The "Everything is Important" paradox: 9 practical methods for how to prioritize your work (and time)

Posted: May 5, 2020 · By: Jory MacKay · Category: Time Management, Workplace Productivity · 15 Comments

One of the oldest workplace struggles is knowing **how to prioritize your work**.

With more tasks to do, non-stop emails, and higher expectations, deciding what deserves your attention can quickly become overwhelming.

However, mastering prioritization can change your life. Knowing your priorities reduces stress, helps you focus and ignore FOMO, can improve productivity and time management, and even help with work-life balance as you create better boundaries for your workday.

Once you know how to prioritize your tasks and your time, you realize that much of the work that *felt* urgent doesn't really need your attention. At least not right away.

But while the elements of prioritizing your work are simple (i.e. Know what tasks need to be done and rank them by importance), it's far from a simple exercise.

When priorities are piling up, you need a clear system in place to take you from overwhelmed to under control. In this guide, we've collected the best strategies on **how to prioritize your daily tasks**, optimize your time, and focus on the work that matters most.
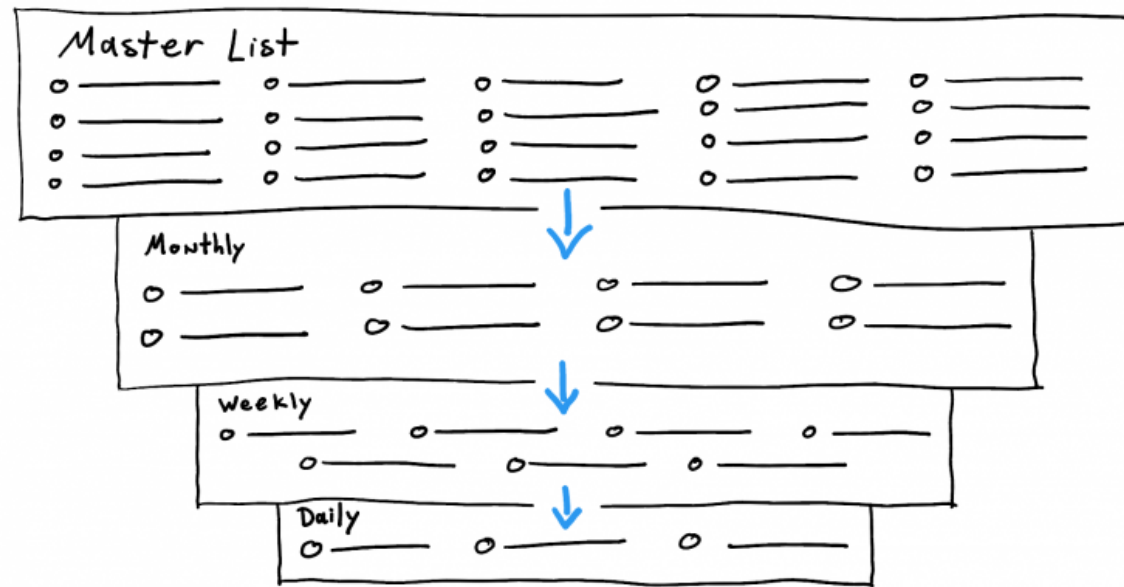
How to prioritize your tasks (and your time)

1. Capture everything on a Master List and then break it down by monthly, weekly, and daily goals
2. Separate the urgent from the important tasks with the Eisenhower Matrix
3. Rank your daily tasks by their true priority with the Ivy Lee Method
4. Separate tasks with similar priorities using the ABCDE method

