Ten Tips for Getting Things Done Better, Faster, and Easier

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1. Good Work Habits Good Results

Choose the answer that best describes the statements below.

1 = Hardly Ever

2 = Sometimes

3 = Frequently

4 = Almost Always

1. I do the most important activities first.
2. I have too much to do and cannot spare time for routine activities such as filing.
3. I can find any document within 60 seconds.
4. I empty my paper and email inboxes daily.
5. I have stacks of paper in my office.
6. I check emails as soon as they arrive in my inbox.
7. I use filters and rules to organize emails.
8. I use a calendar to plan and organize my time.
9. When I am out sick or on vacation, people can find what they need in my workspace.
10. I am highly organized.

"First we make our habits, then our habits make us."

Charles C. Noble

1. **I do the most important activities first.**

   Best answer: 4. Doing the most important things first keeps you on track and ensures that you accomplish your major goals. Knowing how to set and respect priorities is a mark of professionalism.

2. **I have too much to do and cannot spare time for routine activities such as filing.**

   Best answer: 1. Handle every document only once. Do it, delegate it, diary it, discard it, or file it.

3. **I can find any document within 60 seconds.**

   Best answer: 4. According to experts in organization, you lose an hour a day trying to find documents. The goal is to establish a place for everything and put everything in its place.

4. **I empty my paper and email inboxes daily.**

   Best answer: 4. Emptying inboxes daily is a primary productivity tool. You lose time when you have to sort through documents you have already read. Remove documents you have read from your inbox. Do it, delegate it, diary it, discard it, or file it.

5. **I have stacks of paper in my office.**

   Best answer: 1. Often, people who have stacks of paper on their desks have a difficult time remembering where they have filed things. Out of sight is out of mind. Stacks also give the appearance that you are disorganized and unprofessional. Clutter also negatively affects your productivity and self-esteem.

6. **I check emails as soon as they arrive in my inbox.**

   Best answer: 2. Some jobs or managers require you to immediately respond to emails. However, time management and organization experts generally advise people to turn off their "You've got mail" notification and check and respond to emails at designated times during the day.

7. **I use filters and rules to organize emails.**

   Best answer: 3. Rules and filters help you organize emails, so you can immediately respond to and manage emails from key people or emails that have keywords in the subject line.

8. **I use a calendar to plan and organize my time.**

   Best answer: 4. Your calendar is one of your most important planning and time management tools. It can help you manage priorities and identify critical dates and deadlines.

9. **When I am out sick or on vacation, people can find what they need in my workspace.**

   Best answer: 4. Your office and files should be organized so anyone can find anything in your absence. You may need to create a "table of contents" for filing cabinets or drawers.

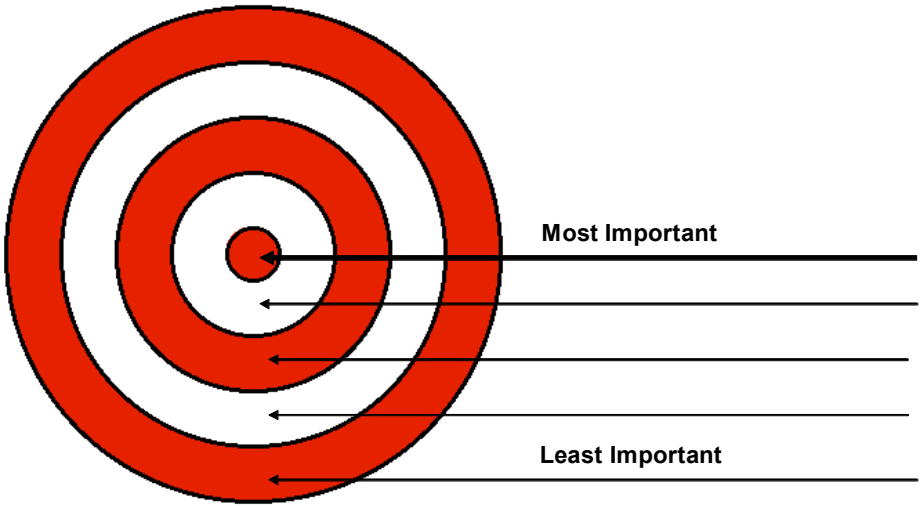
10. **I am highly organized.**

    Best answer: 4. Being organized is a habit. The goal is to automatically take care of things as they come up and implement processes for following up and keeping track of documents.

