture. A seemingly unimportant task may be the first step in a bigger project or a key component of a new business strategy that the higher-ups are trying out.

Don't be afraid to approach your manager for help. It's what they are there for. However, it is best to ask for assistance before you get behind on your work. If you have weekly one-on-one meetings with your manager, this is a great time to get help prioritizing projects on a consistent basis.