

Using Covey's Urgent v Important Matrix

Model Answer

Compare your response with the model answer and critically evaluate any differences. Why are there differences? What have you considered when making your prioritization decision? Are your decisions based on habit or very thoughtful consideration regarding the real urgency and importance of this task for you? Of course, there is often additional information required in order to make an effective prioritization decision. What assumptions have you made about the task? Should these assumptions be tested or is there enough information for you to make an effective decision?

The Urgent/Important Matrix is a useful framework for making prioritization decisions to help you be more productive, efficient and organized. It will also help you manage the expectations of others regarding what you can achieve, by when and also, when you have capacity to give your time and attention to others. It requires discipline to apply, however building this into your way of working will reap benefits.

Here is a list of typical tasks that a Microsoft intern may have on their weekly to-do list. It's Monday morning and you need to plan your week. You want to use Covey's Urgent/Importance Matrix to categorise each of these tasks. From your reading, you know that Quadrant 2 is where you should be investing the majority of your time and Quadrant 1 needs to be managed carefully or it will consume all your time and contribute to stress. You know those tasks in Q3 should be given lower priority and those in Q4 are the lowest priority.

When determining how to categorize these tasks, use the following questions to help your prioritization decision. The answers to these questions may result in the tasks changing quadrants. If "it depends" or "I'm not sure" comes to mind, it means that you need to ask the appropriate people for further information, so you are not making decisions based on assumptions. In the workplace, what is important, is ensuring you have enough information to make an effective prioritization decision.

Here are examples of types of questions that can help you to prioritize your tasks.

- What are my short and long-term goals and how does this task support me in this?
- Who is asking me to do this task? What are their expectations? How can I manage expectations to ensure both our needs are met if I can't meet the timeframe or it will cause me undue stress to meet the timeframe?
- What are the consequences if I don't complete this task on time?
- Is someone else depending on this and by a certain time?
- How does the task relate to my objectives?
- Am I the only person who can do this task?
- How urgent is this task really? Is there flexibility on the deadline?
- Can this task (if it is a meeting for example) be moved to another day?
- Who could I ask to help me complete this task? Or to whom could I delegate this task?
- If I complete this task, would it make other tasks easier?
- How many people will be impacted by this task? What are their needs?
- What other times are available for me to do the task if I don't do it now?
- Is this task an expected part of my job?

There is no correct answer for the categorization of tasks as it will depend on many of the above questions. Here is where these tasks may typically fit.

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Q1 Important & Urgent <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Email received from manager asking for a project update at your next team meeting on Tuesday. 6 Attend the intern lunch with other fellow interns today. 7 Formulate objectives for the internship ready for your next meeting with your manager on Wednesday. 11 Deal with an urgent query about the project you are working on. 12 Microsoft Teams has stopped working. 13 Prepare for your weekly intern meeting today with the university recruitment team. 16 Prepare for tomorrow's departmental meeting. 	Q2 Important but Not Urgent <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Phone call from a customer that you haven't heard from for months. 4 Notification on your phone from LinkedIn requesting a new connection. 10 Plan your professional development activities for the next month. 9 Prepare for weekly connection meeting with intern hiring manager on Friday. 14 Develop presentation to welcome new interns next week. 15 Conduct research needed for the project team in 5 days. 17 Connect with intern buddy for catchup. 18 Meet with fellow interns on stretch project (philanthropy project). 19 Organize weekly coffee chat with senior leaders. 20 Read weekly company email digest.
	Q3 Urgent but Not Important <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2 Email asking you to confirm your attendance at social function next weekend. 5 Colleague with a personal problem has just appeared at your desk asking for your help. 	Q4 Not Important & Not Urgent <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7 Check social media notifications.

Q1 Important & Urgent

- This is the 'reactive' quadrant.
- The tasks in here require immediate attention, plus contribute to our objectives and goals.
- You need to manage the amount of time you spend in this quadrant, as this is a stressful place to be.
- You won't be able to remove all tasks from here, but you can limit them if you plan ahead and allocate sufficient time in advance. This is why weekly planning as a minimum is critical.

Q2 Important but Not Urgent

- This is the quadrant that Covey states we should spend the most time.
- Here, we are being proactive, goal-focused and productive.
- The tasks don't have pressing deadlines, but still help you to achieve your objectives and goals.
- Tasks here are usually focused on strengthening relationships, pro-actively completing tasks, planning for the future and developing your skills and knowledge.

Q3 Urgent but not important

- These tasks are typically interruptions so they have become urgent, but they may not be important to you.
- They usually aren't contributing to your objectives.
- Be very careful of working in this quadrant too much. Typically, tasks in this quadrant are urgent/important for others and in the spirit of wanting to help others, we can spend too much time here. You need to practice being supportive and a good team player whilst also managing your workload effectively. Open and assertive conversations with others who are requesting these type of tasks can be beneficial here.

Q4 Not important & not urgent

- The tasks in here don't usually help you achieve your objective.
- This is often where we find ourselves procrastinating, as it is tasks we can do with very little thought or energy – think of how lost and distracted you can find yourself when browsing social media (even if you started it with a set purpose).
- The goal is to spend less than 5% of waking hours in this quadrant.