



## Productivity

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### A To Do List that Works

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We have all written “to do” lists, yet, there never seems to be enough hours in the day to accomplish all the things on the list. If a “to do” list fits your management style, here are some tips on how to make your list work for you.

#### Ranking

Making a “to do” list is not enough; you have to [prioritize](#) the items on the list based on their [importance](#) and [time sensitivity](#).

I list my “to do” items on a spreadsheet, although a palmtop computer (PDA), paper list, or time management software are equally effective. Then, I assign an A, B, C ranking to each item. My A list are items I have to get done today. My B list are items I need to get done this week, and my C list are items I would like to accomplish within the next several weeks. Your rankings may vary based on your own schedule of priorities.

I found out pretty quickly that things on my C list never got done. In fact, most of the B list didn't get done either. And there were many days that I didn't get through everything on my A list. This led to frustration and a growing A list. That's when I figured out what I had to do to make my “to do” list work for me.

#### Time Management

It wasn't enough to know what was important; what made the A list. I also needed to know [how much time was required](#) to complete a task. As a result, I added a column to my “to do” list with the estimated time for completion and an adjacent column with the cumulative time total.

Then I did a simple time study. As I performed each task, I wrote down the start and end times and tracked them for an entire day. Then I repeated the time study a couple of weeks later on a different day. It wasn't an exhaustive study by any means, but it gave me some insight. As an operations manager, I found that much of my day was taken up by interruptions - dealing with events that happened, crises that came up, or problems that had to be solved STAT. On average these interruptions consumed four hours a day, leaving me 4-5 hours a day to devote to the tasks on my “to do” list.

Each night, before I left the office, I would update my list—deleting completed tasks, delegating or downgrading others, and adding new tasks. I put the most important tasks at the top of my list and assigned estimated times for completion to each task. Then I went down the list to the 4-5 hour mark and drew a line. That became my target for the next day.

### **Reward Yourself**

Most often, the line fell somewhere on my A list, and that was my goal. Seldom was it anywhere near the bottom. If I hit or passed the line, I went home feeling like it had been a productive day. Instead of stressing over the tasks I hadn't been able to get to, I acknowledged my success at having met my goal. The next day, I started toward a new goal from the perspective of building on previous success rather than having more to do than I had time to accomplish.

I learned that to be successful, you have to develop a system to manage what you can accomplish. The system must be both simple and realistic. What worked for me was the following:

- List the tasks you have to do.
- Prioritize the tasks by importance and time sensitivity.
- Assign the time required to complete each task.
- Establish a daily goal related to the time available to devote to the “to do” list..
- Reward yourself when you meet or beat your daily goal.

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*Excerpts of article from John Reh, About Management. Find more about management at: [www.management.about.com](http://www.management.about.com).*