Shorten Your To-Do List In 5 Minutes

Ben Piper

When you come up with a new task that needs to be done, you put it on your to-do list. Then you go about your day.

At some point in the future, you start working on your list. Of course, just as soon as you get in "the zone," you're interrupted. It's important. Now you have another 10 items to add to your to-do list.

The problem with to-do lists is that they grow exponentially, but they shrink linearly. A single meeting or issue can easily add multiple items to your list. But items only come off your list one-by-one, maybe two at a time if you're fortunate.

In my article *The Big Data Myth*, I noted that the value of data decreases over time. There are exceptions (tax returns, medical records, deeds and titles, etc.), but most things on your to-do list decrease in importance over time. Take a look at your current list, starting with the oldest outstanding item.
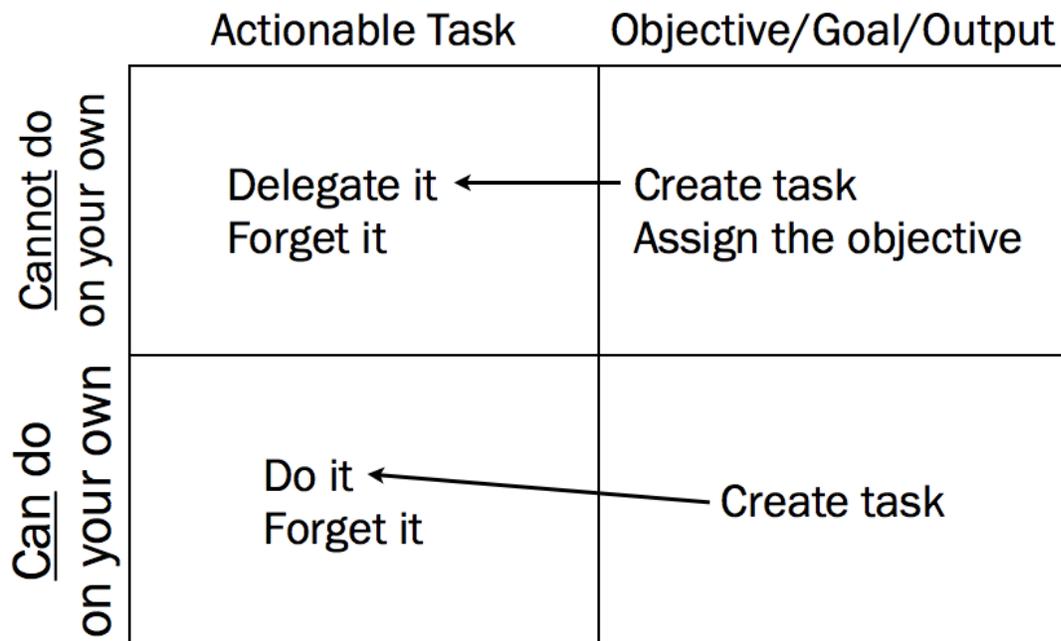
How important is it?

Could you just not do it?

Are to-do lists even necessary? If you're managing a project, you undoubtedly have a list of tasks that need to be done. In fact, part of planning requires having a list of individual tasks. But here is the key: A to-do list should contain only immediately actionable tasks. It should never contain outcomes, outputs, goals, objectives, or anything that you can't do right now.

How to Shorten Your To-Do List In 5 Minutes

The visual below will help you quickly identify which items on your list are actionable and which are not. The goal is to move things on the right side of the quadrant to the left side. Once each of your tasks is on the left side, you can do it, delegate it, or forget it.

How To Shorten Your To-Do List

	Actionable Task	Objective/Goal/Output
Cannot do on your own	Delegate it ← Forget it	——— Create task Assign the objective
Can do on your own	Do it ← Forget it	——— Create task

Starting at the top-left quadrant and moving clockwise:

- **Actionable task that you can't do on your own** - *Delegate it or forget it*

- **Objective/Goal/Output that you can't achieve on your own** - *Create a task and delegate it, or assign the objective to someone else*

- **Objective/Goal/Output that you can achieve on your own** - *Create a task and do it*

- **Actionable task that you can do on your own** - *Do it or forget it*

What Does Your To-Do List Say About You?

If you find yourself delegating a lot of tasks, it means you're overwhelmed and trying to take on less. Don't let others put a monkey on your back if you didn't ask for it. Instead of just saying, "No," ask "Why?" when presented with a task. Asking "Why?" the first time will get you to

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the objective, and asking "Why?" again will get you to the value of that objective -- if there is any.

If you find yourself deleting a lot of tasks, it means you are underwhelmed and trying to take on more busy work. Don't add things to your list just so you'll stay busy. Instead, find a worthy objective to work on and focus on that.

To-Do Lists Make You Less Effective

A productivity tool like a to-do list should make you more effective and efficient. But the problem is that when you have a long to-do list, you have a psychological weight that is constantly bugging you. Every time you look at your list to add another item, you're reminded of all the items you haven't done, and you begin to feel overwhelmed.

Don't do this to yourself. Begin paring down your to-do list now (that means don't put this as an item on your to-do list!). You may find yourself getting a lot more done than before.

About Ben Piper

Ben Piper is an IT consultant and network engineer. He's the author of the book Learn Cisco Network Administration in a Month of Lunches *as well as numerous Cisco and Windows networking courses on Pluralsight.*

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