

Your to do list is the first thing to do

By [Diana Clement](#)

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Have you ever had that sinking feeling when you walk into your office and there are simply too many things to do?

The humble to do list is a great way of dumping clutter from your brain and works well for those people who work systematically, says Iain McCormick, director of the Executive Coaching Centre.

But the world has moved on from paper to do lists. These days to do lists have gone high-tech and mastering this simple technology can lead to:

- * Better productivity.
- * Achieving more in your day.
- * Improved prioritisation.
- * More effective delegation.
- * Being noticed for your efficiency.
- * Having a better work-life balance.

"When you have a detailed list of things together – you can batch [items] and save time," says Debbie Mayo-Smith, author of *101 Quick Tips for Email and Google*.

The to do list is one thing that Microsoft has really spent some time on in the 2007 version of Outlook, integrating tasks, calendar items, emails and reminders. Now there's a to do bar, with everything you need to do – not just Outlook Tasks.

When Outlook starts up, the to do list displays beside the user's inbox. Items are colour-coded according to due date, category or importance.

It's really simple to add emails and other items to to do lists by right clicking on them, choosing to follow up today, tomorrow, next week or another date. They then appear in your to do list along with any tasks you've entered and any items from other programs such as OneNote and Microsoft Project, says Anne Taylor, office product manager for Microsoft. It makes it harder to forget about something you need to do, which can be stressful or result in negative brownie points for missing a deadline.

David Callaway, managing director of Priority Management in Auckland, uses the to do lists to plan his day and his company also trains others in the efficient use of Outlook.

Callaway sits down with Outlook each afternoon and reviews what he has achieved in the day. He then

drags and drops remaining items on his to do lists into the calendar for the following day, scheduling a block of time for each item.

Of course not everyone uses Outlook and some may prefer other electronic to do lists. Such software can be downloaded from websites such as Download.com or Tucows.com and can be free or relatively cheap.

One that the author of this article downloaded, VIP Simple To Do List from www.todolistsoft.com, provided an easy-to-view window where to do items could be categorised, prioritised and tracked according to the percentage of the task that had been completed. Others include Active To-Do List, Decent Little To-do List, Priorganizer and many more.

One advantage of electronic to do lists over paper ones is that they can be shared or tasks can be delegated. At a server level, it's possible to delegate tasks and track the employee or colleague's progress with the task. "In (Microsoft) Project, you can create tasks for other people, delegate those tasks and they will appear in their to do lists in Outlook," says Mayo-Smith. Likewise, tasks created in the Microsoft Sharepoint server can be sent to employee or colleague's calendars and to do lists.

By taking the delegation route, she says, you ensure things get done and "you keep track of progress with one central source".

Not everyone requires a highly complex to do list and a simple one that is constantly on your computer desktop may suffice. There are a number of Google To Do list and Task Gadgets (mini-applications) which can be found at www.desktop.google.com/plugins. These To Do lists are always on top no matter what programs you're using at the time.

A number of web-based to do lists also exist. One popular online to do list is Voo2do.com, which, in its own words, provides "advanced task management and priority management for busy, ambitious individuals". The downside of Voo2do is that tasks can't be shared with a hand-held computer.

Taylor says the To Do list is a great way of making yourself proactive rather than reactive.

It's important, says Mayo-Smith, that you don't overwhelm yourself by putting too many tasks and emails into your to do list.

"There's nothing more horrible than the feeling of a long list getting longer or when you open Outlook, 86 items in your to do staring at you." She adds that there are some personality types who will simply never be organised.

One way around this, says Roseann Gedye, who runs Roseann's Principles, is operating two to do lists: a full, master to do list and a daily to do list kept short and to the point.

People also should try not to work from the top of their to do lists, adds McCormick. "It is best to sort out the most difficult tasks to do and then put some time in your diary when you are at your most alert and creative to solve these problems. Leave the phone calls and meetings to a time when you are not at your most energetic."

Callaway says that, during one-to-one sessions with a trainer, people see just how much more efficient mastering the technology will make them in real life.

For those people who spend a lot of time out of the office and need their to do lists with them, it's probably worth getting a to do list that syncs with a BlackBerry, Palm Pilot or other hand-held computer or smart phone, which provides a good argument for using Outlook.

There is also a nifty system for Vodafone users called Aangel.co.nz, which allows users to dial 808 and have a reminder of something important added automatically to their Outlook to do list, calendar or

address book.

Finally, author Stephen Covey author of the book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* recommends dividing to do lists into quadrants of importance and urgency and prioritising the "importance" quadrant.

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