The Art of Prioritization: How to Focus on What's Important

by Dennis Hammer

As you know, the execution of a startup is far more important than the idea that inspired it. Entrepreneurship is about making things work and doing more with less, including your time.

Even with [plenty of funding](), prioritizing your work is paramount. It's your job to identify which tasks need to happen now, which can wait, and which don't deserve your time at all.

But prioritization is not about staying productive. There are plenty of highly productive founders with [failed startups](), even though they worked lots of long and hard days and never browsed Facebook.

Prioritization is how you *organize your work*. It's the order you complete tasks, the way you stay focused on a big goal, and how you use tools like automation and delegation to get things done.

Unfortunately, there's no perfect solution to prioritization that applies to everyone. We can't put all of your tasks in a perfectly optimized order, but we can explain how to do that yourself.

1. Identify How You Spend Your Time
2. Focus on Impact, Not Urgency
3. Determining What's Impactful
4. Automation and Delegation
5. Prioritization Seems Messy

Identify How You Spend Your Time

Surely you've looked back on days – or whole weeks! – and thought, "What did I even accomplish?"

Your first step toward prioritizing your work is to identify your own inefficiencies, which means you need data. Once you have a *true* understanding of how you spend your time, you can determine what's costing more time than it should and what deserves more.

[RescueTime](#) will automatically track how much time you spend using a specific app or website, so it's a great set-and-forget tool. It will help you identify where you spend your time. It's also a good way to identify which resources you turn to the most.

[Toggl](#) is another useful tool. Unlike RescueTime, Toggl won't track your work automatically. You have to name your projects and hit the timer, but this is actually an advantage if you're not concerned with the specifics of each project.
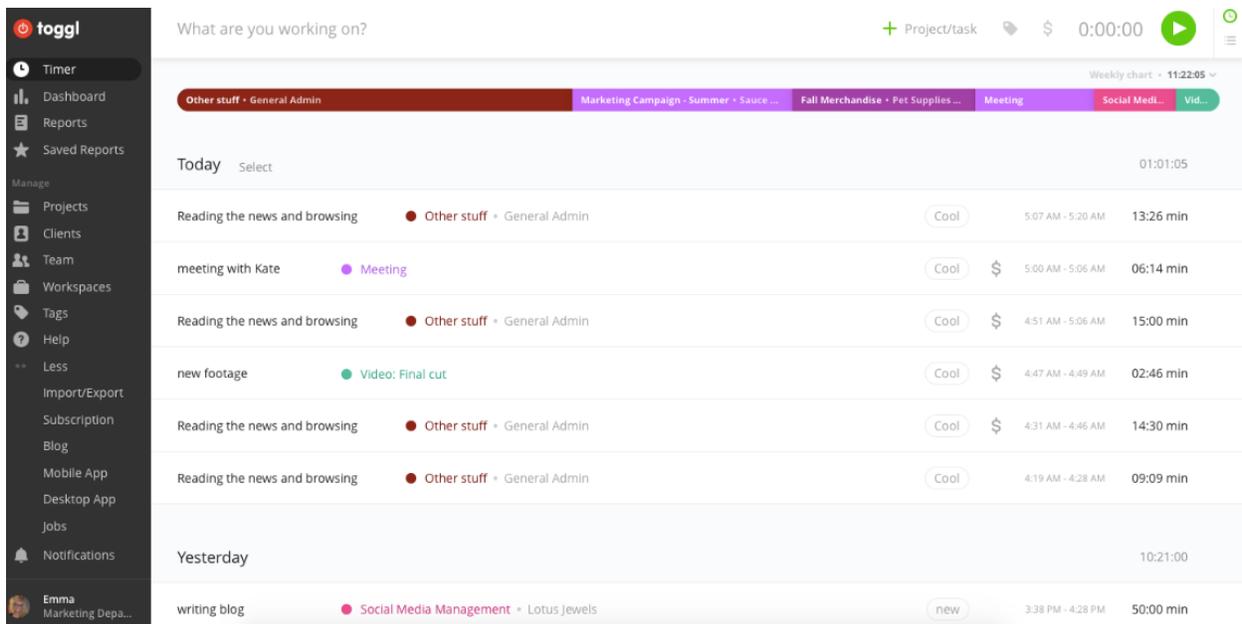
For instance, you might make three phone calls, read two blog posts, and have a meeting with a colleague in order to craft a hiring process. RescueTime will tell you how much time you spent

on *each* component, but with Toggl you can lump everything into the same project. It just depends on how you want to measure your own time.

