

# Knowing when to stop



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**M**ost time management advice is about planning tasks and appointments, and knowing what to start work on and when. However, it's just as important to know when to stop.

## Stopping tasks

By nature, I'm a completer finisher, so I like to have an end to things. Tasks are not always so clean cut though, and the nature of much of my own work means it can be difficult to know when I can actually check something off my to-do list. How can we keep track of these things without our to-do lists growing exponentially?

I make sure to review my to-do list on a regular basis to ensure I've marked completed tasks as done, and removed anything that no longer needs to be done.

For collaborative work, I use a 'Waiting for' list. So once I've finished working on a draft and shared it with colleagues for comment, I move the task to my 'Waiting for' list which contains all the things I'm currently waiting for feedback on or waiting for additional information. This means I can still keep track of progress but I don't have it in my to-do list, as I have finished my current stage of work on it. When I receive feedback or further information, I move the task back to my main to-do list to make the changes. I check my 'Waiting for' list weekly to follow things up and try to move them to final completion.

The other method you can use to manage longer tasks is to create separate sub-tasks for each stage of development, so rather than having a task to write a report, you could for example have separate tasks for each section of the report, and separate tasks for sending the draft out for comment, using feedback to make amendments, and finalising the report.

Another thing to bear in mind is that with many tasks there comes a point where you should finish working on it, even if you might not think it's totally perfect. Sheryl Sandberg mentions in *Lean In*,<sup>1</sup> 'one of my favourite posters at Facebook declares in big red letters, "Done is better than perfect".'

## Getting things done

### Stopping projects

In addition to stopping tasks, it's also important to stop projects. There are a number of reasons for stopping a project:

- 1 It has completed
- 2 You have done all you can
- 3 It is not a valuable use of your time.

Regularly reviewing projects as well as tasks is an important element of time management to help you focus your efforts on current priorities. I do this with my development plan which I review on a monthly basis, adding any new areas I would like to develop and removing any areas I feel I have developed enough for now. This helps me prioritise future development opportunities without getting overloaded.

### Tips from the series

I thought it would be a good opportunity to end the column series by reviewing the areas covered this year and highlighting key tips from the series.

- Ensure all confirmed appointments are in your calendar and check your calendar regularly
- Consider blocking out time in your calendar for working on particular tasks/projects

- Find a to-do list that suits the way you work, whether it's physical or virtual
- Learn when and how to say no to help you prioritise your time effectively
- Set up a tickler file to store items for future and have them ready for when you need them
- Include start dates on tasks and projects so they don't bother you until it's time to work on them
- Keep your email inbox for incoming items only
- Review your tasks and projects regularly to ensure they are up-to-date and you can focus on current priorities.

### Useful resources

Thanks to everyone for reading my columns this year and for the great feedback I have received; I'm so glad the tips have helped. If you're interested in keeping up-to-date with time management tips and tools, I recommend subscribing to the following:

**Lifehacker:** <http://lifelife.com>

**Time Management Ninja:** <http://timemanagementninja.com>

**Freakishly Productive:** <http://freakishlyproductive.com>

### Reference

**1 Sandberg, S. (2013) *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. New York: Knopf.**

\*Update would like to say a big thank you to Jo for the columns she has written for us this year.

