How to prioritize your most important work

Additional resources

✓ Introduction to work management

✓ How to create a project plan that actually keeps you on track

✓ 4 ways to improve your focus at work

If you're like most people, you usually start work with the intention of being as productive as possible. Yet, as the day rolls on, you find yourself fielding multiple urgent requests and watching your task list grow. What you initially set out to accomplish always seems to get pushed to the side.

If this sounds familiar, you're not alone. Many of us don't have a process for prioritizing tasks at work and always feel like we're playing catch-up. We risk missing key deadlines and constantly worry about staying on track or losing focus. But enough is enough. You can get ahead of the game and stay on top of deadlines with some simple methods to set priorities and manage your workload.

Work from anywhere with Asana

When you take steps to prioritize your work, you can be proactive rather than reactive—and will ultimately increase your productivity, meet your deadlines, and better manage your time at work. Take a look at the tips below and find a process that will help you prioritize your tasks at work:

Start by gathering your to-dos and create a task list

You can't decide how to prioritize tasks if you don't have a single view of everything you need to get done in the first place. This may seem rudimentary, but it's something that's often skipped in the rush to dive into projects. Instead, take the time to list out what you need to work on across all of your projects. Be sure to break down bigger tasks into subtasks to feel less overwhelmed.

Once your tasks are aggregated and listed in one place, add additional information, such as the amount of time it'll take to complete, level of importance or urgency, and due date. With all of your tasks in one place, you'll be able to see an overall view of what needs to get done, get a sense of how much work you're dealing with for time management purposes, and what most likely needs your attention now. Don't worry about organizing your tasks quite yet; just get them all in the same spot to start. Gathering everything together is a crucial first step because, if you can organize yourself at the beginning of a project or the quarter, it is much easier to stay organized for a longer period of time.

[Download ebook: What is work management—and why your team needs it]

Asana tip: My Tasks is a feature of Asana that automatically aggregates all the tasks assigned to you in a single view. It serves as the master checklist that keeps you focused on the right pieces of work and allows you to organize and prioritize tasks based on due date.

Adopt a task prioritization method to organize your work to-do list

How you ultimately prioritize your tasks will depend on the nature of your job and your personal work style, but there are a few common task prioritization methods that might work for you. Let's take a look at a few methods for prioritizing tasks:

1. Eat the Frog

The Eat the Frog method is not a literal suggestion, but rather a system based on a quote from the ever-wise Mark Twain. He said, "If it's your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning." In the world of work management, that translates to tackling big or complex tasks first before moving on to less important or time sensitive tasks.

Important tasks that serve the highest purpose and are tied to top-level objectives or OKRs should be first on the priority list when you start your day. Once you've eaten your frog for the day, you can slot in other tasks based on factors such as deadlines and feel less stress, since your most important work is already done.

[Download ebook: How to set OKRs the right way]

Eat the Frog in action: Finish up that big presentation you'll be making to the management team at the end of the week before you reply to emails, work on your review form, call clients, or iron out contract revisions. By diving into a big project before doing anything else, you won't lose focus or get distracted by random tasks or questions, and you'll be able to knock a big piece of work out more easily.

2. Eisenhower Decision Matrix

Another method, the Eisenhower Decision Matrix or Urgent-Important Matrix, starts by organizing tasks into four quadrants, based on whether they are important, urgent, both, or neither. As a five star-general during World War II and then president of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower was adept at making important decisions quickly, and came up with this method to help him.

This approach helps you decide what to do now (important and urgent), what you need to plan for (important but not urgent), what you may be able to delegate (not important but urgent), and what you can possibly delete (not important and not urgent). It is a great tool for prioritizing tasks, making decisions quickly, and staying organized.

Eisenhower Decision Matrix in action: A colleague has just sent you an email asking for help with a sales presentation. This request is urgent because it has to be done today, but is it important enough (to you) to postpone other work? Measure each of the tasks on your own

daily list for importance and urgency to decide whether you can shift tasks to help your colleague, or if it needs to be deferred to later. Knowing your commitments also helps you say "no" when you need to.

3. ABCDE Method

With the ABCDE method, you take that task list you've created, assign each task a letter value according to its level of importance, and then tackle tasks accordingly. It's a way of quickly weighting task importance to help you prioritize and time manage. This is comparable to giving grades to your tasks, from A (very important) down to E (eliminate whenever possible). Make sure you're always working on your A and B tasks first, because those are the ones that will make or break your success at work.

