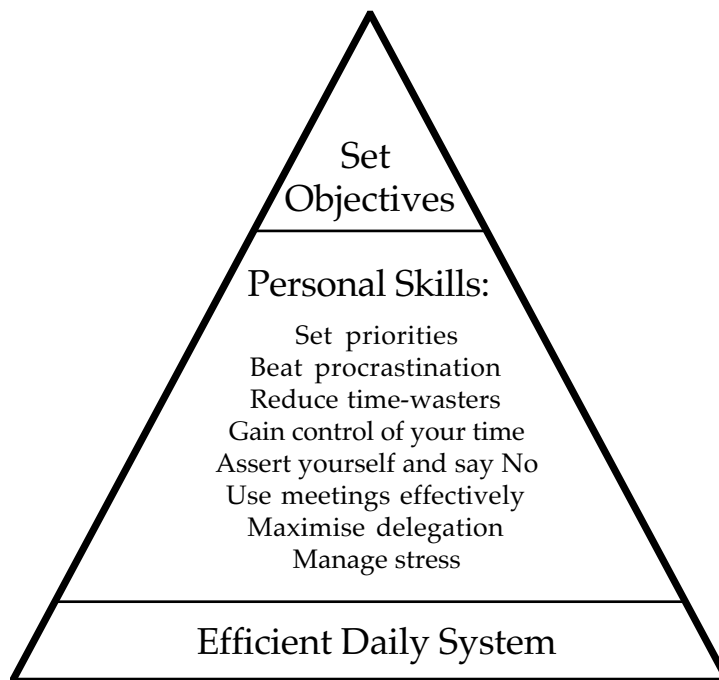


Chapter 10

Efficient Systems: What should you do every day?

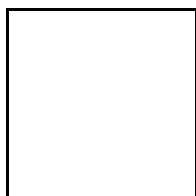
In the introduction I suggested that an efficient daily system is the foundation of any successful person's life:



Without goals there is no point in being efficient: you will travel very fast, but to where?

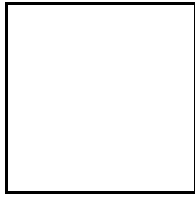
With goals, but without an efficient system, you won't make any progress.

Your personal organisation system must therefore:

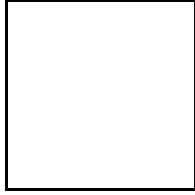


progress

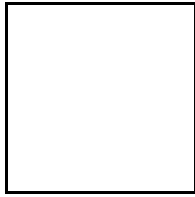
Encourage you to spend time on activities that lead to long term



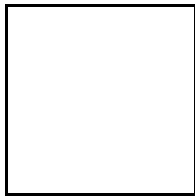
Give an overview for planning



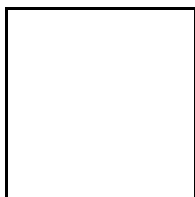
Prevent lateness and forgetfulness



Save time when tasks repeat themselves



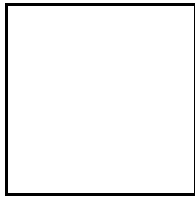
Reduce stress



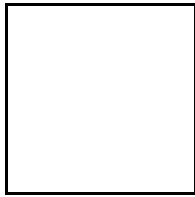
Allow space for fun and spontaneity

So, what should an efficient daily system look like?

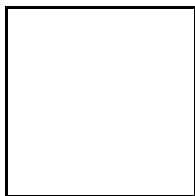
In this final chapter we will look at the ideal personal organisation system under the following headings:



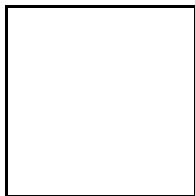
Master Actions List



Daily Jobs-To-Do List



Diary



Desk

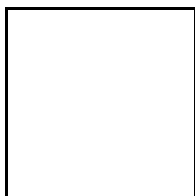
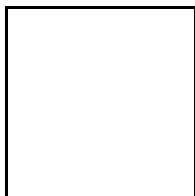
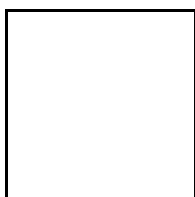


Image: The importance of the above.

