The Endless To-Do List: Three Ways to Work Smarter

By Amy Anderson

Your inbox is overflowing. You have three different to-do lists, including one on your mobile device. Not to mention the one in your head. Dread is creeping in and wrecking what used to be a job you were passionate about. It’s time to make some changes.

“Most of your dread doesn’t come from the work itself. It comes from how you think about the work,” says Jason Womack, a workplace performance expert, executive coach and author of *Your Best Just Got Better: Work Smarter, Think Bigger, Make More*.

“The psychological weight of unfinished tasks and unmade decisions is huge. There is a constant feeling of pressure to do more with less. You can’t change that reality... but you can make peace with it.”

First, Womack says, you’ve got to accept that you are never going to get it all done. The to-do list is updated daily. Instead, try giving yourself the satisfaction of a job well-done with these work-smart tips:

- **Time blocking and prioritization.** Look at your to-do list, figure out where you have blocks of time to act on those items and then prioritize. “I keep my defined ‘work’ actions to 15 to 30 minutes each,” Womack says. “These are the chunks of time I can use to stay focused, minimize interruptions and work effectively.”

- **Take technology shortcuts by setting up a Microsoft Office rule that sorts incoming emails to specific folders.** Or keep your current projects in a cloud folder so they’re accessible on the go. If you don’t know how, ask someone who’s tech-savvy to help.

- **Figure out what distracts you.** Identify what is blocking your ability to give all of your attention to what needs your attention. Is it the constant ding of emails? Mute the alert sound. Is it employees or colleagues who need “just a minute” of your time? Block off visitation hours. Once you know the triggers, you can begin to make subtle changes so that you wind up getting more done.
Most people allow their lives to simply happen to them. They float along. They wait. They react. And by the time a large portion of their life is behind them, they realize they should have been more proactive and strategic.

I hope that hasn’t been true for you. If it has, then I want to encourage you to develop a stronger sense of urgency and a pro-strategic mindset. As you plan and develop strategies for your life and growth, I want to share with you some of the things I’ve learned that have helped me in the process.

1. Life is very simple, but keeping it that way is very difficult.

Despite what others might say, I believe life is pretty simple. It’s a matter of knowing your values, making some key decisions based on those values and then managing those decisions on a day-to-day basis. And at least in theory, the longer we live and the more we learn, the more experience and the more knowledge we acquire—well, that should make life even simpler. But life has a way of becoming complicated, and it is only through great effort that we can keep it simple.

2. Designing your life is more important than designing your career.

If you plan your life well, then your career will work itself out. If you don’t believe you can succeed in your life in the long term, you’re not very likely to give it the planning attention it deserves.

Planning your life is about finding yourself, knowing who you are and then customizing a design for your growth. Once you draw the blueprint for your life, then you can apply it to your career.

3. Life is not a dress rehearsal!

There is no warm-up for life, yet that’s the way many people seem to be treating it. Each of us goes on stage cold, with no preparation, and we have to figure it out as we go along. That can be messy. We fail. We make mistakes. But we still need to give it our best from the very start.

We don’t get a rehearsal for life. We have to do the best we can in the moment. But we can learn from others who have gone before us and found success. They should inspire us to plan as best we can and then give our all.

Comedian Fred Allen once said, “You only live once. But if you work it right, once is enough.” Inspire us to plan as best we can and then give our all.

4. In planning your life, multiply everything by two.

Give two times the effort and energy to growing yourself. And allow yourself to grow. And at least in theory, the longer we live and the more we learn, the more experience and the more knowledge we acquire—well, that should make life even simpler. But life has a way of becoming complicated, and it is only through great effort that we can keep it simple.

5. Commit to putting more love into everything you do.

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6. Know that you count – and act as if you do.

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7. Be patient and trust “It’s all happening perfectly.”

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8. Act responsibly and lovingly toward yourself and others.

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9. Learn something valuable from all life experiences—good or bad.

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10. Do your best and let go of the outcome.

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Comedian Fred Allen once said, “You only live once. But if you work it right, once is enough.” Inspire us to plan as best we can and then give our all.

11. Take a deep breath and cut the cord to any unhealthy dependency.

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12. Rise above your fear, and focus on all you have to give to the world.

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13. Reach out and invite others into your life.

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14. Feel joy in the knowledge that your life has meaning.

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16. Quiet your mind and trust that your inner wisdom will lead you wherever you need to go.

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17. Relate knowing you can handle all that needs to be handled.

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19. Always choose the path with the heart.

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20. Touch the world with love wherever you go.

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Few of us escape feelings of fear and self-doubt as we go about our lives. But the good news is that we can learn how to create within us a wonderful sense of confidence and peace of mind as we face all situations in our lives. Here are 20 rules to help us handle the challenges, accomplish what we want and create a beautiful and satisfying life.

1. With eyes of gratitude, notice all the beauty around you.

2. Smile as you recognize the many blessings in your life.

3. Joyfully say “thank you” to all who contribute to your life.

4. Pick up the mirror and ask, “How can I be more helpful here?”

5. Commit to putting more love into everything you do.

6. Know that you count—and act as if you do.

7. Feel joy in the knowledge that your life has meaning.

8. Take a deep breath and cut the cord to any unhealthy dependency.

9. Let go of blame, stand tall and take control of your reactions to all life experiences.

10. Learn something valuable from all life experiences—good or bad.

11. Do your best and let go of the outcome.

12. Act responsibly and lovingly toward yourself and others.

13. Rise above your fear, and focus on all you have to give to the world.

14. Let go and allow the river to carry you to new adventures.

15. Be patient and trust “It’s all happening perfectly.”

16. Quiet your mind and trust that your inner wisdom will lead you wherever you need to go.

17. Relax knowing you can handle all that needs to be handled.

18. Reach out and invite others into your life.

19. Always choose the path with the heart.

20. Touch the world with love wherever you go.