

# Skillbook

# How to Prioritize

Time Management  
Skills



Mindtools

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## Skillbook

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# Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>Why Prioritize?</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Prioritization Techniques</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>Key Points</b>	<b>9</b>

# 1. Introduction

**P**rioritization is the key to getting the most from your day, and from your team.

Without clear priorities, you can end up bouncing from one activity to another, only doing what's easy, or focusing on other people's priorities rather than your own – after all, there's always that urgent email or that insistent phone call!

Your day can be much less stressful and more satisfying if you write a To-Do List, prioritize your tasks, and then complete them in the right order. It's amazing how much better you can feel once you've organized your workload!

In this **Skillbook**, you'll learn the essentials of prioritization, including:

- Why it's important to prioritize.
- Two simple techniques you can use to tackle your To-Do List, so you can focus on the activities that have the biggest impact.

Once you've finished, you'll have all the tools you need to prioritize your workload effectively – the key to a much more productive day.

## 2. Why Prioritize?

**P**rioritization is an essential skill that you need to make the very best use of your own efforts, and those of your team. It can also help you create a sense of calm and space in your life, so that you can focus your energy and attention on the things that really matter.

It's particularly important when time is limited and demands are seemingly unlimited. It helps you to allocate your time where it's most needed, freeing you and your team up from less important tasks that can be attended to later... or quietly dropped.

With good prioritization (and careful management of reprioritized tasks) you can bring order to chaos, massively reduce stress, and move toward a successful conclusion. Without it, you'll waste time, and struggle to juggle competing demands.

When you prioritize effectively, you can improve your productivity by delegating low-value activities that aren't a priority but still need doing, minimize switching between types of tasks, and reduce the time you spend on personal activities. When you see how much time you're wasting, you can change the way you work to eliminate them.

Using the exercise on the next page, take a moment to think about how much time you spend on tasks that you actually plan to do in advance, rather than just reacting to events. Do you ever do low-value tasks before the more important ones? Should you be doing all of these reactive tasks in the first place? If so, are there other, more important things that you're failing to schedule? Or, are you spending time on tasks that are simply not a priority?

Consider the reasons why you do this. Is it because you are procrastinating, for example, because your high-value tasks are more challenging? What impact does this have on the rest of your workload? How much time might you free up if you were to focus your time more productively?



### Action:

By looking back on what you've done in the last couple of days, you can build up a picture of how you typically spend your time. Use the spaces below to identify how you prioritize your tasks, and to think about some of the ways you can improve this.

**What low-value tasks, including urgent but not important ones, have you completed in the last two working days?**

**What important high-value tasks have you not done?**

**What does this tell you about how you should prioritize in the future?**

### 3. Prioritization Techniques

**W**hen you feel overwhelmed by the amount of work you have to do, it's difficult to know how to resolve this.

In this chapter, we look at two techniques that can help you get your priorities in order.

Once you've learned more about these techniques, you can carry out the exercise on page 7, and put them into practice.

#### Prioritized To-Do Lists

If you do nothing else to prioritize and organize tasks, keep a prioritized To-Do List and update it every day.

#### Action:



Create your own prioritized To-Do List using the template provided on page 5. Simply list all of the tasks you need to complete today. Then assign a priority ranking of A, B, C, D, E, or F to each item (where A is the most important and F is unimportant).





You may find you have too many high-priority tasks. If so, run through the items again and downgrade the least important ones. You might also decide that you'll drop the things you've given an E or an F to, unless you choose to increase their priority – in which case, do so.

By prioritizing all of your tasks at once, you won't have to waste time revisiting your list, after completing a task, to decide what to do next. Plus, with a sensible plan for the work you'll complete during your day, you should feel much more in control of your workload.

## The Action Priority Matrix

The Action Priority Matrix is our second “must have” prioritization tool. It helps you think about how you spend your time so that you can reallocate it, if necessary, to make the most of your time, energy and talents.