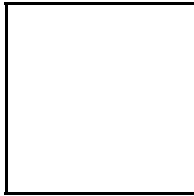


Daily routine



Making it happen

Everyone is different, both in terms of character, job, and the way they live their life, so one Filofax-type system cannot be prescribed to everyone. Some people like to have detailed lists and plans, while others prefer slips of paper or a small notebook. However there are three features that every efficient system must have:



1. Master Actions List.

This is quite simply a single list of every job that you have got to do, all written down, in one place.

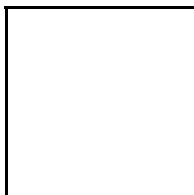
Do you have this?

In my experience, only about one person in 20 has such a list.

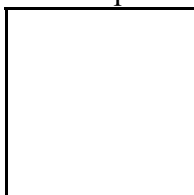
Why don't most people have one?

- Never thought about it
- Can't be bothered
- Lack of self discipline
- Fear that the list will be too long to cope with

What will happen if you don't have one?



Stress: you will have an uneasy feeling that there are lots of things you probably should be doing,



You will forget things,

You will find it easy to procrastinate,

You won't be able to prioritise,

You won't be able to stand back to review progress and plan ahead.

Considering that it will take you about five minutes to write, and then less than a minute a day to maintain, I am sure that you will agree that this is worth doing!

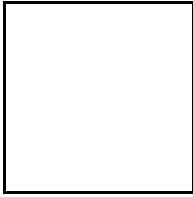
So: are you going to do one? Today?

The best format of your Master List is:

- Any order
- Every job, big or small
- Written on one piece of paper,
or in your diary,
or on a collection of cards,
or on pages in a ring file, either A4 or small,
or listed on a computer or computerised diary.

In order to capture everything without forgetting it you should always carry a pen and paper with you. You can then write down an idea or something you are asked to do and get straight back to concentrating on what you were doing. It sounds simple, but do you do it?

From your master list you can then extract the jobs that you will do each day, based on whether the jobs are urgent and also whether they are important. As discussed in detail in chapter 3, the ideal mix is to cover all the urgent ones while still fitting in some of the non-urgent but important ones. This will enable you to stay ahead of the game, and achieve your desired quality of life in the longer term.



2. Daily Jobs-To-Do List

This has been described by other Time Management writers as the single biggest aid to getting more done in a day. It really does focus you on what you are going to get done, and helps you to avoid wasting time. It is a great way of reducing procrastination, it helps you plan your day, and it acts as a reward when you cross out each job and then, on a good day, finish the list completely!

Writing a jobs-to-do list reduces stress by

- having a reassuring plan for tomorrow rather than an uncertain fog,
- releasing your mind from having to remember all the tasks.

Write your Do-list the evening before.

For work tasks, you should write it just before going home and leave it on your desk. This tells your subconscious that tomorrow is well planned and organised, and that you are leaving all thoughts of work behind when you go home.

Your subconscious will prepare you for whatever you are planning to do tomorrow, so you will perform better when the time comes.

The list also sets your subconscious quietly working on some of the problems, while you sleep or do other work. Answers to problems will sometimes pop into your mind just before you need them.

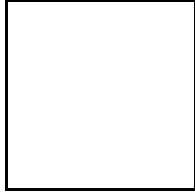
You will find that writing the list the evening before makes it much easier to commit yourself to doing the unpleasant tasks that you would normally avoid with "I'm too busy" or "I don't have quite enough information yet".

If you leave it until the next morning you may easily be side-tracked by an urgent problem as soon as you arrive at work, and then you will not get around to writing your list.

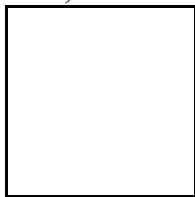
So: write it the evening before.

