

Best Practices: Managing Your To-Do List

By Chris Palmer

Too often in the past, I would arrive home from the office exhausted, struggling to recall one thing I had accomplished, dissatisfied because none of my projects had made much progress, and convinced that my day had been wasted despite the frenetic rush of meetings, phone calls, and emails.

But then I decided to take control of my routine via a daily to-do list. Now, I tend to end my workday feeling fulfilled and satisfied rather than empty and enervated.

An item in a recent to-do list was to share my 10 secrets to managing my daily list. Without further ado:

1. **Create a personal mission statement describing your professional and personal goals.** What sort of person do you want to become? What do you want your life to be about? What do you want to achieve? How do you want to be remembered?
2. **Derive your daily to-do list as much as possible from that personal mission statement** so that every day you are moving your life forward in the direction you want to go, not simply reacting to someone else's agenda.
3. **Write down your daily action items (your to-do list).** Don't rely on a mental list.
4. **Have only one list for the day ahead.** Consolidate all lists into one master list, either on paper or electronically. Break down big jobs into smaller ones.
5. **Capture *all* your tasks for the day and put them on your to-do list.** This gives you a comprehensive list that includes everything you need to accomplish. Add any new task to the master list. Don't use sticky notes or scrap pieces of paper. If a new task takes less than two minutes, do it immediately without adding it to the list.
6. **Draw up your to-do list first thing in the morning before distractions begin** (or before you go to bed the night before). Are there any tasks that can be delegated or deleted? Don't procrastinate on important (but perhaps not urgent) jobs critical to your professional success. Try to give priority to important tasks over urgent tasks.
7. **Make your desired outcomes specific.** Instead of "Contract for Barnes," write, "Review contract for Barnes, especially the deliverables, then send it to Fred in HR." Start each item on your to-do list with an action verb.
8. **Put your list of to-dos in order of importance.** You can work effectively on only one task at a time. Work on the first task until it's complete, then move on to No. 2. This allows you to work with total concentration on the task at hand without worrying that you might be forgetting to do something important.

9. **As the day progresses, keep asking yourself:** Of all the items remaining on my to-do list, which one is the most important right now? The answer to that question constitutes the best use of your time. Reorder your priorities as appropriate.
10. **When you complete a task, put a check beside it** or draw a line through it and feel a satisfying sense of accomplishment. This will improve your mood and motivate you to keep going.

Adhering to this process will boost your productivity, help you make steady progress toward your most important goals, and allow you to arrive home from the office feeling less anxious and more fulfilled.

Professor Chris Palmer is the director of American University's Center for Environmental Filmmaking and author of the Sierra Club book "Shooting in the Wild: An Insider's Account of Making Movies in the Animal Kingdom." He is also President of the One World One Ocean Foundation.