



8 Ways to Make Your To-Do List More Doable

It is both the lifeblood of your business as well as the bane of your existence. It can make you excited or cranky. It either motivates you or defeats you. And we all have one (if not two...or three...or four...)

A to-do list.

There are plenty of schools of thought on effectively managing a to-do list. Google it, and you'll find an insurmountable number of pages dedicated to how to simplify/organize/complete/survive everything on your day-to-day must-do list.

The good news is, you don't have to Google it. We did it for you.

Not to mention, we've been helping clients manage their to-do lists for years!

If you dig into the research (like we did), you'll run across some common themes. In our experience, the trick is to find a system that strikes the right balance between how you work and the goals you want to achieve. It's not always easy, it requires a bit of discipline, and it typically involves some trial and error. But, eventually you find a groove that inspires you to get through that list every day.



1 Know your long- and short-term goals and what you ultimately want to achieve

Once you understand where you're going, it makes it that much easier to build a tactical, focused to-do list that will get you there. If your goal is to increase revenue by 50%, your to-do list better include manageable action steps to get there.

There's a story about Warren Buffet's advice on this topic. He suggests making a list of the top 25 things you want to do in the future, then pick the five most important ones — and put the rest on an “avoid at all costs list.” This is intended to keep you focused on the highest priorities, and keep you from getting sidetracked by “shiny object syndrome.”

If you know your goal is to increase revenue, create a list of small, manageable, actionable steps to get there. It's useless if your list simply says “increase revenue by 50%” — it's too vague and overwhelming. Instead, break it into manageable (and measurable) chunks to get you there. Make three phone calls, register for two networking events, write and schedule four social media posts.

By incorporating action items that directly impact your short- and long-term goals on your daily planner, you're halfway there.

2 Have the self-awareness to know when you're working *in* the business and when you're working *on* the business.

In our line of work, what we see most often are business owners getting bogged down in the day-to-day details of working in their business instead of on it. Eventually that leads to stalled growth, burnout, and overall oneriness. None of the items on their to-do lists are forward-thinking or strategic; they're all procedural steps to keep the doors open and the lights on.

Yes, we all have fires that need to be put out, and being part of the day-to-day operations is unavoidable and, in a lot of cases, makes good business sense. But, when you find that more than 50% of your to-do list is operational or supportive, that's too much. Make sure you're intentionally carving out time and space to work on your longer-term strategic plans.

WHAT IT'S COSTING YOU

\$125/hour *What your time is worth*
x 10 hrs/month *On admin tasks*
\$315 per week on admin tasks
\$1250 per month ←
\$15,000 per year
on non-revenue-generating tasks!

HOW YOU CAN EARN

\$50/hour *Fee for a professional*
x 10 hrs/month
\$500 per month cost
\$1250/month revenue ←
~~**\$500 to pay professional's fee**~~
\$750 revenue potential/month
\$9000 revenue potential/year



This is where having a team to support you can be vital. What can be delegated? What can be outsourced? If bookkeeping is on your list, hire a bookkeeper. If updating your Website is on your list, hire a Web expert. If managing the process to keep your marketing lifecycle humming is on your list, work with a marketing coordinator.

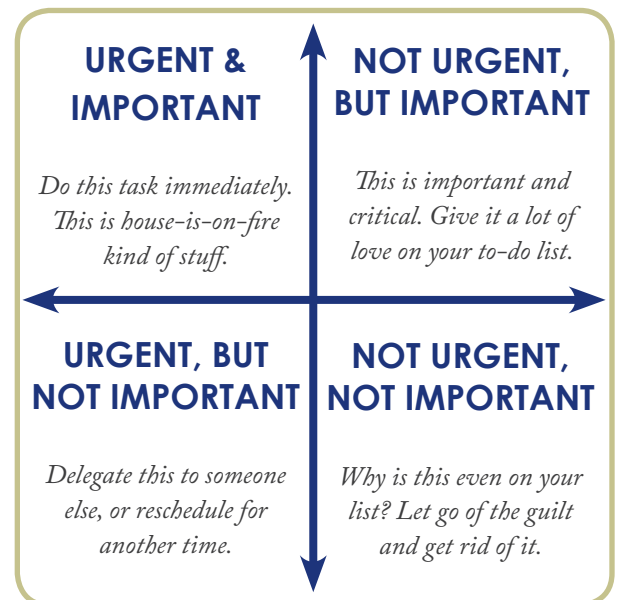
If you don't do this, it'll eventually start costing you money to do it yourself.

By delegating part of your list, you've freed up time and energy to focus on only the things that you can do – define the direction of your company, set goals for the future, and focus on sales and service. All the stuff that directly drives revenues and profits and the growth of your business.

3 Segment and Categorize

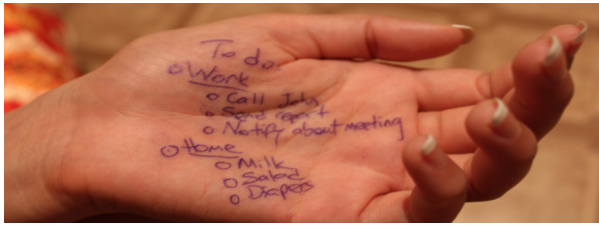
The longer your list is, the less likely you'll be to get it done. The goal is to be doing things that A) move you closer to your goals and B) are broken into manageable pieces that leave you feeling like you accomplished something.