Why is the *Master List* not enough to work from? Why is it necessary to write a new, extra little list each day?

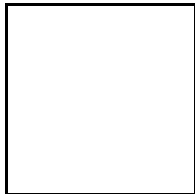
The answer is that if you try to work from your master list:



you will 'cherry pick', taking the best jobs and leaving the unpleasant ones,



you will feel depressed because you never finish the master list,



it's unwieldy and you might even lose your master list.

What should your daily list look like?

- Ten items at the most,
- Written on a small piece of paper or written in your diary,
- Always with you,
- Added to as the day continues,
- Crossed out as you go.

Some people like to sort them into

Must Do (stay on until finished),

Should Do (feel guilty if not done), and

Might Do (if the day turns out to be a quiet one).

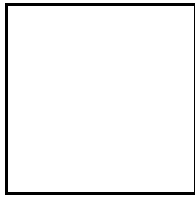
Others like to mark the important ones with a star, or write the jobs in order of urgency. This is a matter of personal preference, and I would not like to discourage you from keeping a daily list by prescribing it in too much detail and making it too much effort. However, if you can, I do recommend writing the jobs in the order in which you are planning to do them. This makes you less likely to leave the top ones until too late.

One manager I know puts an easy job at the top of his list, to get himself going in the morning, and then the worst job of the day second. He likes to get this out of the way early rather than think about it all day.

Another manager has a small home-made pad with the dates of every day already written on the top of each consecutive page. This means that every day (in the evening) she *has* to write the jobs list for the next day. Try making a pad like this for yourself: it works so well that within 10 days you will be running out of urgent jobs to put on it! You will then be able to put the important ones on it.

It will take you less than five minutes per day to write your list for the following morning. I am sure you will agree that this is time well spent.

So: are you going to do one? Today?



3. Diary

Without a diary you cannot plan ahead, you cannot hope to remember appointments, or be on time.

Your diary should:

...Be small enough to always be with you.

...Contain work and home appointments :

When you are at one place you need to know when your next appointment is at the other place; separating your work and home diaries will increase your stress level as your brain will have to manage two identities.

...Have a note of what the next action on a project is to be:

Each project should be like an unbroken chain, so if someone says they'll get back to you, or you are waiting for a letter, or there is a date when your next section of work is due, or you haven't got time to think about a problem today, write in your diary what the next action is, by whom, and write it in on the day when it is due.

This reduces your stress level because that loose end is now taken care of and can be put out of your mind until it comes up. Other people will be amazed at your efficiency when you call them and say "You promised it for today, how's it coming?" or "There's two weeks until the deadline, shall we arrange that preparatory meeting for next week?".

You don't need a good memory, you just need to write the next action down in your diary. Never let the chain become broken until the job is finished!

...Have spaces

After your essential appointments have been entered in your diary, you can programme in some blocks of time for your important but non-urgent tasks. These may only be one or two blocks of half an hour each day, but will encourage you to spend proactive time on the things that matter to you. Remember that an hour per day is equivalent to five solid weeks of work per year. Most box 2 (unimportant but urgent) interruptions can wait until after the half hour block, but box 1 (urgent and important) interruptions will occasionally have to be done right away and ruin your allocated block. This is unavoidable, but at least most of your blocks will be achieved.

Make sure that 50% of your diary is still unprogrammed each day, for all the box 2 (urgent but unimportant) problems that will certainly crop up. If you allow less than this, your day will be frantic and your stress level will be too high. Over-planning or over-management of time can be quite a stress-raiser, since the plans will not work out!

...Contain all sorts of other information, not just dates.

For example, in my diary I have

- All my frequently used phone numbers
- Some key addresses and post codes
- Maps of the country, and streetmap of my home area
- Expense records
- Stamps and costs of posting overseas / overweight in UK
- Useful numbers: National Insurance, Driving Licence, & all bank/credit card numbers except PINs
- List of birthdays and other dates to remember
- List of what to remember to pack when going away (based on bitter experience of what I normally forget)
- Information on key business contacts
- List of books to read, added to when people recommend one to me
- Photo of my dog.

