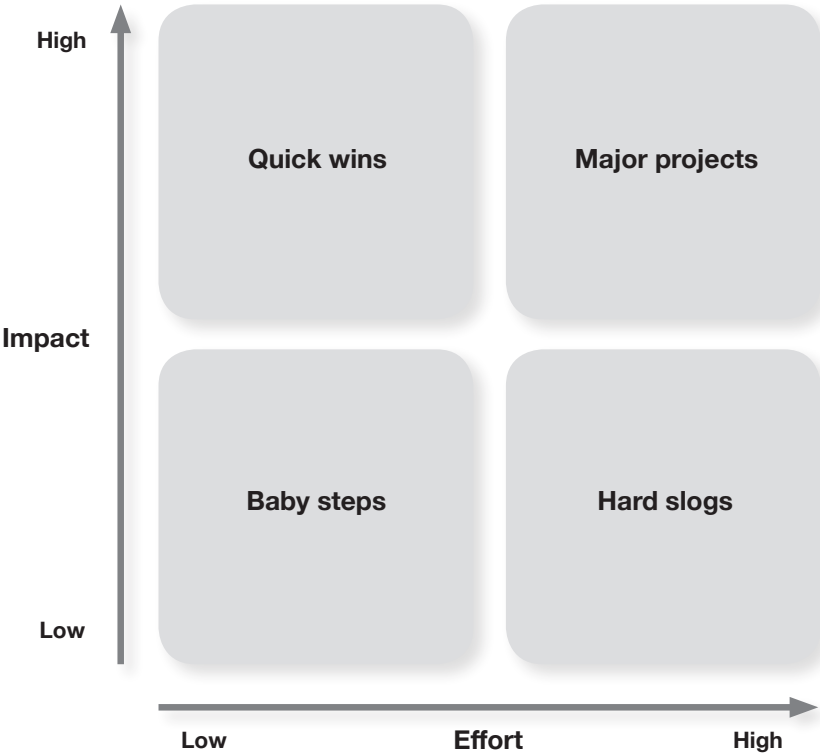


37. Systems Activity: The Action Priority Matrix

As you move through the exam season, time will be limited and the pressure will be on. Inevitably, there are going to be moments when you have too much to do and not enough time to do it in. Here's where an action priority matrix can be super-useful. It's a real lifesaver because it allows you to differentiate between tasks according to how much impact they are going to have on your learning relative to the amount of energy they'll need to get them finished.

The grid looks like this:



If you've got too much to do, try plotting all your possible actions on this grid. List everything you could be doing to prepare for the next two or three exams. Now weight them. First, consider how much energy they'll require. Energy means high concentration, focused time. If it's lots, put the action towards the right. If you could do it quickly and easily, put the action towards the left.

Second, consider the potential impact on your learning. If it's high – if you feel the action could really transform your knowledge or skills – put it up towards the top. If you think it will improve your learning a little, put it towards the bottom.

Once you've got all your possible options on the grid, have a look at which of the four quadrants the actions have fallen into and check out the advice below.

Quick Wins

These are gold. Get them done as a matter of urgency! They won't take long, and they could well transform your performance in a particular subject. If you've got an afternoon ahead of you (maybe even a full day, lucky you!), get these tasks done while you're feeling fresh and lively. Set a time limit for them – say to yourself, 'I'll do this task in thirty minutes' or 'I'll give myself an hour to get this finished.' Don't consider any other activities on the grid until you've bust through all of these.

Baby Steps

These tasks won't take much effort but neither will they have a massive impact. However, they could be good tasks to do if you're feeling foggy or lacking energy. They might not require total concentration, so if you need something to do just to get you into the rhythm of working, choose one or two. Similarly, if you've got a spare half an hour before lunch, or a spare twenty minutes before your bus, you could fire off one of these. Try doing one on the way into school for an exam – on a bus or train or in an environment that's not great for total concentration.

Major Projects

These are going to really boost your understanding and skill in a particular subject, but they're going to take a long period of high concentration to complete. Choose them if you can fulfil the following criteria:

- » You have two to three hours where you won't be interrupted.
- » You're committed to switching off all mobile devices for two to three hours, and you won't allow yourself to be distracted no matter what.
- » You have access to a reasonably calm and quiet working environment.

If you can't fulfil these criteria, either change things so you can (call and cancel a meet-up, pull out of another commitment or switch location) or break the activities up. We've seen pupils have real success by taking a sledgehammer to a big project and bashing it into five or six smaller pieces. So instead of 'reread the complete chemistry textbook' (definitely a 'major project!'), pupils have broken the task down into 'reread chapter 1 and make notes' or 'reread sections 4 and 5, picking out key ideas'. Suddenly, the big project becomes a set of smaller tasks that might end up in 'quick win' or 'baby steps'.

Hard Slogs

If you're really pushed for time, the chances are you'll end up not doing these; all your energies should be spent on getting your quick wins done, building up a load of activities in baby steps or breaking your big projects down into more manageable tasks.

Watch out, though – sometimes we might put an activity into 'hard slog' because we just don't want to do it. Could it be that you've subconsciously underestimated the impact the task could have on your learning? Only keep the task in 'hard slogs' if you're super-sure.

It's worth using this grid throughout May and June just to check in with yourself, work out what you could be doing and picking off those tasks which will have the highest impact.

April Activities

Making judgements

Imagine these were all tasks you could be doing with your time. Try adding them to the grid to help practise making judgements about effort and impact. Your answers might not be the same as others' – that's not a problem:

- » Borrow a friend's notes and review that entire topic
- » Build a glossary of key terms with definitions
- » Ask three questions of my teacher, noting down the answers
- » Do a one-hour re-organise of all my notes into topics
- » Ask for a textbook recommendation, then read the opening chapter, taking notes
- » Resubmit that disastrous piece of work re-done, asking for it to be marked again
- » Do a full, high-pressure 2 hour exam under timed conditions

Final Thoughts

It's well worth reviewing the kind of work you do and thinking about the impact it has. Some pupils use the grid and realise they spend lots of time doing high effort low impact jobs. Others often figure out that they're doing lots of low effort low impact jobs over and over again.

Have you got a particular pattern of working? How might you improve it? Use the space below to record your thoughts and plans:

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