

How to Mitigate the Urgent to Focus on the Important

Busy people have two options when they decide how their workdays will go: they can choose to be reactive to urgent demands on their time, or proactive about focusing on what they decide is important. The only way to actually get things done is to mitigate the urgent to work on the important.

Let's differentiate between what I call urgent and important.

Urgent tasks include things like that frantic email that needs a response RIGHT NOW; a sudden request that seems like it'll only take two minutes but often ends up taking an hour; a report you've got to write up before a meeting. More often than not "the urgent" is putting out fires, or busywork, or tasks that you'd rather do first because they're less intimidating than your current project list.

Urgent tasks are usually short-term and we're drawn to them because they keep us busy and make us feel needed. (If we're busy people, we must be important people.)

But dealing with a constant stream of urgent tasks leaves you wrung out at the end of the day, wondering where all the time went, staring at the undone actual work you've got to complete.

On the flip side, important work moves you and your business towards your goals. The important stuff doesn't give us that same shot of adrenaline that the urgent requests do. It can involve thinking out long-term goals, being honest about where you are and want to be, and just doing plain hard work that feels boring and tedious. On a personal level, important stuff may include making time to get to the gym every day. On a business level, important stuff may be devising your yearly plan, breaking it down into quarterly and monthly deliverables, and evaluating your current performance against last year's plan. (Doesn't the mere thought of going to the gym and deciding on this year's goals make you want to check your email? Still, that's the work that will help you meet your goals.)

If your workplace encourages that frantic vibe of headless-chicken running and constant urgency, it can feel impossible to focus on what's important versus what's urgent. Still, an awareness of the difference and a few simple techniques can help.

Choose three important tasks to complete each day. Write them down on a slip of paper and keep it visible on your desk. When you have a moment, instead of checking your email, look at the slip, and work on an item. Keep the list to just three, and see how many you can complete.

Turn off your email client. Shut down Outlook, turn off new email notifications on your BlackBerry, do whatever you have to do to muffle the interruption of email. When you decide to work on one of your important tasks, give yourself an hour at least of uninterrupted time to complete it. If the web is too much of a temptation, disconnect your computer from the Internet for that hour.



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Set up a weekly 20-minute meeting with yourself. Put it on your calendar, and don't book over it — treat it with the same respect you'd treat a meeting with your boss. If you don't have an office door or you work in an open area that's constantly busy, book a conference room for your meeting. Go there to be alone. Bring your project list, to-do list, and calendar, and spend the time reviewing what you finished that past week, and what you want to get done the following week. This is a great time to choose your daily three important tasks. Productivity author David Allen refers to this as the "weekly review," and it's one of the most effective ways to be mindful about how you're spending your time.

The countenance is the portrait of the soul, and the eyes mark its intentions. *Cicero*

