

Making Your “To-Do” List Work For You

By Lori Welch

Most of us have at least one “To-Do” list, others even have two. The lists can be personal, professional or a combo. Some folks keep their list tucked away in a corner of their mind, others proudly display a hard copy on the fridge door. Some doodle on their list, others write clearly on a crisp legal pad.

Ah—our friend, our enemy, our “To-Do” list!

Like laundry, “To-Dos” seem never-ending. You scratch off two items and three more surface. The bad news is that if you’re as busy as the rest of us, your “To-Do” list has probably taken up permanent residence. The good news is that you are in control of your list—you alone decide what to add and its order.

Save Endangered Mind Space

A few years ago, I started a professional organizing/concierge business. Now my days consist of attacking other people’s “To-Do” lists. What *was* I thinking? Life gets a little crazy at times, but I found it all becomes manageable if I write things down!

The first step to organizing and controlling tasks is to put pen to paper. Once that is done, it no longer takes up precious mind space. Freeing the brain from clutter allows you to focus on carrying out the tasks, or at least figuring out the “how and when” of them.

Start With A Clean Slate

I begin each day with a new list. If I have to carry items over to the next day, that’s fine, but every day is

always a fresh start. I don’t keep reminders of things I didn’t accomplish or items that have been crossed out. I just have a list of what lies ahead of me. A new day for me means new challenges.

Remember to structure your list in a way that is best for you. If you prefer typing, do that; if scribbled code words on a fluorescent pink Post-It is more your cup of tea, that’s OK too.

I always include “Me” things on my list—things I’d like to achieve but probably would forget about because everybody else’s stuff always comes before my own! “Manicure/pedicure” always goes on the list for a Sunday. Sometimes there’s a simple reminder like “Buy flowers” or “Go to movies.” Other times there’s a note to call a friend on Wednesday to make a plan for the coming weekend.

Chart Your Course

As I add items to the list I always leave space in between so I can add things above or below. And as soon as I’m writing, my brain is thinking about whether or not it makes sense to tackle the task in the morning or towards the end of the day. If I need to make it to the bank when it opens, “Bank” will go at the top of the list. If I need to get groceries on my way home, “Groceries” will be at the bottom of the list. Whatever goes in between will depend on its priority and proximity. As I go about my day, my eyes scan the list so I know what direction my car needs to be headed. My “To-Do” list essentially becomes my roadmap for the day.

Flexibility Isn’t Just for Yoga

Didn’t someone say, “Life is what happens when you’re busy making plans?” The best-laid plans and the prettiest “To-Do” lists can be shot to you-know-where with one urgent client request or a call from your husband announcing that his parents are stopping by for dinner. The car gets put in reverse and instead of heading to the dry cleaners, you’re frantically trying



It’s MY List

The list can include whatever I want, and look however I’d like it to look. Most days, items are systematically entered into my beautiful pink leather Franklin Covey organizer. Then there are less than perfect days when my list ends up on whatever piece of paper I find on my desk.

Who? What? Where?

Not only do I include tasks on my list, I also jot down the names of people I need to call that day. And if I’m craving chocolate, “Chocolate” will make it on the list. I might hear a song I like. If so, that will end up on my list to remind me to buy the CD.

to find a parking spot at Kinkos or Whole Foods. Breathe and relax. Do a "downward-facing dog" pose, then sit up and re-adjust your list.

Lighten Up

Lighten the list, and lighten the load. Don't stretch yourself too thin. Always remember, you control what goes on your list and there are only 24 hours in a day. If you look down your list and see you have eight items remaining, don't say "Yes" when someone from your bookclub calls at 3 p.m. and asks if you can bring brownies to tonight's meeting. "No" is not a four-letter word.

Relief Is Only A Sharpie Away

I always carry a black Sharpie pen for the express purpose of checking items off my list as they're done. I love pulling out that Sharpie! I derive great pleasure from ticking off each item. And at the end of the day, there's nothing like looking at the list and seeing my check marks and accomplishments!

As Virgos say, "There's Always Tomorrow"

I'm not encouraging procrastination, but if you don't manage to get to something on the list, move it to the next day (that's why it's important to organize your list in order of priority as well as geographic proximity). Urgent stuff always goes at the top of the list. And if you do make it to the bottom, think 'BONUS POINTS!'

Repetition Is Our Friend

For those of us with an imperfect memory, repetition can be a lifesaver. When I have a project that needs to be on my radar, it always goes on the bottom of my daily list leading up to its due date. For example, if I know I have an article

due on the 12th of the month, I jot "Write *Washington Woman* article" each day starting about the 2nd of that month. It's a gentle reminder and the act of writing it down regularly keeps it fresh in my mind.

You Too Can Be A List Person

Some of us are list people and some are not. I live by lists, but if making lists is foreign to you, begin the same way you would start an exercise program—make it a part of your daily routine. I usually sit down before I go to bed and jot down my "To-Do" list for the next day. That way, when I wake up, my day is already outlined. I grab my coffee and my list, and I'm ready to tackle the world... or at least the bank and the dry cleaners.

Battle The Paper Tiger, But Save The List!

While I try to encourage clients to rid themselves of unnecessary paper, I must confess that I save my "To-Do" lists for three to four months. That's because they are a record of my day-to-day activities and I've often jotted down useful information in the margins.

Preparation and organization are two important keys to success for anyone. Keeping a "To-Do" list is a great way to prepare for your day by organizing your tasks. Forget being overwhelmed. Be prepared and get organized. Let your list be a source of satisfaction as you look back at your accomplishments and look forward to the challenges that lie ahead.

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