What did you learn about your habits? Where are you strong?

Where do you need improvement? What will you do to improve?

Weekly Target Worksheet



a 500
execution.
That's more than one hour a day.

Focus on what is most important. Each week, list the tasks you need to accomplish for the week and rank them from most important to least important. Hit the bull's eye by aiming the majority of your activities there during the week. Small gains in productivity can produce big results.

What are the top five tasks you need to accomplish this week?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

What is in the bull's eye?

Are you always focused on the bull's eye?

3. Close the Door on Interruptions

No matter how good your concentration skills are, unless you are a hermit in a cave, people will interrupt you. The phone will ring. Someone or something will demand your attention. It takes a person about 20 minutes to recover focus after being interrupted.

If you do not handle interruptions well or want some new ideas, here are some tips to help you:

- Allow time in your schedule to handle interruptions. If you schedule your day too tightly or rigidly, you will not be able to make up time lost to interruptions.
- Who interrupts you and when? Do you see a pattern? Is it the same person asking the same questions? Is it a call from a friend at the same time each day? Eliminate the interruption before it occurs. Consider additional training for the employee who asks too many questions. Call your friend at night and refuse to take the call during the day.
- Close your door. Leave your cubicle and go to an empty office or conference room.
- Ask people to postpone routine matters. Each day, set aside time for dealing with them and encourage people to meet with you during that time. Make sure everyone knows when your door is open and you are receptive to interruptions.
- Do not encourage socializing. Turn your desk so you do not face the door. When someone just drops in, immediately stand and remain standing. Either ask them to return later or tell them you can only spare five minutes. When the five minutes are up, ask them to leave and promise to call them later. Make sure you follow up.

Where do most of your interruptions come from? What will you do to minimize interruptions? List three steps you will take to manage interruptions.

4. Cope with Priorities, Projects, and People

Inevitably, you are going to find yourself swamped with tasks that need to be done at the same time. It is critical to know whose tasks get top priority. Or it could be a certain type of task that takes priority, regardless of who assigns it to you.

- Be direct and specific. Make sure you know what your job description entails. Do not be afraid to remind people making requests that you have multiple priorities. You have to make a judgment call as to which one is your TOP priority.
- Ask for specific deadlines to help you prioritize tasks. Be sure to get a specific date and not just "ASAP." ASAP is not a date. If someone cannot or will not give you a specific date, ask when things will "hit the fan" if the task is not completed and then work backward from there. If this still does not work, give the person a reasonable deadline by which you can get the task done.
- Speak up about scheduling and deadline conflicts. When several people want their work done at the same time, let each one know that there is a conflict. Find out which task has the highest priority. Try asking your manager to help determine which one should come first.
- Your manager will have the authority to ensure you are not overwhelmed and you can operate at peak productivity. If you have 12 people pulling you in 12 different directions, your productivity is bound to suffer. You can perform all your tasks efficiently if you do not have to communicate with all of them every time a potential change comes up. Ask for enough authority to set priorities on your own.

> *"Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least."*
> *— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

5. Clear the Clutter

Clutter is emotionally draining and causes delays, frustration, and stress. Facing a mess every day can make you feel irritable and tired before you even begin the day. Experts estimate that we spend about 150 hours a year looking for misplaced information and items. That is about one full month of lost productivity. In order to be productive, you have to become organized. If you are like many people, you have piles of papers that you need to clear out before you can begin to create and maintain order.

