

TIME MANAGEMENT: Pre-course learning

Stephen Covey's Time Management Matrix Explained

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Although time seems to fly by, we all have the same 24 hours a day. So why is it that some people are able to accomplish so much more than the majority of the population? One possible explanation can be found in their skill to manage time more efficiently than others. But *how* is it possible to cope with the flood of tasks that all require our immediate attention? In a time where missing deadlines is not an option, the Covey time management grid can help you to manage your available time more efficiently. Covey's matrix allows you to organize your priorities much better than before. The idea of using four quadrants to determine the priority of a task was introduced by American keynote speaker [Stephen Covey](#), author of [The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People](#). Covey's system makes use of four different quadrants that allow you to *prioritize* tasks in relation to their importance and urgency, helping you to decide whether you need to address a task immediately or if you can postpone it.

As you can see from the graphic below, the time management matrix is separated into four quadrants that are organized by importance and urgency.

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	Quadrant I: Urgent & Important	Quadrant II: Not Urgent & Important
NOT IMPORTANT	Quadrant III: Urgent & Not Important	Quadrant IV: Not Urgent & Not Important

Source: Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*

The matrix, also known as [Eisenhower's Urgent-Important Principle](#), distinguishes between importance and urgency:

- **Important** responsibilities contribute to the achievement of your goals.
- **Urgent** responsibilities require immediate attention. These activities are often tightly linked to the accomplishment of someone else's goal. Not dealing with these issues will cause immediate consequences.

Here's a summary of the meaning of each quadrant:

- **Quadrant I** – *important deadlines with high urgency*
The first quadrant contains tasks and responsibilities that need immediate attention.
- **Quadrant II** – *long-term development and strategizing*
The second quadrant is for items that are important without requiring immediate action. Covey points out that this quadrant should be used for long-term strategizing.
- **Quadrant III** – *distractions with high urgency*
The third quadrant is reserved for tasks that are urgent, without being important. Covey recommends minimizing or even eliminating these tasks as they do not contribute to your output. Delegation is also an option here.
- **Quadrant IV** – *activities with little to no value*
The fourth and last quadrant focuses on tasks and responsibilities that do not yield any value—items that are unimportant and not urgent. These time wasters should be eliminated at any costs.

If you apply the Covey time management matrix to your own professional and private life, you will notice that the majority of your activities can be found within quadrant I and III. Experience shows that quadrant II is neglected by most people, especially in the area of their own personal development.

However, the importance of the second quadrant must not be underestimated. If you notice a big gap in this quadrant it means that your focus lies too much on the operative aspect, while the strategic perspective is left behind. For this reason, Covey addresses quadrant II as an exceptionally important part of the matrix. Without this quadrant, efficient time management would not be possible, as it requires strategic elements as well.

Explanation of Covey's time management matrix

In the following, you can find a detailed explanation of all four quadrants that can be found in Covey's time management matrix.

The four time management quadrants

Quadrant 1 – urgent and important

The activities in quadrant 1 can be differentiated into items that could not have been foreseen, and those items that could. The latter can be avoided by developing plans and paying close attention to their execution.

The first quadrant should only contain those activities and responsibilities that require your immediate attention. The space is reserved for emergencies and extremely important deadlines. Should a major crisis arise you will have to postpone other tasks.

- Crises
- Pressing problems
- Projects that are deadline driven
- Emergencies
- Last-minute preparations

Quadrant 2 – not urgent but important

The items found in quadrant 2 do not have a high urgency but can play an important role in the future. This quadrant is not only reserved for strategic planning, but also to items related to health, education, exercise, and career. Investing time in these areas might not be urgent at the present day, but in the long term, it will be of the greatest importance.

Pay close attention that you have scheduled enough time for quadrant 2 activities, in order to avoid them to become quadrant 1 items. Doing so will allow you to increase your capability of finishing your tasks in time.

- Planning
- Preparing
- Training
- Exercise, health, and recreation

Quadrant 3 – urgent but not important

The third quadrant summarizes items that appear to have a high urgency, but are not at all important. Some of these activities might be entirely ego-driven, without contributing any value. In fact, these activities are obstacles that stand in-between you and your goals. If possible, try to delegate these items or consider rescheduling them.

If another person is causing you quadrant 3 tasks it could be appropriate to [decline their request politely](#). If this is not an option, try to avoid being constantly interrupted by appointing timeslots to those that often need your help. This way, you can address all their issues at once, without regularly interrupting your [concentration](#).

- Interruptions
- Meetings

Quadrant 4 – not urgent and not important

The fourth and last quadrant contains all those activities that do not contribute any value at all—the obvious time wasters. All the activities contained therein are nothing more than distractions; avoid them as much as you can. You should also try to eliminate all the items in this list, no matter how entertaining.

- Trivia
- Time wasters
- Surfing the Internet without purpose
- Watching TV for hours

How to apply the time matrix?

When using the Important-Urgent matrix it is recommended to try to maximize the time spent with quadrant II activities. This will allow you (in the long run) to reduce quadrant I activities, as many of them could have been quadrant II activities—if better planning had been implemented.

The objective of using the time management matrix is to question whether a certain activity brings you closer to your goals or not. If this is the case, these

responsibilities need to be prioritized over those tasks that might demand your time but do not contribute to your goals. Delay activities that do not contribute any significant output until more important tasks are finished.

Covey's time management grid has many possible applications, two of which will be explained in the following.

Reprioritizing your current 'to-do' list

The time matrix can be applied as a tool that allows you to reprioritize the importance and urgency of your current and upcoming tasks. By sorting the tasks and responsibilities into the appropriate grid you will be able to quickly identify activities that need your immediate attention.

One week assessments

The second approach of using the [time management](#) matrix requires a weekly assessment. You will need six blank copies of the matrix, five for each workday and one for your weekly assessment. At the end of each workday, you list all tasks and responsibilities and the amount of time spent. At the end of the week, you summarize the five days of your week in one matrix. Make sure to summarize the amount of time spent on a given task.

After you have summarized the week you can then evaluate how well the time was spent and whether or not you need to make any adaptations.