To-do or not to-do, that is the question

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OFTEN one of the first things we think about when considering productivity is the to-do list. This column includes my own experiences with to-do lists, some tips to help you choose a suitable to-do list tool, and discusses how you could use a to-don't list.

My journey

I'm a list person by nature and action-oriented too, so have been doing to-do lists pretty much since I could write. The way I've done this however has changed as my workflows have developed and software has improved.

I started out with pen and paper, progressed to a whiteboard (the satisfaction of wiping something off completely is so much more satisfying than a tick!), then discovered to-do list post-it notes. These were great for when I worked on a number of different desks (my own desk plus two different enquiry desks), as I could plan my time and create a bundle of materials with accompanying post-it note to-do lists for different situations. However, it took a lot of rearranging and rewriting of lists.

At this point, I began to use online start pages to access information from wherever I was, and so naturally progressed to using an online service that could integrate with these. I used ToodleDo initially, though the interface didn't appeal to me, so I switched to Remember the Milk and was a happy user of the web and mobile service for a couple of years. However, as time progressed, I found it no longer seemed to suit my workflow.

I tried a few other services including Flow, Trello, Nozbe and Wunderlist before settling on NirvanaHQ, which was in beta at the time. Sadly, their service didn't have a mobile app for a long time, so when I switched to using an Apple Mac for the majority of my work, I moved over to Omnifocus. I now use the Mac, iPad and iPhone versions of Omnifocus, so that I always have access to my to-do list.

So many tools, how to choose?

As you can tell, I've tried many different to-do list tools depending on my needs and the functionality of different systems as they develop. Your criteria may differ, but for me, the following things are most important:

- Mobile access (preferably via offline app)

- Support task input via email

- Support contexts (e.g. Errands, Office, Phone, Email)

- Support projects

- Support repeating tasks

- Easy to use, with a clean interface.

Additional things which may be important to you include collaborative functionality for shared tasks and access via web browser (rather than a software download). I've created a bundle of online to-do list options for you to try out at http://bitly.com/bundles/joeyanne/4.

Getting things done

Q&A

This month's question comes from Damyanti Patel, who asks about the art of saying 'no' to help you manage your time more effectively. This is something I've had to learn as demands on my time have increased. Firstly, there's the issue of knowing when to say 'no', which isn't as easy as it sounds.

Obviously, there are some tasks we have to complete, but often we have the flexibility to choose which additional projects or tasks to take on. I use this quick checklist:

1 Do I have capacity for the work within the timescale?
2 Do I have the experience or skills to be able to competently complete it?
**3** Does it contribute to my goals?

The to-don't list

The other thing I recommend is a to-don't list. These can be useful for reminding us about tasks that don't suit us (e.g. things which add unnecessary stress), especially if they are things we know we might get tempted by.

You can also use a to-don't list to help you prioritise tasks during the day by moving distractions to your to-don't list to help you focus on things that really need your attention.

Hopefully the combination of a to-do list and a to-don't list will help you effectively manage your workload. [U]

Picture by David Machiavello
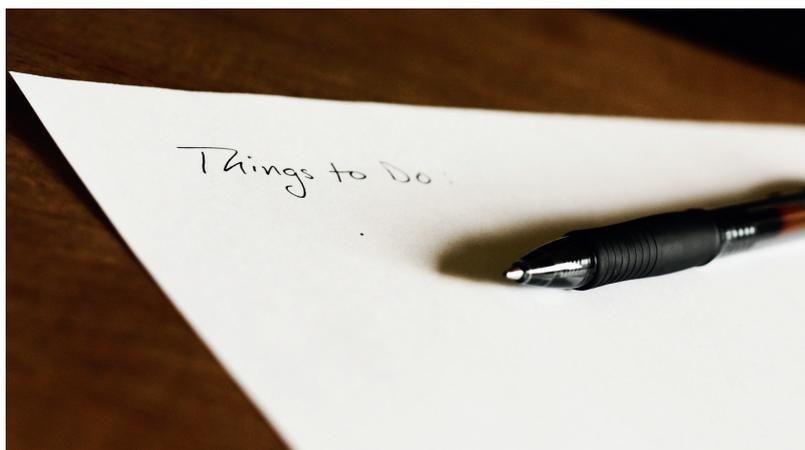
Online to-do lists

Check out Jo's **online to-do lists** bundle at:

http://bitly.com/bundles/joeyanne/4