### Action:

Write out your To-Do List again using the template provided on page 7. This time score each task from 0 to 10 for both of these factors:

- The **impact** of completing the activity.
- The **effort** you have to put in to complete it.

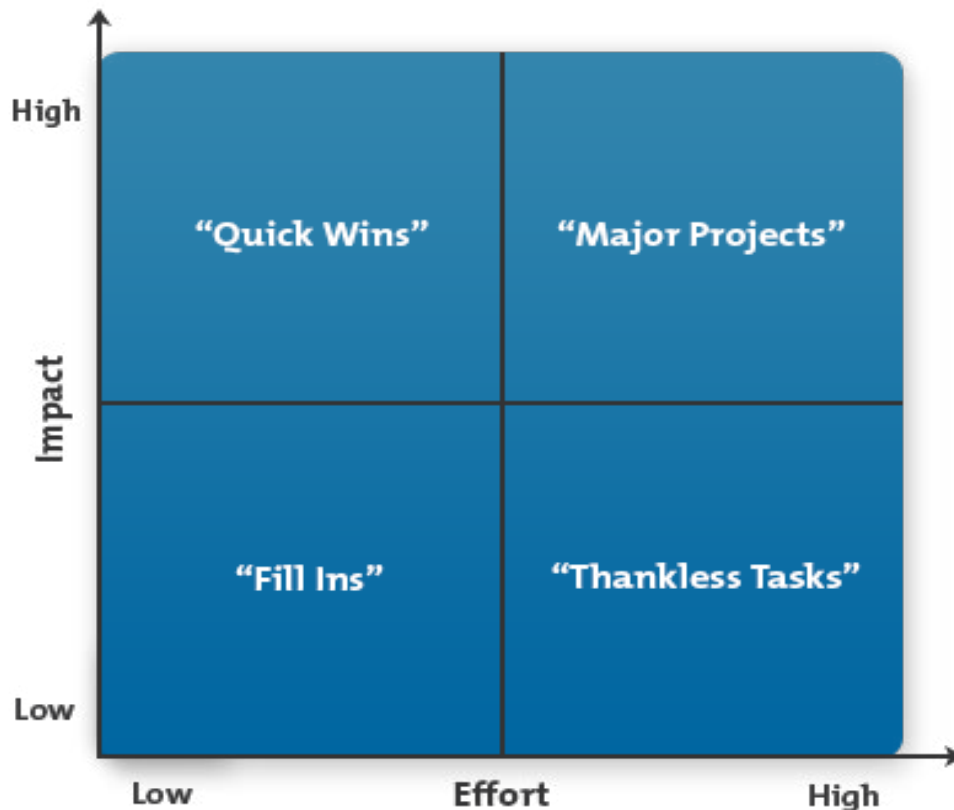
[illegible]



### Action:

Now, based on your scores, plot each task on the chart below (you may need to print this out). Use the key below the chart to categorize your activities, and prioritize what you need to do next.

Figure 1 – The Action Priority Matrix



**Quick Wins:** These activities give great results for relatively little effort. Focus on these as much as possible. Remember, quick-win activities that allow other people to get on with their tasks should often be treated as top priority.

**Major Projects:** These give good returns but take a long time to complete, or use a lot of scarce resources. Don’t let them take over your schedule! Complete major projects as quickly and efficiently as you can, so you can move on to the next priority, but don’t forget to make time for quick wins, too.

**Fill Ins:** These are tasks that you can do in a spare moment in between major activities. Drop these if another task becomes more pressing.

**Thankless Tasks:** Try hard not to get involved in these projects – they’ll soak up your time and give little reward.

## 5. Key Points

**Y**ou can quickly feel overwhelmed by your workload if you don't prioritize the things you do. By taking control and organizing your tasks in the right way, you'll be able to focus your efforts and talents where they're need most, and reduce stress!

A prioritized To-Do List can quickly bring order to your day. And, you can manage your tasks in a more intelligent, insightful way with tools like Prioritized To-Do Lists and the Action Priority Matrix.

