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The Urgent-Important matrix



Technique sheet

Problem-based learning resources

Introduction

There is always a constant stream of jobs for an engineer to do. Some of these are urgent (they must be done now!) and some are important (the whole project fails if this is not done!). How can you organise work so that the important stuff gets done and the urgent stuff gets done on time? The Urgent-Important matrix might help. It has just four sectors and when you can fill it in by asking two questions: is it urgent and is it important?

But how can I be sure that something is important?

Your supervisor or manager may already have identified the key tasks in your work package. As you gain experience you will also begin to recognise the important tasks: things that impact safety, the wider project schedule and costs. If uncertain, check with your manager who will have access to the whole project plan.

	Urgent	Not urgent
Important	<p>Crises – these need to be dealt with now or something bad will happen.</p> <p>Get moving!</p>	<p>Do these jobs in plenty of time – or they become crises!</p> <p>Use the time you have before they become Urgent.</p>
Not important	<p>Interruptions – people expecting an answer now or the phone ringing from someone wanting to sell loft insulation.</p> <p>Deal with them politely but quickly – get rid of them!</p>	<p>Why are you tidying your desk drawer for the third time this week?</p> <p>It's not important and you don't need to do it now. Stop wasting time!</p>

- Make sure you are confident about the key tasks you are expected to complete and the timeline to complete them. Work done on time does not create crises!

What is the difference between Urgent and Important tasks?

Urgent tasks are things that we have to do now – they tend to interrupt our existing work and demand our attention (e.g. the support line phone rings, a colleague drops by to chat). Some of these urgent tasks are important (e.g. responding to a reported gas leak) and some (that chat with your friend) ... not so much.

Important tasks are things that have a major effect on the project (e.g. securing agreement to use photovoltaic panels rather than wind power for the centre). Some of these Important tasks can wait until later, (e.g. planning for the presentation to the executive board can be done in three weeks' time, because the presentation isn't due for a month).

- Make sure you consider whether a task you are being asked to do is Urgent or Important or both. It will help with planning your time.

What happens in the Urgent and Important quarter?

Tasks that are both Urgent and Important are often seen as crises – things that we have to do now or something bad will happen, (e.g. fire safety systems must be installed by tomorrow or the whole site will have to shut down).

You may have known that the system needed this work six months ago, it was already Important, but it was not Urgent at that time.

Dealing with crises (Urgent and Important) all the time is exhausting! You get no time to plan, and everything is just on the edge of failure. Some crises are inevitable but try to spend more time dealing with Important issues before they become Urgent.

- Make sure you can recognise a crisis when it happens but plan to do Important jobs before they become Urgent and so avoid crises.

What happens in the Important but not Urgent quarter?

These tasks have to be done but you do not have to do them now. This means you can plan for them to fit into your schedule at a convenient time. This involves an honest

assessment of what is Important and doing it in plenty of time.

This action may involve collaborating (working with others on the task) or delegating (asking someone else to do it).

The one thing not to do is to ignore it and hope it goes away! When you do that, the task inevitably ends up in the crisis quarter! Get that planning right and you can do all the Important things in time before the crisis develops.

- Make sure you use the time for planning effectively – identify the important jobs and the sequence that they need to be done in to prevent them becoming crises. Never ignore Important jobs – they will move towards the crisis zone by themselves if ignored!

So, can we just ignore the work that isn't Important?

It's a bit more complicated than that! Imagine a colleague drops by to chat while you are trying to organise the system update. They are an example of an event that is Urgent but not Important.

It's Urgent because they are standing in front of you and expecting an answer. But their plans for the weekend or the company social event are probably not that Important at the moment!

Urgent but Not important tasks are interruptions because they take you away from what you are doing to deal with something else. Managing these Urgent but Not important tasks may be about learning to say 'no' politely – to yourself as well as to others.

And finally, the things we do that are Not important and Not urgent. These are distractions and can happen at any time. It doesn't need anyone else to interrupt us – we can wander off on some social media trail or start reorganising the filing at any time!

Sometimes we even start tidying the desk drawer because we don't want to start the redesign of the heat exchange system (which is much more complicated!). If dealing with interruptions is to learn to say 'no' to others, dealing with distractions is about saying 'no' to ourselves when we feel we are starting to wander.

- Make sure you have strategies to identify and deal with interruptions and a way to avoid or limit distractions.



Again, I struggled to get this one on 2 pages, so have tried to pad out to make 3 pages, with extra images, generous spacing and extra paragraph breaks.

So, what's with the egg timer?

Some people use a timer, often called a pomodoro (<https://tinyurl.com/5562k6pa>) to help them focus on tasks. The idea is that you decide on a task (e.g. preparing the reports for the site manager), set the timer for 25 minutes and work flat out until the timer pings. Then have 5 minutes rest, wind the timer up again for another 25 minutes. This helps to break up long time periods into shorter manageable chunks. The 25 minutes limit also adds a deadline and many people find it helps them to concentrate.

- Make sure you have strategies to avoid distractions. Ideas like the pomodoro technique might be useful – find a way that works for you.



Check yourself

You should be able to answer these questions easily after reading this sheet.

1. What is the difference between an Urgent and Important task?
2. What happens if you keep putting off Important tasks?
3. Why might a simple egg timer help you to focus?



Taking it further

These activities will deepen your understanding of this topic.

1. Think about your current work patterns – perhaps make a list of the things you have done this week. Now look honestly at the time spent – how much was working in each quarter of the Urgent-Important matrix? Were you mainly dealing with crises? And how often were you distracted – or did you distract others?
 - Imagine the work pattern you see in front of you belonged to a colleague. What advice would you give them? How could you make their working life more effective and less stressful?
2. Brainstorm with a colleague some strategies to avoid interruptions and distractions. Try some of them out over the next few weeks and see which ones work best for you.
3. Create your 'no list'. This is a list of things that are not Important but take up time and stop you making progress at work. Make sure you are clear about these 'not important' tasks – they are not just the things you don't think are important – check with your manager before choosing to avoid doing things! There may be some things on there that you enjoy or find easy but be ruthless! Note down over the next two weeks how often you do something on your 'no list'. How low can you get your score?