5. Set a productive tone for the day by "Eating the frog"
6. Cut out "good enough" goals with Warren Buffett's 2-list strategy
7. Be aware of the sunk cost fallacy when choosing what deserves your time (i.e. be flexible enough to change your mind and drop priorities)
8. Use Time Multipliers to make the most of your daily hours
9. Prioritize your most important work during your most productive hours
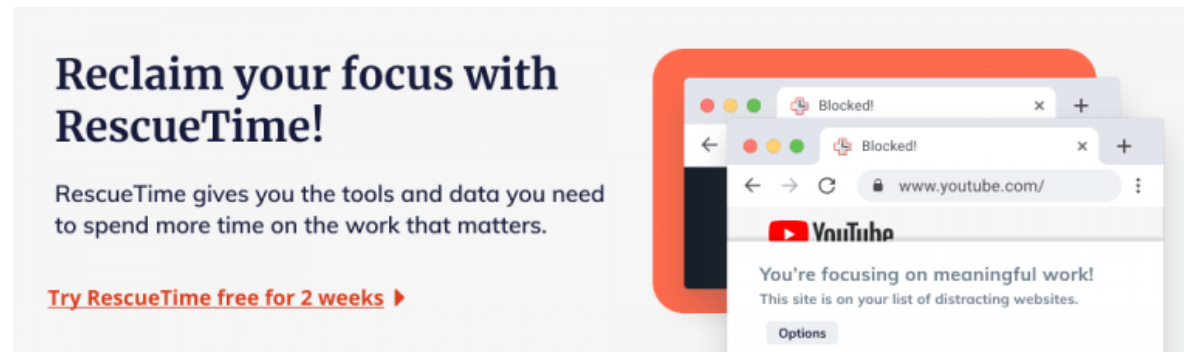
1. Capture everything on a Master List and then break it down by monthly, weekly, and daily goals

It's impossible to prioritize your tasks if they're all swimming around in your head.

Instead, start by getting everything down and organized in a **Master List**.

Think of this as a brain dump. You want to get every possible *thing* that pulls at your attention out of your head and into a doc.

One great way to do this is David Allen's Get Things Done (GTD) methodology— a 5-step process we wrote an in-depth guide to here.

The tool you use to store these tasks doesn't matter (it could be as simple as a piece of paper or as complex as a project management tool) as long as it's easily accessible and easily updated when new priorities come along.

Once you have your Master List created, you'll quickly notice that different tasks deserve different levels of attention. You have the tasks that need to be done

today. The projects that need to be worked on this week or month. And the long-term goals that make you feel accomplished and empowered.

Working off your Master List, start prioritizing tasks by monthly, weekly, and daily goals.

As productivity consultant Brian Tracy explains, your monthly list pulls from your master list. Your weekly list pulls from your monthly list. And so on. This way, **your daily priorities are always aligned with your bigger goals.**

This prioritization method also helps combat the Completion Bias—our tendency to focus on finishing small tasks rather than working on larger, more complex ones.

When your daily tasks are being pulled from a larger list you can make sure you're always working on meaningful things. Not just urgent ones.