Here are some tips to help you keep your workspace clutter-free:

- Create one or more piles of everything that is not in its place. Do not forget the stuff piled on windowsills and under the furniture.
- Eliminate "clutter" boxes and "miscellaneous" piles. Everything needs a place and a label.
- Create an in-box, out-box, and to-file box on your desk. Empty your in-box and to-file box before you leave each day.
- Discard what you no longer need or use.
- Set aside 15 minutes a day or clear one pile a week until the clutter is gone. Some people have such large piles, they clear by the inch!
- Go through each pile and look at each piece of paper or document once.
  - If you need to take action or make a decision, do it now.
  - If you need more information, get it now or request it and diary the item for follow up.
  - If you need to read it, create a "To Read" file for clippings. Carry this file with you and read clippings from it whenever you need to wait.
  - If you may need this piece of paper again and you already have a file set up, file it now. If not, set up a file. If you don't need it, recycle it or toss it now.
- Store and stack materials and supplies properly.
- Use the right equipment for your job and place it for ergonomic and efficient use.
- Use equipment for the purpose for which it was intended.
- Don't fill up all your space. Leave room for growth and new materials.
- Keep it neat and orderly going forward.

Do it.

Delegate it.

Diary it for follow-up.

Discard it.

File it.

NOW

6. Stop Talking and Listen

Active listening is showing respect for the speaker; not being judgmental; and paying attention to facts, emotions, needs, and intent. Active listening is manifested by interest and understanding.

According to Dr. Marisue Pickering, a University of Maine researcher, empathetic listeners:

- Are other-directed.
- Are non-defensive.
- Understand and respect that the roles, perspectives, and experiences of the other person differ from their own.
- Listen non-critically with a sincere desire to understand the other person.

Improving Listening Skills

- Listen 70 percent of the time and talk only 30 percent of the time.
- Stick to facts and objective observations. Be aware of your biases and set them aside. Avoid evaluative or critical comments.
- Interpret the other person's nonverbal communication.
- Monitor your own nonverbal communication. Be aware of the messages you are sending with your body and facial expressions.
- Monitor and control your emotional triggers and their effects on you.
- Put yourself in the speaker's shoes and respect his or her viewpoint.
- Focus on what the speaker is saying. Take notes, if appropriate.
- Show attentiveness by making eye contact and repeating key phrases and words.
- Repeat what the speaker has said. "Let me be sure I understand this. Are you saying…?"
- Ask the speaker to repeat what you do not understand, then stop talking and give the other person time to answer.
- Ask open questions that require more than yes and no answers. Start open questions with how, what, could, would. "How could we do this? What do you think? What if we did it this way? Which way do you prefer?"
- Use closed questions to stop the other person from rambling. Closed questions require yes or no answers.
- Avoid questions that put people on the defensive.

7. What Is Body Language Saying?

Watch what other people are saying with their bodies and what you are telling them with yours. If words and body language clash, what the body is saying will be believed. Use appropriate body language to create credibility and congruence. Practice each one as we go over it.

Negative Messages

- Fold arms and cross legs to reject what you hear.
- Lean back, doodle, or look at the ceiling to show boredom.
- Sit back and join your fingers like a church steeple to show indifference.
- Slump to convey uncertainty and uneasiness.
- Slouch and walk slowly to show reluctance and lack of enthusiasm.

Positive Messages

- Lean forward to show active involvement.
- Tilt the head to one side and nod occasionally to show understanding.
- Relax the face and smile to show acceptance and agreement.
- Walk with a quick gait and swing your arms to show confidence and enthusiasm.
- Stand and sit with an erect, yet comfortable and relaxed posture to communicate openness and a readiness to talk or listen.

