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Putting a to-do list on your to-do list

by Margaret Littman
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The first step is admitting you need one. The second? Deciding how your priorities – and your personality – determine the best way to organize your list.

To list or not to list? With the advent of BlackBerrys, Outlook and spiral-bound recycled paper note-books, this question plagues the 21st-century mind.

For those whose basic survival needs are met, one of life's most nagging problems is having too much to do and not enough time to do it. In a Harris Poll conducted in October 2006, 33 percent of those surveyed reported having too much information to process at any one time as one of their major stresses. More than half of the respondents—across all ages, sexual orientations and genders reported that they had experienced “too many things to do” in the last month. Those with higher household incomes were more likely to feel that way.

Asking if to-do lists are in vogue is akin to asking if showering is in vogue. Making lists as part of an effort to get our busy schedules under control is just a part of everyday life. Executives do it. Stay-at-home parents do it. College students do it.

“The more responsibility you have at work, the more you need to log in or write down and codify everything you need to get done. Especially when you have two or more people reporting to you, there will simply be too much floating in your head,” says Jeff Davidson, a North Carolina management consultant and author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Getting Things Done* (Alpha, 2005).

Davidson believes that the first to-do lists actually predate the invention of paper (in A.D. 105, according to the Robert C. Williams Paper Museum at Georgia Tech University), and that cave-dwellers' hieroglyphics may have been some sort of to-do list that chronicled accomplished tasks.

If the phrase "to-do list" leads you to think of the supermarket scrawl your mother jotted down before heading out to stock the fridge, then it's time to enter the new millennium. While to-do lists may be nothing new, they have taken on a new importance in our lives. Empires have been built around creating tools that enable people to write lists that allow them to actually get things done.

"The majority of people have a list," says Clay Nelson, a life coach in California. "But 60 percent of them do not have it written down. The biggest challenge I have is getting them to stop and put down what is in between their ears." Nelson likens a grown-up to-do list to the after-school tutor who monitors a child's homework. "You have to write it down, or you can't hold someone accountable."

"A to-do list is nothing more than a wish list until you schedule time in your planner," agrees Barry J. Izsak, owner of Texas-based Arranging It All and president of the National Association of Professional Organizers.

Not only does the to-do list help you keep track of who is supposed to do what and when (including yourself), Davidson believes "the brain has trouble retaining lists, specific sequences and minute detail." For those of us without photographic memories, making a physical list is the best way to help our brains recall what we need them to.

Nothing personal

Since it seems clear that you should list, perhaps the real question is when to list.

Creating lists at the office is almost a no-brainer. Bosses may hand over a list of to-dos in the form of an annual review. Executive assistants may break down the day's tasks into manageable chunks for their bosses. Increasingly, workplaces are requiring their staff to be on the same page with their to-do technology by handing everyone a BlackBerry or Treo, or requiring everyone to use Outlook's public meeting function.

But what about those at-home to-dos, like taking the kids to soccer practice, fixing the garage-door opener or paying your property tax bill? Should those tasks get thrown in the mix with preparation for your company's annual meeting or completing your next expense report?

"The people who have most success organizing their lives align with their values," says Kristin Wehner, an entrepreneurial coach in Colorado. "Figure out your top four to six values or priorities, and then start to line up your tasks in support of your values. You will not feel like you live so much in an energy vortex if you are thinking of how you spend your time in alignment with your values."

As most of us consider our personal lives a higher priority than our work lives (at least in theory), it stands to reason that organizing in alignment with our values would mean organizing our homes first. For some folks, though, just putting the at-home tasks on the office list doesn't work. If you don't bring your laptop home at night or—heaven forbid—don't own a PDA, you may not have access to your to-do list in your off hours. And, if everything is on a sheet of paper in a notebook, what happens when you accidentally leave the notebook on your breakfast table as you hurry out the door for a meeting?

For the right balance of efficiency and energy, most experts say that two lists, one for work and one personal, are acceptable. But, they need to be simple. Life coach Clay Nelson recommends mingling the separate work and personal to-do lists inside one system. So, you might have a distinct home and office list (or several of each); but the system, whether Outlook or Franklin Covey, is consistent.

How do you do?

Now that you've decided when to list, the question becomes how to list. The possibilities are almost endless, with a new "system" published practically every month, each one promising to help users get a handle on their tasks and lives.

Popular listing systems vary from the A, B, C method of prioritizing to breaking even the smallest task into smaller accomplishable items that are charted on paper. Not every system works for everyone, even those committed to religiously keeping lists up-to-date (which, let's face it, not many people are). Otherwise, David Allen, Stephen Covey and Marla Cilley (a.k.a. "The Fly Lady") wouldn't all be raking in the dough.

A list for every personality

The perfect list system takes your strengths and weaknesses into consideration. Here are some categories to help guide you to listing success.

Linear

If you are someone with a spotless desk—known around the office as a "neat freak"—the linear approach of the Outlook Task List might be ideal for you. Those who like to see how to get from point A to point B appreciate the way Outlook is arranged, believes life coach Kristin Wehner. All the "to-dos" end up in discreet lists on your PC, so your desk stays paper-free. Reminders link the tasks to a date, so you won't forget what you've written down.

Visual

Visual learners need to see things in front of them to keep a handle on the task at hand. If you prefer using a whiteboard in a meeting to see all the ideas being generated at once, look into some paper-and-pen solutions. This doesn't mean you have to suffer with a plain legal pad from the supply closet. Some Moleskine brand notebooks have pockets into which you can slip the occasional magazine clipping. Attractive clipboards and binders also help corral loose scraps in one place.

Tech-Savvy

If you want to be able to add any thought to your master list the moment it hits you—on the train, at the opera or in the lunch line—then try one of the handheld devices at your disposal. Tech-savvy listers should opt for a BlackBerry or Treo with the ability to serve multiple purposes, so you don't have several disintegrated gadgets, such as a computer, PDA and phone. Wehner says that these devices have replaced the paper-based list for most of her clients.

List of lists

Check out these resources about compiling to-do lists. In addition to being useful, they serve a voyeuristic purpose: You can peek at the methods to other people's madness.

43folders.com

blablalist.com

flylady.net

Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity, David Allen (Penguin, 2002)



In order to keep track of the research, interviews and writing for this article, Chicago journalist MARGARET LITTMAN kept lists in her Treo, in Microsoft Word and on an old-fashioned legal pad.