

Insights from The Checklist Manifesto by Atul Gawande

“(T)he volume and complexity of what we know has exceeded our individual ability to deliver its benefits correctly, safely, or reliably.” – Atul Gawande, MD

Each day we process an overwhelming amount of information and take on more responsibility. As the complexity of our life increases, we make small consequential oversights in our work, despite having experience and training. These oversights cause our co-workers, managers, and customers to doubt the quality of our work.

When author and surgeon Atul Gawande makes a small oversight, like forgetting to wash his hands before surgery, he puts a patient's life in jeopardy. According to research, these small avoidable oversights occur more than 75,000 times a year in operating rooms across America. On Gawande's quest to find a solution he discovered a surprisingly simple, yet powerful tool the aviation industry has used for years: [the checklist](#).

“Four generations after the first aviation checklists went into use, a lesson is emerging: checklists seem able to defend anyone, even the experienced, against failure in many more tasks than we realized. They provide a kind of cognitive net. They catch mental flaws inherent in all of us—flaws of memory and attention and thoroughness. And because they do, they raise wide, unexpected possibilities.” – Atul Gawande, MD

Checklists = Excellent Results

Several industries use checklists to **verify their work** and **make important decisions**:

- More than 16 disciplines use checklists on a major construction site to coordinate efforts and verify each major step of the building process. Their discipline to use checklists has kept the building failure rate in America to 0.00002% (1 in every 50,000 structure partially or entirely collapses due to human error).
- Venture capitalists who take a methodical, checklist-driven approach to investing in businesses are 40% less likely to fire senior management for incompetence. Venture capitalists who use checklists to verify investments experience 45% larger returns than venture capitalists who avoid using checklists to verify their decisions (on average).
- When surgeons and nurses started using checklists before surgery, major complications dropped by 36 percent, and deaths reduced by 47 percent!

Resistance to Checklists

It's one thing to realize that checklists work, it's another thing to actually use them.

“It somehow feels beneath us to use a checklist, an embarrassment. It runs counter to deeply held beliefs about how the truly great among us—those we aspire to be—handle situations of high stakes and complexity. The truly great are daring. They improvise. They do not have protocols and checklists... Maybe our idea of heroism needs updating.” – Atul Gawande, MD

To overcome the resistance of using checklists, you'll need to make checklists efficient and effective. The more efficient a checklist is, the more likely you'll use it. The more effective a checklist is, the more mistakes you'll catch and the more you'll learn to rely on it.

A Checklist for Making Useful Checklists



Pause Point

Every checklist must have a clear trigger – a location or routine action that reminds you to pause and complete the checklist. For example, I use a checklist when releasing a video on YouTube to verify the video's description, tags, and the links within the video. The pause point is just before I hit the 'publish' button on YouTube.com.



Speedy

Aviation checklist specialist Dan Boorman recommends making each checklist less than 60 seconds to complete - any longer and you'll start taking shortcuts. To make a checklist speedy, aim for 5-9 'killer' items. A 'killer' item is an item that if missed gives the impression of poor quality, or adversely effects other people.



Short and Concise Items

A checklist is NOT a how-to guide. Each item on a checklist should be a short and concise reminder of a routine that you are familiar with (prior training and expertise). For example, a pre-surgery checklist includes: "verify reserve blood." This item description is sufficient for surgeons since surgeons know exactly where the reserve blood is stored, and how much reserve blood is needed before starting surgery.



Field Tested and Revised

Checklists must be practical and based on actual experience. A useful checklist is made up of past failures and lessons learned. For checklists to remain useful you need to continually update the items with the latest discoveries and lessons learned.

Final note: For checklists to be effective you need to read, verify and physically check-off or click each item on a checklist. It's the deliberate act of going through each item that makes checklists effective, NOT the fact that you are familiar with every item on a checklist.

“(Checklists) not only offer the possibility of verification but also instill a kind of discipline of higher performance.” – Atul Gawande, MD