2. Separate the urgent from the important with the Eisenhower Matrix
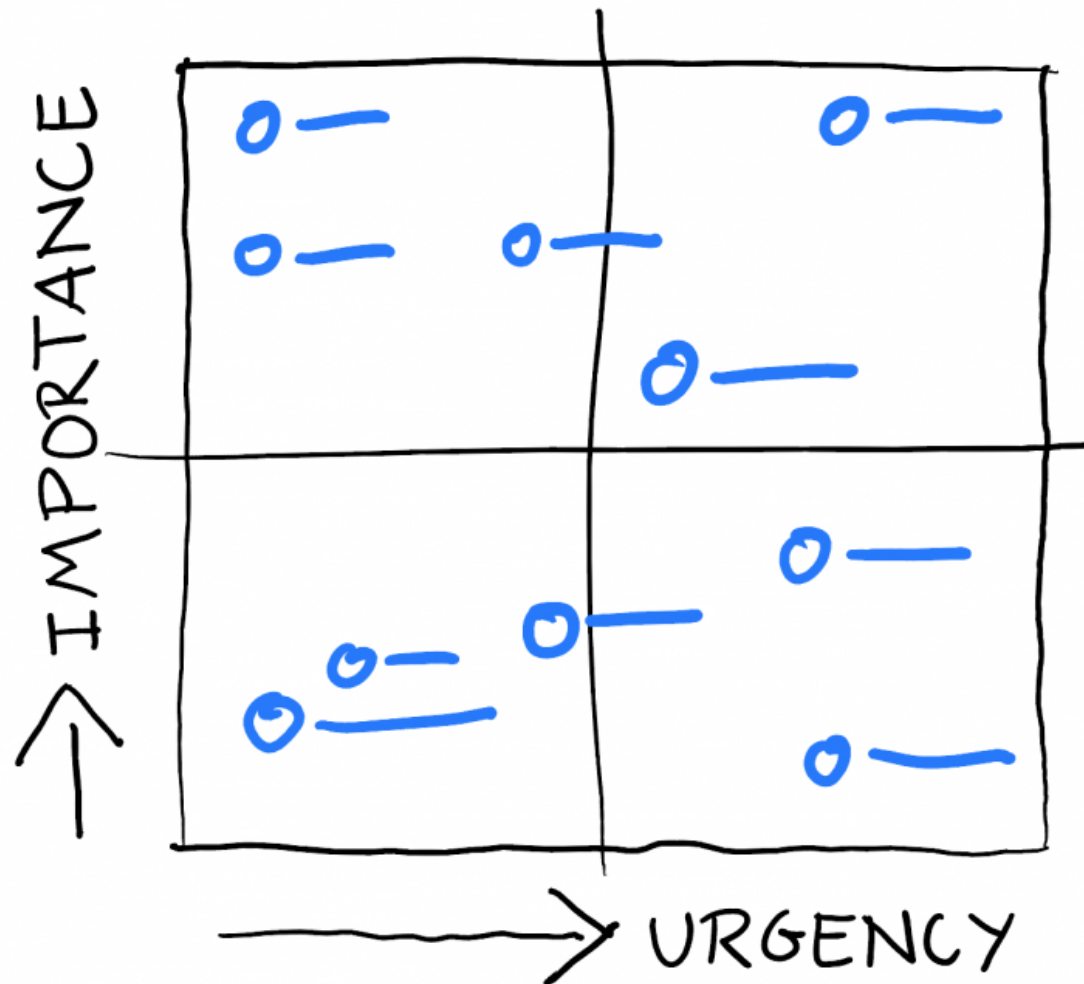
Your Master List helps you understand how to prioritize *all* your tasks. But it can still get complicated when deciding what needs to get done now versus later. There are a few prioritization techniques you can use to separate the urgent from the important tasks.

First, there's what's called the Pareto Principle—or, the 80/20 rule—which says that 20% of your efforts tend to produce 80% of your results. Look for those tasks that don't just get checked off, but that bring you real results.

The Pareto Principle relies on experience. But what if you're working a new job or simply don't know which tasks should be priorities? In this case, you can use **the Eisenhower Matrix**.

Developed by former US president Dwight Eisenhower, the matrix is a simple four-quadrant box that answers that helps you separate "urgent" tasks from "important" ones.

In basic terms, urgent tasks are things you feel like you need to react to right away, like emails, phone calls, texts, or news. While important tasks are ones that contribute to your long-term mission, values, and goals.

When looking at how to prioritize tasks best, ask which one of the quadrants they best fit in:

- **Urgent and Important:** Do these tasks as soon as possible
- **Important, but not urgent:** Decide when you'll do these and schedule it
- **Urgent, but not important:** Delegate these tasks to someone else
- **Neither urgent nor important:** Drop these from your schedule as soon as possible

One of the most difficult tasks here is getting urgent but not important tasks off your priority list. This is where **smart delegation** comes into play.

Delegating starts with finding the right person and explaining the task properly. But it also involves giving that person enough time and guidance to fully get the task off your plate (and your mind).

In this case, follow the **30X rule**—budget 30X as long as the task normally takes to complete for training.

For example, if you have a task that takes 5 minutes to complete, you should budget 150 minutes to delegate and train someone new on it. That might seem like a lot of time, but over a year, you'll end up saving yourself 1100 minutes a year. (5 minutes a day X 250 annual working days = 1250 minutes spent doing that task.)

