

The Stress of Too Much To Do

by Jeff Davidson

Everyone I know from college age on up maintains some form of a to-do list. And why not? Without writing down the things we want or need to complete, it is awfully hard to proceed throughout the day. Yet, in recent years, the unrelenting burden of handling an ever-growing array of items that populate our to-do list is wearing on career professionals everywhere.

As I speak to groups around the country, people continually tell me that they have more on their plate to take care of than ever before. Both personally and professionally, it seems as if everyone is faced with too much to do and it is stressful. How did this come to be? Did we all suddenly become poor time managers? Within a single generation did our sensibilities leave us? Did our ability to get things done evaporate? Actually, all of the opposite is true. Today's professional manager accomplishes much more than his counterpart of even a few years ago. All of the technological devices we have adopted in recent years make us more, not less, productive than in prior years.

With what are we productive? All of us are more inclined to tune into news sites and news channels to keep pace with what is going on in the world. We all have a many email correspondents, if not text message and instant message correspondents. We all have the opportunity to become better informed about what our clients or customers are seeking. We have endless opportunities to scout what the competition is doing, with the ability to summon information unlike that which previous generations could have even conceived. And therein lies the issue.

When Expectations Rise

We have so much capacity for gathering information, sifting through it, and acting upon it, and so many technological tools at our disposal, that our expectations about what we can do and should do in a day automatically rises to meet our newfound capabilities. At any given moment in the current generation's progression as career professionals, college students, and everyone in between, it feels as if we never quite take care of all that we need or want to do. Hence, the ever growing to-do list phenomenon.

What are the immediate antidotes? To be more vigilant than ever before as to what makes our to-do list. To assemble those resources that will enable us to be more effective, in pursuing projects and tasks that we have taken the time to identify as worth doing. To maintain a continual awareness that there will never be enough time to do everything that we want to do, hence select the handful of things that ultimately make our lists.

While to-do lists can be seen as the curse of humankind, they can also be seen as a blessing. If you doubt that, try this simple experiment. Proceed a whole day without any kind of list of things to do in front of you: Not on screen, not on a post-it pad, nowhere. If you're able to get through a single day without looking at a list of tasks of any kind, try another day. If you're able to go two days, congratulations. You have an ability that exceeds the rest of the population.

To-do lists give us a sense of direction no matter how they're constructed; they are something that gives us a bit of guidance. So, the next time you're cursing your situation because of all that competes for your time and attention, and all that has to be done, remember, that without to-do lists, it would be so much harder.

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Jeff is the author of "Breathing Space," and "Simpler Living." His 60 Second Series with Adams Media, including the 60-Second Organizer, 60-Second Self-Starter, and 60-Second Innovator, are popular titles in China, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Poland, Spain, France, and Brazil. Jeff has been widely quoted in the Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Christian Science Monitor, New York Times, and USA Today.

Cited by Sharing Ideas Magazine as a "Consummate Speaker," Jeff believes that career professionals today in all industries have a responsibility to achieve their own sense of work-life balance, and he supports that quest through his website www.BreathingSpace.com and through 24 iPhone Apps at www.itunes.com/apps/BreathingSpaceInstitute