You don't have to have all these things, and you will probably add others, but the point is

- Write everything down - you never know when you'll need it;
- Keep it all in one place, i.e. your diary, so you know where to look;
- No more scraps of paper that you can't find;
- Saves time and mental effort if you can look it up, rather than trying to remember it.
- Downloading information onto paper frees up your mind to think.

...Be perpetual

To save starting again each year I use a small filofax-type book with lots of loose pages after the diary for the above information. Another advantage of this is that around October I can put in some of next year's months, so I get the forward visibility I need. I prefer a week to two pages, plus a year on one pull-out triple page, but you can decide which to choose depending on how many jobs per day you need to plan, and how far ahead your work horizon is.

...Be secure

What if I lose my diary? This can be quite traumatic because if properly used a diary is such a valuable tool. I recommend:

- Never put it down anywhere other than back in your pocket or handbag,
- Don't leave it on your desk, or in a hotel room,
- Never change your routine with it (putting it somewhere different like giving it to your wife/husband to look after, packing it in a different bag, etc.),
- Don't put it in a bag with lots of other things, e.g. picnic bag, shopping bag,
- Photocopy key pages occasionally,
- Keep previous versions of phone lists etc.,
- Keep phone lists on computer, and print out updated versions for putting into your diary: then you have the computer as back-up if the hard copy gets lost,
- Put your name and address on page 1, with a message saying PLEASE return this diary, perhaps even with a small reward.

As mentioned before, your diary can also contain your long term goals, your master jobs list, and, written in each day, your daily jobs to do. If a job has a time when it needs to be done, or a best time to do it, then you should write it into your diary rather than your daily or master list.

Similarly, if it is a small job you don't need to write it on your master list: it can go straight onto your daily list or into your diary. The master list is best for large jobs that cannot be completed in a day, and for jobs for which you don't yet have a time of action. However, if these start to be procrastinated, you can get a grip of them by putting them into your diary for a date in the future.

Apart from these three key parts of your paperwork system, there are some other aspects to your daily routine which are important and these are discussed next.

4. Desk

Your desk is prime real estate, the most important two square yards in the world.

So don't fill it up with old magazines you'll never read, and papers you can't be bothered to file. Put these somewhere else, preferably in the bin but at least not in your top two square yards.

Personally, I don't advocate a completely clear desk, even when finishing for the day, but I do feel that there are certain rules that everyone should follow:

4.1 Pen and paper.

Always have instant access to plenty of pens and rough paper. Otherwise you won't write things down when you should, and you are then on the slippery slope to chaos.

I could never find a pen when I wanted one, (where on earth do they go?), so I bought fifty and put them all around the house, in every room. This turned out to be just enough to saturate the house, so although I am down to my last ten they never quite disappear.

At work I write everything down:

- If my boss comes in and asks me to do something, I write it down. I then know I won't forget it, and can if necessary focus again on the job I was doing before the interruption. It also gives the signal that I will be taking action on the request.
- If I receive a phone call I take notes from the start, so I don't forget their name or any points from the conversation, which could get long and complicated. What if you received another call straight after the first one, and you didn't take notes during the first call?
- If I have an idea I write it down before I forget it again.

All actions that I agree to do, or decide to do, are added either to my Master Actions List (if they are large and non-time specific) or to my diary (if I can decide immediately when I will do them).

All promises made to me are written down in my diary, on the date when they are due.

4.2 Location.

Make sure the view is conducive to thinking. Looking out of a window onto a busy road is too distracting, and facing a corridor is the same. We tend to automatically have our desk facing the door or direction of approach, as a defensive measure from our days as wild animals, but you should consider turning your desk away from (or sideways on to) areas of activity in order to aid concentration.