# 3. Rank your daily tasks by their true priority with the Ivy Lee Method

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we end up with a massive list of urgent and important tasks we need to get done. In which case, we need to find a way to dig deeper and find their true importance.

One of the best ways to do this was developed over 100 years ago by productivity consultant named Ivy Lee. The so-called Ivy Lee Method forces you to prioritize your day by following a simple set of rules:

1. At the end of each work day, write down the six most important things you need to accomplish tomorrow. Do not write down more than six tasks.
2. Prioritize those six items in order of their true importance.
3. When you arrive tomorrow, concentrate only on the first task. Work until the first task is finished before moving on to the next one.
4. Approach the rest of your list in the same fashion. At the end of the day, move any unfinished items to a new list of six tasks for the following day.
5. Repeat this process every working day.

Limiting yourself to six tasks (or less) each day creates a constraint that forces you to prioritize properly and then stay focused by single-tasking your way through your list.

4. Separate tasks with similar priorities using the ABCDE method
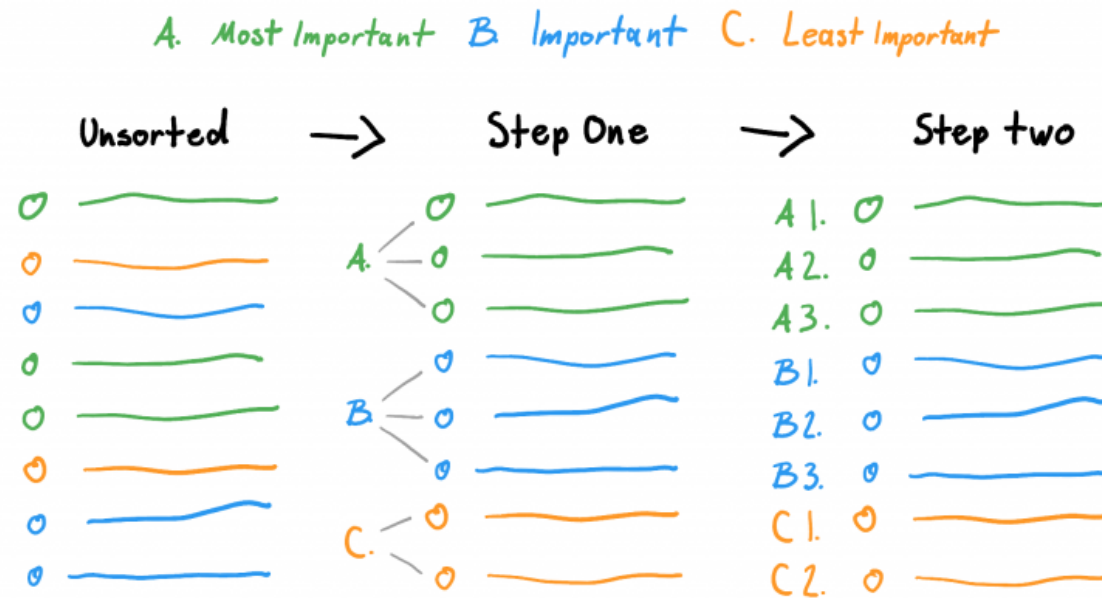
While the Ivy Lee method is great for prioritizing daily tasks, there's still one part that's unclear: **How do you know the "true importance" of a task?**

The biggest unknown when it comes to how to prioritize is differentiating between tasks that feel like they're on the same level of importance. When you're working on complex tasks or juggling multiple roles, the Pareto Principle and Eisenhower Matrix don't totally cut it.

Here's where Brian Tracy's ABCDE method works wonders. Instead of keeping all tasks on a single level of priority, this method offers two or more levels for each task.

Here's how it works:

- Go through your list and give every task a letter from A to E (A being the highest priority)
- For every task that has an A, give it a number which dictates the order you'll do it in
- Repeat until all tasks have letters and numbers

Again, this is a deceptively simple prioritization strategy. While in most cases it's almost impossible to differentiate between a B1 task and an A3 one, by giving each task multiple layers of prioritization their true importance suddenly becomes much clearer.