The ABCDE method also works well when combined with Eat the Frog. If you start your day off with your A and B tasks, then you can spend the rest of your day on tasks with lower importance, like C, D, and E.

ABCDE in action: You have eight working hours available today, but fifteen hours worth of tasks on your list. When you give each task a letter, though, only two qualify as A tasks, and most are D tasks that you can delegate or reschedule. Now you know to focus only on those A tasks, and leave the D tasks until later or pass off to another teammate. You've just gone from being overwhelmed to having a prioritized task list that focuses on the must-do items of the day.

4. Chunking

For the chunking method, a chunk is defined as a focused work activity. It can be self-contained (emptying your inbox), a slice of a larger project (completing the first draft of a document), or a collection of small, unrelated tasks. Your key here is to make these chunks focused, uninterrupted blocks of time.

Turn off outside distractions and signal to others that you are unavailable by taking advantage of collaboration tools with features like do not disturb. Alternatively, you can use your calendar to block out time for deep focus, also signaling to people that they shouldn't schedule over those important blocks of focus time. If you find this method rewarding, consider making a No Meeting Wednesday policy for yourself and your team if you're able to. Regardless, taking breaks in between chunks is also important to relax and refresh.

[Read: How to find focus and reduce digital distractions]

Chunking in action: You might start your day with one hour of design work followed by a coffee break. Then, two hours of scheduled meetings, lunch, and thirty minutes of email response time. Next, you move onto one hour of research on a new client. You note all of your activities in your calendar to hold yourself accountable and ensure no one schedules over your

plan. You end your day by taking a short social media break, head to the team update meeting, and then finish with a final hour of design work.

Asana tip: If you're using Asana to manage your tasks, you can create custom fields to add additional information, such as a letter grade (if you're using the ABCDE method), urgency and importance (if you're using the Eisenhower Decision Matrix), priority level (if you're going with Eat the Frog), or estimates on how long it will take to complete.

Use your calendar to schedule your tasks

Whether a task takes you minutes or weeks to complete, it always has a beginning and an end. So, once you have your list, add a start and an end date to each task. Doing this will make sure nothing falls through the cracks as new things come up and priorities need to shift.

If a task is assigned to you without clear start or end dates, be sure to ask for that information so you can schedule a time to work on it and to set expectations. Once you know these dates, you might even set your personal end date earlier than the actual deadline to account for unexpected issues or to turn in work early. Think of your work as a puzzle: You need to know the pieces will fit together, and start and end dates are the edges of those puzzle pieces.

[Read: 4 ways to manage your workflow with Asana]

To continue the metaphor, if tasks are puzzle pieces, with start and end dates noting their edges, then your calendar is the puzzle board where you assemble the bigger picture. Use it to schedule work, balance high-effort and high-priority tasks in a way that won't overload you, and make sure you meet deadlines. If you're adopting one of the prioritization methods above —or a combination of your favorites—use that framework to help fill your schedule and manage time.

Asana tip: Using the calendar view in Asana, you'll be able to spot days when you might be overloaded and also see open blocks of time. Take advantage of this view to shift tasks and spread your work out more evenly. When you proactively manage your calendar, you can stay organized and start each day knowing exactly what important tasks need to be accomplished.

Communicate task progress with your teammates

Finally, don't forget to loop in teammates who may be waiting on you to complete a task, or vying for some of your time. By proactively giving teammates status updates on task progress, when you plan to complete it, or any delays or blockers that come up, you can cut down on the amount of update requests you receive. Instead of constantly responding to those requests, you can keep doing your work productively and efficiently.

[Read: How to create and share effective project status reports]

Asana tip: Asana's task comments feature lets you share updates and ask follow-up questions directly on a task to keep communication connected with the actual work you're doing. Or, you can use status updates within a project to notify every stakeholder of your progress on a specific project, not just a task.

Prioritized work is productive work

When you clearly prioritize your work, you can increase productivity, better manage your time, and feel confident that you'll hit your deadlines—every time. Boost your productivity even more by using a work management tool, like Asana, to organize and manage all of your tasks—no matter how big or small—in one place.

Manage your tasks, projects, and more with Asana

Try for free

Learn More about Asana

More Asana Resources

What is work management—and why your team needs it

See how a work management tool helps teams easily connect and collaborate, enabling everyone to achieve more, together—even in an increasingly distributed world.

Get ebook

10 strategies for successfully managing multiple projects

Managing multiple projects at once gets complex. Learn 10 tips and best practices to successfully manage multiple projects. Prioritize all of your moving pieces so your team always knows who's doing what by when.

Read article