4.3 Empty your in-tray every day.

Even if you just put it all in another pile somewhere, you need to keep your in-tray empty so that you can recognise new arrivals. If yesterday's incoming mail is buried by today's, you will have the stress of wondering if something in the pile is important or overdue.

Also, others will have more faith that you will take action if your in-tray is under control. If people feel the need to put notes on your chair or on your computer keyboard then you have an image problem!

Ideally when you empty the in-tray you either

- read it and bin it,
- read it and file it,
- action it right now
- put it on one side to read more fully later,
- put it on one side to action later, or
- put it one side to delegate later.

In other words, you make your decision on the next action immediately, and follow this by putting it into your system: write it on your daily list, or your master list, or in your diary to do at a known time in the future. It is then on the system, and the unbroken chain will pursue it until it gets finished.

4.4 Work on one job at a time.

Trying to work on several jobs will mean you won't focus on any of them, they will all take longer both in terms of lead time and total hours worked, and you will have the extra stress of holding several jobs in your mind at once. Your subconscious can only show one picture at a time on its internal film projector.

Of course, there will be interruptions as you work on your important jobs, either from telephones or visitors, and these cannot be ignored. But after you have dealt with each interruption you should go back to your one important job. You should never have more than one important job being worked on at once. The other important jobs that are partly completed are not on your desk, they are in files, out of view. You open one of them and start it only after you have put away the one you have been working on.

4.5 Clutter

Never let "dead" paper fill your desk area. If anything has not moved for more than two days, take it away somewhere else and keep the space clear. You will remember to do it because it is on your master list, and either in your diary or on your daily list too. But having it crowding you is adding stress to your life. Doesn't it feel like a marvellous relief, a weight off your mind, when you clear your desk top? This shows the amount of stress that the cluttered desk was putting on you.

4.6 Filing

When a paper is to be filed, put the name of the destination file in the top corner and then put the paper in a tray. Then, when you file all the papers (every week or two) it is a quick and easy job to sort them into piles and file them. You don't need to read each one again and work out which file it should be in. If you have the luxury of a secretary you can delegate the physical sorting and putting-away, while still controlling which file the papers go in and therefore being able to retrieve them yourself if you need to.

5. Image: The importance of your desk and your personal organisation system.

As well as being the foundation for achieving whatever results you want, your desk and your personal system will also be a major contribution to how others judge you.

If promotion in your organisation is one of your objectives, then you will need to know the following:

Careers are decided

10% on what you do
20% on who you know
and 70% on appearance.

Appearance means being P-E-A-R shaped:

- Positive attitude,
- Easy to work with,
- Appear to be in control,
- Reliable: do what you say, when you say you will.

Promotion, if it is your aim, depends largely on whether you can fulfil two criteria:

1. You must be the sort of person your potential colleagues would like to work with: positive, and easy to work with: "A good team player".
2. You must look as if you could do the job at the next level up, which means that you must be in control of your current job. In management, where delegation and teamwork are the major contributing factors to results rather than doing it all yourself, *personal competence* is more likely to make this difference than *technical competence*. If you are at the limit of your ability at your current level this will show in unreliability.

If your desk is tidy, you are always on time and you deliver the goods on time as promised, you will be a rare and valuable person. The right people will notice and want to work with you.

Even if corporate ambition is not your objective, you will probably want to be seen as reliable, easy to work with, and positive by your friends and colleagues. I hope this book has given you enough ideas to move you into these categories!

6. Daily routine

During this chapter and in earlier chapters I have mentioned a number of things that you need to do every day. Below is a list of everything that should be part of your daily routine if you want to live a satisfying and productive life. As you read it you may like to tick the ones you are already doing, and then consider the gaps:

Get up in plenty of time.

Say "I feel great today".

Take time to read (something uplifting, not the papers)

Take time to think, and to review the plan for your day.

Eat a healthy breakfast.

Clear any unnecessary accumulations off your desk.

During the day, get some exercise.