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2h 48m
Daily Productive Time

+2h
with RescueTime

5. Set a productive tone for the day by "Eating the frog" (i.e. Do your most important work first)

1. _____

AVOID EVERYTHING ELSE
UNTIL #1 IS FINISHED
- - - - - - - - - - -

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Once you've prioritized your most important work (in whatever method you choose), it's time to actually choose how to attack the day.

How you start the day sets the tone for the rest of it. And often, getting a large, hairy, yet important task out of the way first thing gives you momentum, inspiration, and energy to keep moving.

That's why a huge number of productivity experts suggest spending time on your most important task (MIT) right away each day. Or, as Mark Twain famously wrote:

> "If you have to eat a live frog, it does not pay to sit and look at it for a very long time!"

When thinking about how to prioritize your daily work, try to include one of these "frogs" at the top of your list.

When thinking about how to prioritize your daily work, try to include one of these "frogs" at the top of your list. Not only does this get that task out of the way, but it can also motivate you to continue pushing through the rest of your list.

In fact, when Harvard professor Teresa Amabile studied the diaries of hundreds of knowledge workers, she found that:

> "Of all the things that can boost emotions, motivation, and perceptions during a workday, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work."

Prioritize a small win early on in the day and you'll be motivated for the rest of the day.

6. Cut out "good enough" goals with Warren Buffett's 2-list strategy

It doesn't matter how efficient and effective you are each day if you're working towards the wrong goal. That's why it's a good idea to periodically reassess your long-term goals and priorities to make sure you're still on the right path.

Here's one great method for doing this from billionaire investor Warren Buffett.

(As the story goes, Buffett ran his personal pilot through this process to help him prioritize his career goals.)

The first step is to write down your top 25 goals. This could be life goals, career goals, education goals, or anything else you want to spend your time on.

Now, circle your top five goals on that list (if you're doing this right now, finish circling before moving on).

Finally, any goal you didn't circle goes on an "avoid at all cost" list.

Rather than intersperse working on these goals when you have time, you should actively avoid them. These are the tasks that are seemingly important enough to deserve your attention but in reality, aren't moving you towards your long-term priorities.

7. Be aware of the sunk cost fallacy (i.e. be flexible enough to change your mind and drop priorities)
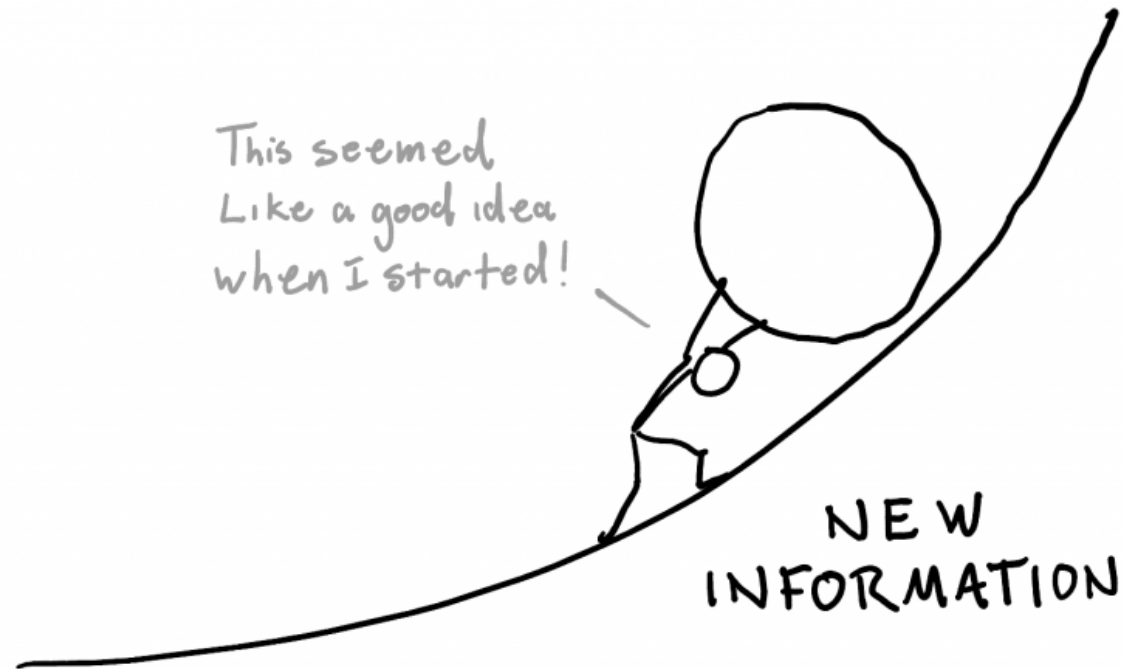
As you go through these prioritization exercises, it's important to remember to be flexible. No one knows what the future holds. And ultimately, prioritizing and planning is really just guessing.