That said, you can track time however you like, just collect the data so you have information to make smart decisions.

Once you have a week's worth of data to examine, look for trends. Does anything take up more of your time than you expected? Is there some place you should spend more time, but haven't gotten the chance? Is there anything on your schedule someone else should handle?

Focus on Impact, Not Urgency

Why does Facebook use an algorithm to organize your News Feed instead of displaying your posts in chronological order?

Because *what's important* and *what's current* aren't the same thing. The things that matter the most to us aren't necessarily the oldest or the newest. (Also, Facebook wants to charge advertisers to boost the importance of things, but that's another matter.)

When a notification pops up on our phone or a new email appears in our inbox, we're tempted to respond right away. But just because it's new doesn't mean it's important.

Similarly, just because a task sits on your to-do list for a while doesn't necessarily mean you "can't get anything done." It probably means the task doesn't create much value, so don't worry about it.

Your first step to mastering better prioritization is to break the connection between importance and urgency. Instead, evaluate the *impact* of a thing before you devote yourself to it.

For example, there's no reason to leave your inbox open all day long if you don't receive time-sensitive emails. Instead, carve out a 10- or 15-minute block every day to check your email. Turn off email notifications on your phone.

That said, if replying to emails quickly *does* impact your business (maybe you have to respond to leads fast), then leaving your email open all day would create value. The point is to let the value of a task dictate how you devote time to it.

You might find it helpful to use a priority matrix like the one below. Fit your tasks into the appropriate boxes, then complete them starting with the important / urgent box, then the important / not urgent, then not important / urgent, and finally not important / not urgent.
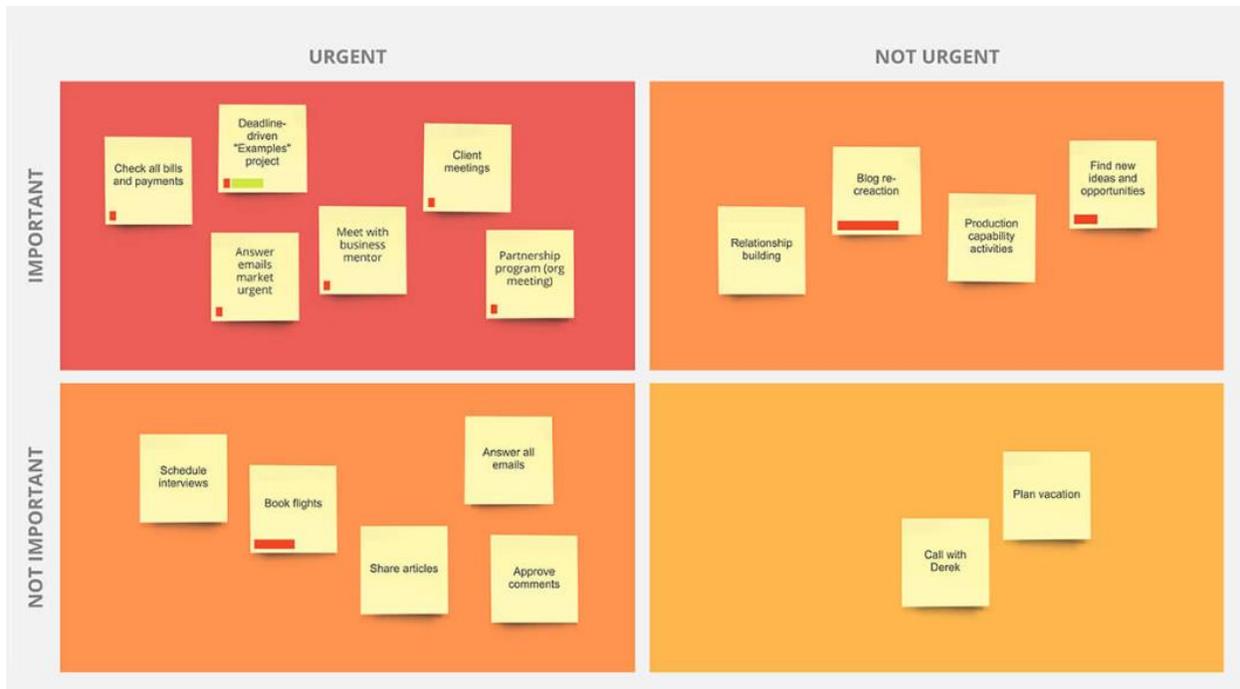
Don't become a slave to deadlines. Deadlines are great for keeping on track, but just because something is due doesn't mean it's impactful. And even if a thing is impactful, something else might be *more* impactful. So don't be afraid to miss deadlines if you have better ways to create value.