Avoid negative people.

Focus on your objectives or goals.

Make sure you allocate some time for category 3 (important) tasks.

Take time to smell the roses: savour some aspect of the day's experiences.

Think about where time was wasted: what should you do next time?

Finish work on time; do not regularly work long hours.

Spend the maximum time on activities that you really enjoy.

Avoid timewasters, particularly TV.

Avoid excessive eating or drinking.

Spend quality time with your children, if you have any.

Write your "jobs to do" list for tomorrow.

Go to bed early enough to have sufficient sleep.

It takes about thirty days to make or break a habit, after which it is no longer an effort to do, or avoid, the activity. Can you choose one of the above and keep it up for thirty days? Having established that particular success habit, you can then move on to another.

7. Making it happen

Presumably you want to be a more efficient or organised person.

I hope you have gained some new ideas while reading this book, and have perhaps felt that you should do a few things differently.

But will you actually do them differently?

And if so, how long will you keep it up?

If you are not living your life even slightly differently in six months time, then my writing this book and your reading it will both have been a waste of time!

So, here are some things you could do:

1. Action list:

Flick through the book and compile a list of everything you would ideally like to do differently or better.

2. On the wall:

Put this list on the wall, somewhere where you will see it often.

3. Reminder notes:

Make small notices and put them around the house or your office, or hidden in places where they will surprise you.

We saw in chapter 2 how repetition is important for programming your goals into your subconscious. You can also use the repetition from reminder notices to:

- Remind yourself of your priorities
- Reduce procrastination by whatever method you chose in chapter 4
- Be more assertive when situations occur
- Resist interruptions
- Delegate more
- Monitor and reduce stress
- Control your personality driver (see chapter 9)
- Keep your systems efficient

How about putting a reminder notice for one of the above somewhere where you will see it occasionally: perhaps in your sock draw, or inside a kitchen cupboard, or in your car, or at the bottom of the washing basket, or in one of the drawers of your filing cabinet?

I have named my word processor disc with an inspirational reminder message, so that when I start up my PC in the morning it tells me the name of the disc and I am given a small jolt in the right direction.

Some people have a tiny red dot above their desk, on a wall in their house, or in their car. The dot is a reminder to them of their personal goals which they have listed. Whenever they catch sight of the dot their subconscious is reminded of their goals. The advantage of the dot is that it means nothing to anybody else.

4. Reward yourself if you achieve any of your actions:

For example, buy yourself some chocolate whenever you empty your filing tray or clear your desk. This sends a powerful message to your subconscious.

5. Form the habit:

See if you can keep up the new behaviour for thirty days: this is how long it takes to make a habit. Can you write a daily jobs-to-do list every day for thirty days? Can you read before breakfast for thirty days? Can you play with the children for an hour after work before watching the TV, for thirty consecutive days? Can you get some exercise every day for thirty days? Keep a chart on the wall, and tick off the boxes. Remember if you miss one, you go back to the start!

6. Get a friend to help you:

Appoint them as your official nagger. Ask them to ask you every day "Have you got your jobs-to-do list today? Can I see it?". Get the friend to point out signs of stress, or times when your internal driver is showing (being too perfect, being too rushed, etc).

7. Pay in advance:

Sign up for swimming classes or an aerobics class, and pay in advance so you are under some pressure to go.

8. Use your diary as a reminder:

Write into your diary some reminders. Block in some time to clear your desk, or go for a run. Write a note to yourself which you will read in six months time saying "How much TV are you watching?" or "How much do you weigh?".

Action plan for chapter 10

Are you going to write a master actions list? Yes or no:

Are you going to write a jobs to do list, every evening for the next day? Yes or no:

Improvements you can make to your diary:

Changes you will make to your desk:

Changes you plan to make to your daily routine:

How will you make your planned actions happen?

Remember,
you only get one life,
some of it is gone already,
but you can change the rest of it
and achieve anything you really want to.

Start now!