Eye Contact

Eye contact can be tricky. Looking directly into someone's eyes can be seen as hostile and even rude in some cultures. However, avoiding contact indicates sneakiness and the need to avoid disclosure. The solution is "soft eye contact." Look at the person's cheek, forehead, nose, chin, or mouth. They think that you are looking directly at them, but you are actually avoiding direct eye contact.

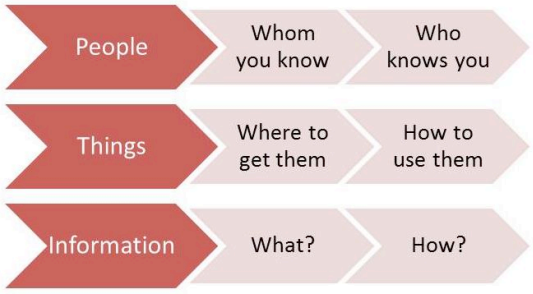
When addressing a group, regularly look around the room and make eye contact with someone for a few moments, then move on. Use short, frequent glances, but don't stare. Everyone will think you are paying attention to him or her, and you will seem to be in control.

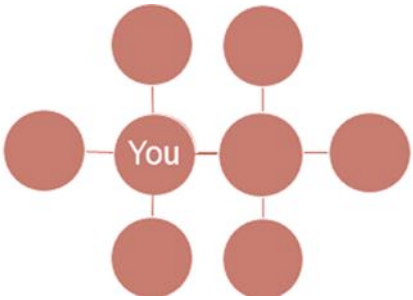
8. Plug into a Network

How can building a network of contacts help you connect with the resources you need?

Essentially, if you help people when they need assistance, people will help you, too. In addition, if you take time to build and nurture relationships with the people around you, you'll build a network of "allies" who can help assign you to interesting, significant, or eye-catching projects that may otherwise go to someone else. They may also recommend you to other departments, which can open up opportunities that may not have been available to you without their recommendations.

Build a network of allies within your department and with other departments. Try to be assigned to teams that involve a wide variety of people. This can help you build your reputation and make important friendships. Build your network outside of the office, too, by joining professional organizations and networks, and through social networking sites.





"Position yourself as a center of influence - the one who knows the movers and shakers. People will respond to that, and you'll soon become what you project."

Bob Burg

9. Write Emails that Get Read

Write emails using an inverted pyramid structure. When you use an inverted pyramid, you start with the most important information and follow with information in descending order of importance, ending with the least important part.

Have you heard the expression, "Above the fold?" It refers to that part of a newspaper you see when the paper is folded in the rack. "Above the fold" also applies to email. It is what readers see when they open an email and before they scroll. The content they see after they scroll is "below the fold." Since many readers do not scroll, whatever is below the fold may not be read.

When you write your emails using the inverted pyramid method, you ensure your message is above the fold. This means that readers do not have to scroll to get the gist of your message.

The most important part of an email is the subject line.

Most people sort their email inboxes by sender and subject line. When readers know you and know you will not waste their time, your emails will be read ahead of others. If readers do not know you, your subject line needs to convince them to open and read your email.

The subject line needs to give readers enough information to help them understand what you expect from them. A good way to do this is to use a keyword in your subject line. A keyword is the first word of the subject line, and it sets the reader's expectations about the content of the email.

Here are some common keywords:

- *Decision:*
- *Review:*
- *Approve:*

The rest of the subject line fills in more information. For example:

- *Decision: What is your opinion about using APX Systems?*
- *Review: Employee handbook by (date)*
- *Approve: RFP for new healthcare plan*

If your message is short, put the entire message in the subject line itself. Want to say "Thanks" to someone who replied to an email request? Add it to the front of the subject line with your name or initials and send it back. Let's say I sent out an email asking a reader to review content for a website.

My email subject line looks like this: Review: Copy for website home page

The reader reviews and returns with his or her comments, and I alter the subject line this way: RE: Thanks! Pat Review: Copy for website home page

No need for the reader to open the email to see my thanks. Time saved!