Sometimes you might prioritize a task only to have expectations or deliverables change on you. At this point it's hard not to be disappointed. But you can't let that skew your judgment.

Humans are especially susceptible to the "sunk cost fallacy"—a psychological effect where **we feel compelled to continue doing something *just because we've already put time and effort into it***.

But the reality is that **no matter what you spend your time doing, you can never get that time back**. And any time spent continuing to work towards the

wrong priority is just wasted time.

Sometimes our effort is better used switching boats than trying to fix a leak.

8. Use Time Multipliers to make the most of your daily hours

Prioritization isn't just about tasks. It's about time as well.

Working on the right tasks can either give you *more* time in the future or take it away from you. As you learn how to prioritize, be keenly aware of the impact your choices have on your future obligations.

The best thing you can do here is to focus on **time multipliers.**

As we wrote in another post, time multipliers are strategies or tools that create *more* time for you in the future. As leadership consultant Rory Vaden explains on the TED blog:

> "Rather than asking 'What's the most important thing I can do today?', time multipliers ask 'What's the most important thing I can do today that would make tomorrow better?'

> "In other words, **by thinking about how we use our time today, we can free up our hours in the future.**"

The prioritization strategies we outlined above are part of this. But so is your work environment and habits. By prioritizing the *right* habits and creating a distraction-free work environment, you give yourself extra time in the future.

9. Prioritize your most important work during your most productive hours

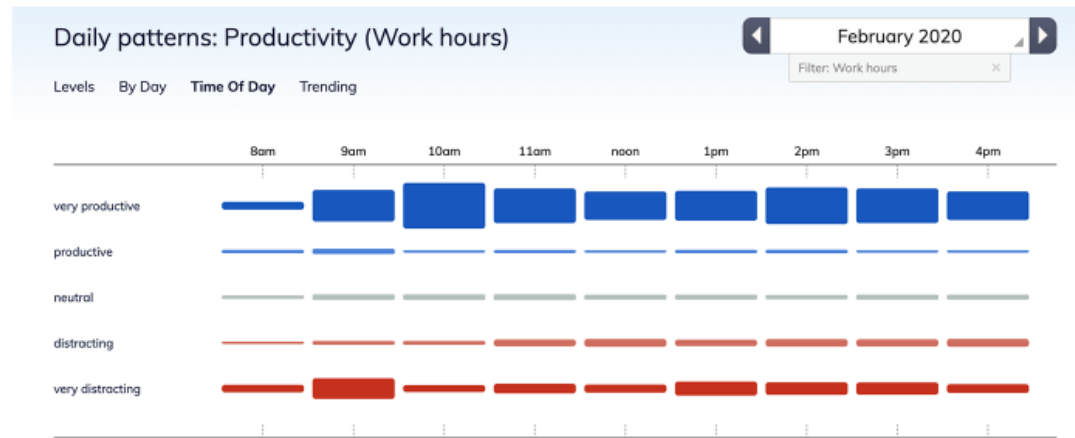Lastly, you can supercharge your productivity by combining your task and time priorities together.

We all go through natural highs and lows of energy and focus throughout the day (we call this your **productivity curve** and you can learn how to find it here).

In other words, there are certain times during the day where you are naturally *more* productive.

