Time Management: The Urgent/Important Matrix

Time management is the act or process of exercising conscious control over the amount of time spent on specific activities, especially to increase efficiency or productivity. Time management may be aided by a range of skills, tools, and techniques used to manage time when accomplishing specific tasks, projects and goals. This set encompasses a wide scope of activities, and these include planning, allocating, setting goals, delegation, analysis of time spent, monitoring, organizing, scheduling, and prioritizing. Initially, time management referred to just business or work activities, but eventually the term broadened to include personal activities as well.


One of the most essential elements of good time management: distinguishing between what is important and what is urgent. Managing time effectively, and achieving the things that you want to achieve, means spending your time on things that are important and not just urgent. To do this, and to minimize the stress of having too many tight deadlines, you need to understand this distinction:

- **Important** activities have an outcome that leads to the achievement of your goals.
- **Urgent** activities demand immediate attention, and are often associated with the achievement of someone else's goals.

Urgent activities are often the ones we concentrate on. These are the "squeaky wheels that get the grease." They demand attention because the consequences of not dealing with them are immediate. The Urgent/Important Matrix is a useful tool for thinking about this.

**How to Use the Tool:**

The Urgent/Important Matrix is a powerful way of thinking about priorities. Using it helps you overcome the natural tendency to focus on urgent activities, so that you can keep clear enough time to focus on what's really important. This is the way you move from "firefighting", into a position where you can grow your business and your career.

Here's how it works:

The matrix can be drawn as shown in figure 1, with the dimensions of Importance and Urgency.

![Figure 1: Urgent/Important Matrix](image)

The steps below help you use the matrix to prioritize your activities:
1. The first step is to list all the activities and projects you feel you have to do. Try to include everything that takes up your time at work/school, however unimportant.

2. Next, assign importance to each of the activities – you can do this on, say, a scale of 1 to 5: remember, this is a measure of how important the activity is in helping you meet your goals and objectives. Try not to worry about urgency at this stage, as this helps get to the true importance.

3. Once you have assigned importance to each activity, evaluate the urgency of each activity. As you do this, you can plot the listed items on the matrix according to the assigned importance and urgency.

4. Now study the matrix using the strategies described below to schedule your priorities.

**Urgent and Important:** There are two distinct types of urgent and important activities: Ones that you could not foresee, and others that you have left to the last minute.

You can avoid the latter by planning ahead and avoiding procrastination. Issues and crises, on the other hand, cannot always be foreseen or avoided. Here, the best approach is to leave some time in your schedule to handle unexpected issues and unplanned important activities. And if a major crisis arises, some other activity may have to be rescheduled.

If this happens, identify which of you urgent-important activities could have been foreseen and think about how you could schedule similar activities ahead of time, so they do not become urgent.

**Urgent and Not Important:** Urgent but not important activities are things that stop you achieving your goals, and prevent you from completing your work. Ask yourself whether these tasks can be rescheduled, or whether someone else could do them.

A common source of such interruptions is from other people in your office. Sometimes it's appropriate to say "No" to people, or encourage them to solve the problem themselves. Alternatively, try allocating time when you are available so that people only interrupt you at certain times (a good way of doing this is to schedule a regular meeting so that all issues can be dealt with at the same time.) By doing this, you'll be able to concentrate on your important activities for longer periods of time.

**Not Urgent, but Important:** These are the activities that help you achieve your personal and professional goals, and complete important work.

Make sure that you have plenty of time to do these things properly, so that they do not become urgent. And remember to leave enough time in your schedule to deal with unforeseen problems. This will maximize your chances of keeping on schedule, and help you avoid the stress of work becoming more urgent that necessary.

**Not Urgent and Not Important:** These activities are just a distraction, and should be avoided if possible. Some can simply be ignored. Others are activities that other people may want you to do, but they do not contribute to your own desired outcomes.

Again, say "No" politely and firmly if you can. If people see you are clear about your objectives and boundaries, they will often not ask you to do "not important" activities in the future.

**Key Point:** The Urgent/Important Matrix helps you look at your task list, and quickly identify the activities you should focus on. By prioritizing using the Matrix, you can deal with truly urgent issues, at the same time that you keep on working towards your goals.


https://www.stephencovey.com/7habits/7habits-habit3.php


**Before our next class:**

1. Consider and list all the activities you have to do in a typical week (everything that takes more than 5 minutes).
2. Assign importance (1-5) for each of these activities.
3. Evaluate the urgency of each activity and plot the activities on an urgent/important matrix.
4. Send your matrix to me via an email attachment (jjackson@eng.ua.edu).
5. Have a great week!