That begs the question: How do you determine what's the most impactful?

Determining What's Impactful

In almost all cases, a founder's priority is growth. As Paul Graham says, "If you get growth, everything else tends to fall into place. Which means you can use growth like a compass to make almost every decision you face."

What he means is that all other problems become easier to manage once you create a growth system. Growth solves practical problems by putting cash in your pocket and personal problems by erasing a whole bunch of stress from your life.

"A better way to think of prioritization is not tasks but themes," says Jake Gibson, co-founder of NerdWallet. "What are the two or three principal things that will drive growth? You really have to understand the key drivers of your business and anything that doesn't move those drivers isn't a high priority."

So your biggest priorities are tasks that support growth, which can include functions like customer acquisition, product development, your team, and customer retention. Let any tasks that don't serve growth fall off your to-do list.

Admittedly, this isn't easy. There are probably a lot of tasks on your to-do list that *feel* like top priorities. You have a million ideas swirling around your head, but you can't realize them until you grow enough to earn some breathing room.

Prioritize growth tasks by focusing on the metrics that matter. These aren't necessarily your key performance indicators, but growth metrics you can lean on. Read more in our guide on finding your growth metrics: [Startup Key Performance Indicators: Finding the Metrics that Matter](#).

Focusing on what's impactful means ignoring distractions, even if those distractions are inherently good ideas themselves. Sometimes you have to turn down a great opportunity because your resources (most notably, your time) are limited.

It's not uncommon for founders to invest in a dozen ideas that all *seem* like they add a lot of value. They'll take on speaking engagements, new feature requests, or dabble in new marketing strategies. But unless the ideas are part of a [growth process](#) (a system of experimentation), they're just wasted time.

Automation and Delegation

Automation and delegation are essential tools for entrepreneurs. They're shortcuts that maximize your productivity and create freedom to prioritize the most-impactful things.

Generally, there's a way to automate at least some parts of every task. You may have to change your process slightly, but that's a minor inconvenience for *free work.* Plus, someone has probably automated it themselves and written a guide or workflow for you to replicate.

[IFTTT](#) and [Zapier](#) are excellent tools to create your own automations. There's no limit to how you can string them together to handle work for you. There are plenty of [single-purpose tools](#) worth exploring, as well.

If you honestly can't automate a task, consider delegating to your team or outsourcing to a specialist. There are freelancers and consultants who charge by the project in every industry. You can also delegate work through platforms like [TaskRabbit](#), [Elance](#), or [Mechanical Turk](#).

How do you choose what to automate or delegate?

Automate everything you can, regardless of its impact, as long as it doesn't require your guidance (that is, as long as you don't mind software making decisions for you) and comes with a reasonable expense. It might be worth it to spend a lot to automate a critical, time-intensive task, but don't burn cash to automate something that's just nice to have.

Delegating is a bit trickier because you still have to manage the worker. If managing requires the same or more resources as doing the task yourself, delegation actually becomes an expense, rather than a savings.

Prioritizing Seems Messy

At first, focusing on the things that create the biggest impact feels messy. You'll have a lot of loose ends floating around that make you anxious, especially if you prefer running a tight ship. But no one will care about the design of your company manual or the margins on your website if your startup fails because you didn't prioritize growth.

"It's OK to have growing pains, as long as you're prioritizing correctly and working to address them," says Drew Houston, founder of Dropbox. "Every company looks messy from the inside."

In time, you'll become accustomed to the messiness and the growth you achieve will free up resources to tidy those loose ends.

Surviving means executing well, which requires strong prioritization. If you measure how you spend your time, focus on what creates the most value, and automate and delegate as much as possible, you'll improve the chances of your startup's survival greatly.