10. Business Writing for Results

Outcome is what you hope to achieve by writing your document. Keeping your outcome in front of you as you organize, write, and revise helps you focus and make decisions about what to put into the document and what to leave out.

Documents that Inform or Explain are used to:

- Provide or request information.
- Explain decisions or actions.
- Document events, results, actions, decisions, etc.
- Plan or evaluate performance.
- Communicate policies.

The challenge with informing or explaining is the need to make the information relevant for the reader. Since no action by the reader is required, you have to motivate him or her to read the document by communicating the importance of knowing the information. Start by telling readers why they need to know the information. Focus on its relevance for the reader and include the consequences of not knowing the information, if appropriate.

Documents that Instruct

Instructions give readers information on a systematic process to do something. Subject matter experts tend to skip steps and the challenge here is to ensure that all information is provided, so the reader can perform the task. This is procedure writing.

- Use numbers or bullets for a series of steps.
- Use imperative sentences for action steps.
- Write one action per step.
- Identify main steps and provide detail in sub-steps.
- Identify the person, if other than the reader, who will perform the step.
- Start conditional steps with "If" or "When."
- Use boldface and/or capital letters for conditional steps that are critical or for safety issues.
- Test the steps with end users.

Documents that Persuade

Your ability to write persuasively helps you get things done and achieve the results you want. Most of your business writing will require you to be persuasive. Sales letters, collection letters, requests for donations, recommendations, proposals, etc. require skill in persuasive writing.

One of the most important rules for persuasive writing is to understate, not overstate. A single exaggeration can destroy your credibility with the reader. Stick to the facts.

- State the reader's need, desire, or problem that you can meet or solve.
- Stress benefits, not features, to appeal to the reader's self-interest.
- Rely on facts, statistics, and authorities to prove your case.
- Tell the reader what to do and why it needs to be done now. Anticipate and answer the reader's questions and objections.

BONUS Tip

Quick Guide to Punctuation

Punctuation	Usage
Period	• To end a declarative sentence or indirect question. • After an abbreviation. • After initials in a name.
Semicolon	• Between two independent clauses not joined by a conjunction. • To clarify a long, complex series of items. • To separate items when multiple punctuation is used.
Colon	• To introduce a list or series. • After a formal salutation.
Comma	• To separate items in a series that are not joined by conjunctions. • To separate adverbs or adjectives modifying a single item. • To separate independent clauses that use a coordinating conjunction. • To set off introductory phrases or clauses. • To set off nonessential information and clauses. • To set off contrasting expressions.
Apostrophe	• To indicate possession. • To create contractions.
Capitalization	• To indicate the first word of every sentence. • To mark the days of the week and months of the year. • To mark proper names and abbreviations. • To mark titles that appear before a proper name.
Italics	• To indicate specific names or titles of books, films, works of art, vehicles, newspapers, magazines; words; legal citations; scientific names for plants, etc. • To emphasize a specific word or phrase.
Numbers	• Use words for numbers from one to ten and numbers that are used to start a sentence. • Use numbers from ten and up and for mathematics.

For Organizations:

I offer strategic learning strategies and customized professional development programs that give your employees the skills they need to achieve success for themselves and their organizations. I use a modular, interdisciplinary approach; you choose the program configuration you need to improve productivity, achieve bottom-line results and enhance the professionalism of your staff.

For Entrepreneurs:

I provide consulting services for entrepreneurs to drive bottom-line results and get your business noticed in all the right ways. I use my expertise in communication strategy to create integrated, strategic content, products and services that grow your customer base and increase sales. I help you:

- Stand out from the competition by showcasing your expertise
- Leverage your business with consistent, credible brand messaging
- Expand your reach to new audiences for your products and services
- Increase your income

I am the author of 11 books, more than 600 articles, and thousands of information products. Before starting my consulting practice 20+ years ago, I was an assistant vice president and senior communications officer at a major financial institution.