You could categorize items by work and personal, rank items by priority, schedule specific tasks based on deadlines, tackle items based the level of difficulty, or any number of ways. The point isn't how you categorize, the point is that you DO categorize. This will help you focus on your priorities and you may even discover items that don't need to be accomplished at all.



4 Find a tool that works, and stick with it.

There are a ton of useful, easy-to-use, intuitive digital tools to help you keep track of what you need to get done. There are also some exceptionally robust programs that are intended to give your to-do list legs. The key is to find a tool that works for you, and stick with it. We've seen too many hard-working entrepreneurs spread their task lists between paper, smart phone apps, Web-based tools, and downloaded software programs. As a result, not only do things get missed, but it doesn't take long to feel overwhelmed and overpowered.



It's also important to be aware of how you tend to think. Some people are broad-stroke thinkers and don't need a ton of detail, while others like to break projects and tasks into teeny-tiny 5-minute action items, and others need to be able to attach files and background information to task-list items.

Take the time to think about how you think, how you work, and what features you need to stay organized and on task.

5 Build a default calendar

A default calendar can be a powerful addition to your productivity toolbox. If you have regularly scheduled tasks you know will produce results, bust out your calendar and literally block off time to do it.

If you know you need to update your CRM every week with business cards and notes, block off an hour every Friday morning to tackle it. If follow-up calls are part of your sales strategy, block off time three times a week to make those calls. Or you may want to incorporate more professional development, so block off time every Monday morning to start the week listening to Podcasts or reading.

The trick is to stick with the calendar. View this time as sacred to your business; don't schedule meetings over this time, don't answer emails, don't answer the phone. Yes, this can involve an insane amount of discipline, especially when the phone rings or social media beckons. But we guarantee that if you can stick with it, it will eventually become habit and you'll start to see results relatively quickly.

6 Understand why some tasks are never checked off

If you have items that tend to be copied-and-pasted from one day to the next and are never resolved, it's important to understand why that's happening. It's the only way to eventually get it off your list.

Is it because the task isn't fun? It feels overwhelming? You still have decisions to make about the project? It requires a high level of focus and concentration, and you aren't working on it during your peak productivity time?

A little self-awareness goes a long way if you realize certain tasks are simply acting as placeholders on your to-do list. Either schedule the time to get it done (see item #5), delegate it to someone with the skill set to do it (see item #2), make the decisions you need to make, or perhaps get rid of it all together.

7 Take a minute to decide

Even the best-laid plans get holes shot into them when the day is underway. When your email dings or your phone rings with an “urgent” request, stop and ask yourself if it really is urgent, or are people trying to push you into putting them at the top of your task list? Take a minute to critically think about where unplanned tasks fit into YOUR priorities, and if it’s urgent to you or only to someone else.

If you don’t establish boundaries on your time, you’ll be right back to where you started with an overwhelming to-do list and an inordinate amount of stress.

8 Know your “Why”

The point of creating and managing an effective to-do list is to not only increase your productivity, but also give you time you need to enjoy your life!

Every business owner we work with is driven by their “Why” statement. They know WHY they do what they do. They know WHY they work with who they do. They know WHY they provide the service or sell the product they developed. These “Why” statements are as individual as the entrepreneurs themselves.

The “Why” of wanting to have a more manageable and effective to-do list is universal -- increase your productivity, guide you in achieving your goals, and provide the time you need to focus on your priorities. By remembering WHY you want to work toward a more manageable day, it’ll guide you in the decisions you make on where and how to spend your time.

None of us are robots. We all have days that simply get away from us. Nothing gets checked off the list, nothing is moved forward, and the only thing you accomplished was putting out one unexpected fire after another. Yes, it can feel discouraging; but by building an actionable plan and incorporating the tools you need to get through your to-do list more efficiently, those occasional unproductive days won’t have much of an impact on your goals and long-range plans.

It’s like if you’re focused on following a low-calorie diet, one piece of cake at a kid’s birthday party isn’t going to derail all your efforts or even set you back too far. As long as you have a plan, the tools you need, and some discipline, any unexpected setbacks in your daily to-do list will be easily absorbed and you’ll be more productive than ever.

About Us | *Rescue Desk Virtual Assistant Services was founded in 2008 with one goal in mind: to build a virtual assistance firm that works behind the scenes helping small-business owners succeed. Our firm works with solopreneurs, small business owners, nonprofits, associations, and busy executives. Our mission is pretty simple: our job is to make your job easier. We are an executive assistant, marketing coordinator and project manager all rolled into one, and we take time-consuming support tasks and projects off your to-do list. Anyone who has ever said “I need an assistant!” can utilize the services of our firm. We are a behind-the-scenes partner whose job it is to give you the time you need to grow your business and find that work/life balance we all work so hard to achieve. **Learn more at www.RescueDeskVA.com***

