

Break free from noisy workdays with the Eisenhower Matrix

If the rhythm of your work day is a succession of video calls, deadlines, and last minute emergencies you are far from the flow state of “smart working” and are probably just keeping your head above water in what can be labeled “chaotic working”. As the world of work has gotten noisier we need to apply simple new ways of work to declutter our work days.

We all have been part of the largest work from home experiment in the history of the world. This unexpected experiment has led to long lasting changes that we are still learning to adapt to when working alone or as part of a team.

The remote work naysayers were confounded by early indicators that showed overall productivity of employees working from home increased by 47%. But as we carry on changing the nature of how and where we work, organisations and workers need to recalibrate where and what to focus on.

Work Days Have Gotten Too Noisy

As teams worldwide have done well to adapt to new work conditions, they have also spurred global team collaboration like never before. Our hope to recreate the work office at home has led to overcompensating for the lack of together time. It has also definitely led to a very noisy worklife.

From increased meetings, calls, emails, and chats, we have been overloaded with a constant flow of solicitations that we have trouble deciphering the importance and/or urgency.

Work is a bit noisy nowadays

Increases in number of meetings up by 12.9%

Number of attendees per meeting increased 13.5%

Telephone calls up by 230%

CRM activity rose by 176%

Email is up 57%

Communication by chat rose by 9%

This has led many workers fighting against the clock trying to jam everything into already busy schedules. Our work days have only gotten noisier but it has never been more important to refocus on our most impactful work.

Balancing priorities to get more done

If we want to talk about a job that has a lot on its plate go no further than the President of the United States. Having a lot going on is the understatement and we often look back on what they have accomplished during their terms. One former President that can inspire us to balance priorities to get more done is Dwight D Eisenhower, the 34th President of the United States.

A five-star general during World War II he then served two terms in the White House from 1953 to 1961. In that time he led the construction of the Interstate Highway System, created NASA, balanced the US Budget on three occasions, signed into law the first major piece of civil rights legislation since the end of the Reconstruction, and welcomed Alaska and Hawaii as states. He also often spoke about the need to understand the difference between what is urgent and important.

“I have two kinds of problems, the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent.” – Dwight D Eisenhower

His time management skills were key in how he organised his workload and priorities helping to be effective as well as efficient. Those methods are credited in the creation of the famous prioritisation framework called the Eisenhower Matrix.

Eisenhower Matrix in Klaxoon

The Eisenhower Matrix allows you to visualise all your tasks to get a better feel for the big picture.

Very simply, the Eisenhower Matrix is a 2×2 grid mapping the urgency and importance of each task or project. Each grid is independent but are related to each other and divided as follows:

Urgent & Important tasks/projects to be completed immediately

Not Urgent & Important tasks/projects to be scheduled on your calendar

Urgent & Unimportant tasks/projects to be delegated

Not Urgent & Unimportant tasks/projects to be deleted

With the Eisenhower Matrix, we can break up our busy schedules into four parts depending on their importance and urgency. But what we deem important is related to our habits and ways of working. Important should be what we are focusing on the most, like our missions and goals. While urgency is a pressing need for time and calls for immediate attention.

In today's ever-more-absorbing and 24/7 world of work it is becoming harder to focus on what's important and impactful, rather than simply reacting to what looks urgent.

Managing the urgent and important

Our new day-to-days have shifted to greater immediacy forcing us to put more stock into Urgent & Important tasks.

Those fall into problems or crises that require immediate action. Deadline driven activities, last-minute preparations or assignments, important customer meetings or calls, and putting out fires at work all would go into this quadrant.

Not completing urgent tasks will often have consequences. Day after day only spent dealing with urgent and important tasks will lead to greater stress and anxiety amongst teams. Office life consumed by deadlines and pressing tasks is fuelling the rise in employee disengagement and burnout.

Focusing on the important and not urgent

This quadrant deserves our utmost attention since it is directly related to our mission, goals, and roles. It begins with market strategy, long-term planning, and relationship building with customers and colleagues. It also includes professional development, lifelong learning, coaching, and mentoring. But it also includes some of the most neglected areas like taking breaks, well-being activities, exercising, broad and deep reading.

Focusing on the important and not urgent helps us recalibrate our work days by concentrating on what is most impactful and related to long-term goals. To assure we are making space for the right things it is essential to block out time for deep work, moments of reflection, and wellness.

Delegating the urgent and not important

As teams become hard-wired into working reactively many are losing sight of the bigger picture. If workers aren't taking back control of their work days they can easily fall prey to the windfall of urgent but not important tasks that are popping up in a next notification. These tasks make up the largest chunk of time wasters in our busy days and have a habit to fill up our to-do lists. They include meetings without a goal or where your attendance serves no purpose, constant interruptions like non-stop flow of emails, communication chats alerts and notifications. Without clearly defined goals these activities can make up a major part of our day and eat away at deep work time. The fear of missing out or saying no to our colleagues also prevents us from refocusing on more important, impactful tasks or projects. A great way to reduce urgent but not

important tasks is to empower others around you or by just being better at delegating.

Delete the not important and not urgent

Lastly, not important and not urgent activities that if not curtailed can take out a larger bite out of our work day than we realise. In the hustle & bustle of our busy work days these activities take many forms from office politics, escape activities, social media, cat videos, and endless procrastination.

As they regularly eat time away at our time and don't produce value try your best to ignore, reduce or eliminate them.

Take back your workday to focus on what matters

All the extra noise brought about with changes and transformations at work has gotten our to-do list out of whack. Learning to prioritise and focus on what really is impactful using an Eisenhower Matrix in Klaxoon will help you take a bird's eye view of what is on your plate and let you lock in on what matters.

Taking back control of your workday will require some rebalancing and thoughtful action. As a team on a weekly basis proactively pick what to focus on and agree on desired outcomes. Being able to visualise together will help everyone have a shared understanding of what is coming next and how to tackle it.

Charles Kergaravat is head of international marketing at Klaxoon, an award-winning company that is changing the way businesses harness the power of teams with solutions designed to make meetings more efficient and work practices more collaborative. He has conducted multiple studies to measure how new ways of working are effecting and changing work habits at the intersection of people, places and technology.