If you can find your peak productive times and then schedule your highest priorities during them, you're setting yourself up for the best day possible.
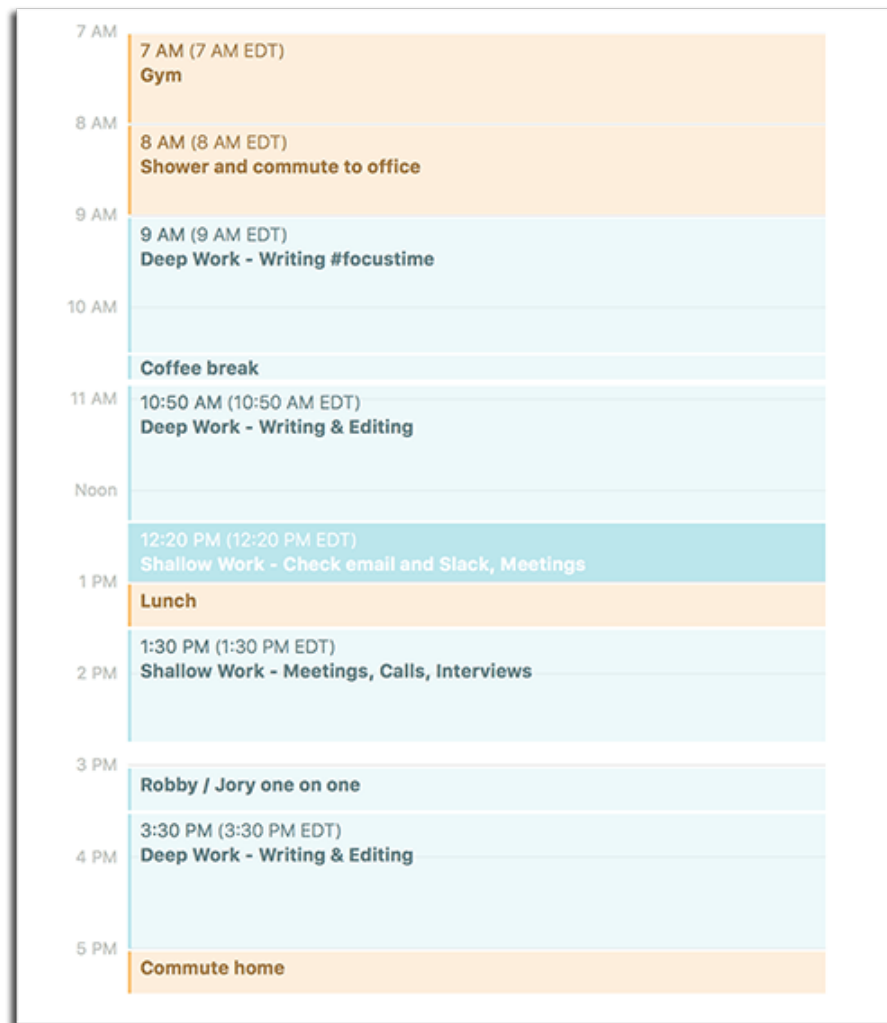
Here's where a tool like RescueTime can help.

RescueTime automatically observes how you work throughout the day and gives you in-depth reports on your productivity. Once it's been running for a few days, you can start to pull out trends of when you're most productive.

Daily patterns: Productivity (Work hours)

February 2020

Filter: Work hours

Levels   By Day   **Time Of Day**   Trending

	8am	9am	10am	11am	noon	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm

very productive

productive

neutral

distracting

very distracting

In the above example, you can see a clear daily productivity trend with peak hours from around 10am to noon.

With this data, you can start to create a time blocked daily schedule that matches your highest priority work with your peak productive hours.

Here's how that might look:

7 AM	**7 AM (7 AM EDT)** **Gym**
8 AM	**8 AM (8 AM EDT)** **Shower and commute to office**
9 AM	**9 AM (9 AM EDT)** **Deep Work - Writing #focustime**
10 AM	
	Coffee break
11 AM	**10:50 AM (10:50 AM EDT)** **Deep Work - Writing & Editing**
Noon	
	12:20 PM (12:20 PM EDT) **Shallow Work - Check email and Slack, Meetings**
1 PM	**Lunch**
	1:30 PM (1:30 PM EDT) **Shallow Work - Meetings, Calls, Interviews**
2 PM	
3 PM	**Robby / Jory one on one**
	3:30 PM (3:30 PM EDT) **Deep Work - Writing & Editing**
4 PM	
5 PM	**Commute home**

Priorities are great. But remember to be realistic about how much work you can actually do each day

When you prioritize your work properly, you're guaranteed to have a good day.

Hitting the end of the day and seeing that you've knocked out some important work is an amazing feeling. But it's not always possible.

Tasks take longer than expected. Interruptions come up. And our days get filled with meetings and chats. So while it's great to know how to prioritize your most valuable work, you should also be realistic about how much can actually be done.

This way, you'll end the day feeling good about the progress you made *and* like you can step away and take a well-deserved break.

What works best for you? Let us know how you prioritize your work in the comments below or on Twitter.

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JORY MACKAY

Jory MacKay is a writer, content marketer, and editor of the RescueTime blog.

15 comments

Emilia Meres says:

August 2, 2018 at 10:34 am

Great article! Can't wait to try the ABCDE method. One other thing I've recently discovered is the idea of "recovery time." I used to pack up my schedule wherever I saw an empty hole, and only now have I realized the importance of actually scheduling and maintaining time for rest and recovery:

https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/management/the-four-ways-to-divide-your-day/article37716726/

Jory MacKay says:

August 2, 2018 at 10:46 am

That's a great point Emilia! I definitely agree that downtime is an important part of making any decision (and having good work life balance in general). One of my favorite resources for this is the book Rest by Alex Pang. We wrote about some of his ideas here: https://blog.rescuetime.com/deliberate-rest/ if you're interested!

Priya Ghalot says:

May 6, 2020 at 5:09 am

great article

Sandeep Chawla says:

May 11, 2020 at 2:25 am

Great. Simple and effective!

Harsha Ghosh says:

May 11, 2020 at 7:18 am

Simple but very useful

Jory MacKay says:

May 12, 2020 at 4:43 am

Thanks Harsha! Hope these prioritization techniques work for you.

KVN says:

May 12, 2020 at 11:56 pm

Superb

Satish says:

May 13, 2020 at 8:54 pm

Easy understanding

Suresh Pai says:

May 13, 2020 at 9:32 pm

Liked concept of "Eating the Frog"

Neeraj pant says:

May 15, 2020 at 7:31 am

Useful

Rowan Clifford says:

May 18, 2020 at 7:45 pm

That's a frickin epic article right there. I genuinely learned a lot.

One other thing that you/your audience might be interested in is this: https://rowanclifford.io/eisenhower-app/

It's a little free tool I've built for using the Eisenhower Matrix digitally.

Hope you find it useful.

Cheers.
Rowan.

Jory MacKay says:

May 19, 2020 at 5:39 am

Thanks Rowan! That looks great.

Mohd. Shahnawaz says:

May 20, 2020 at 9:18 pm

It is really a very nice article. I was in middle of writing one such article and found this article with much more details than my thoughts.

Mohanganesh says:

May 27, 2020 at 8:06 am

Good One

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eddy abasiada says:

June 1, 2020 at 9:10 am

Wow very Informative, Thanks a lot for sharing
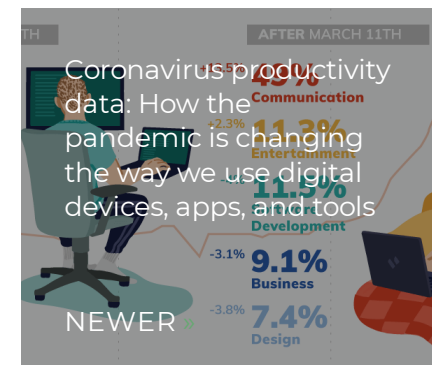

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