



The 'To Do Diary' guide

How to use this simple tool

A50 Articles series: Leadership

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For some years I have promoted a self-management tool which I call the 'To Do Diary'. I devised this with Ministers in mind but it can be used by anyone. In this guide I use illustrations for various church staff members but the application is wider still.

The tool is described in outline in Training Notes TN23, *How to do 'To Do' lists*. Many Ministers and other Christian leaders have told me that they have found this concept of great value. But the Training Notes only give an outline and so I now provide a fuller explanation.

There are four parts. The first describes the 'To Do Diary' covering, broadly, the content of the Training Notes, and the need to dovetail with what I term a 'To Do Calendar'.

The next three parts take in turn the three main divisions of each diary page. I give them names for the first time:

- Timed Engagements (TE)
- Main Tasks (MT)
- Quick Actions (QA)

The aim is to enable any Christian worker to stay in control of their workload and to relieve them of the guilt of what has not been completed. If you then feel more positive and not so weighed down by never-completed tasks, you will in turn achieve more.

But it is important to take the principle of what I describe here and adapt it to fit the person that is you. Don't worry if some of the detail would not work in your case. Check out the broad description and understand the underlying principles. For a summary of its main points, read page 13 now.

The 'To Do Diary'

The 'To Do Diary' is a self-organisation tool that combines the idea of a normal day-to-day engagement diary with a 'To Do' list. Basically, it creates a 'To Do' list for each day but divides items into engagements (like a normal diary would show), tasks that will probably take at least 45 minutes, and shorter tasks and reminders which will probably take less than about 30 minutes and often only five minutes. These three lists are all on one dated page. By showing engagements and tasks on the same page you can more accurately see what you are aiming to achieve on any one day.

How it works

The tool is simply a desk diary, I prefer A5 day to a page, which you divide into three distinct sections to each day's diary page to cover three types of activity that will take your time that day. I am assuming, and recommend, a paper diary for the moment but will mention digital versions shortly.

- **Timed Engagements (TE)**
You will be used to this idea in an ordinary diary. Bookings you have made for a specific time: meetings, events of any kind including church services, Zoom events, telephone calls you have booked for a fixed time, and so on.
- **Main Tasks (MT)**
Here you list anything you need to do that will probably take at least 45 minutes but which is not at a fixed time. It might be preparing a talk, dealing with the day's emails, visiting someone in their home, doing the weekly food shop, and so on.
- **Quick Actions (QA)**
This lists activities you need to do that day but which will probably take less than half an hour, with many of them taking five or less minutes. Examples include phoning someone for a quick check-up, checking your online bank statement, sending a birthday card to a relative, and so on.

So in the next column is what one diary page might look like for a Minister.

Note that you might want to put a time against some of the Main Tasks items, such as 'Theological reading', in which case it would instead appear in the Timed Engagements section. But it is not a good idea to give a time to everything because the day never works out the way you have planned it in such detail. You need to decide how time-specific you want your planning to be.

A normal diary includes all your Timed Engagements but leaves out the other two

Monday 13th September

9.00 Staff prayers
9.30 Weekly planning meeting
4.00 Orchard Nursing Home HC
7.45 Finance Committee

THEOLOGICAL READING
STUDY PAPERS FOR FINANCE CTEE
RING/VISIT BAPTISM FAMILY

Email Local Ministers' Group
Ring Betty in hospital
Refresh this week's Alpha talk
Order new diary

*Timed Engagements (TE) shown in red
Main Tasks (MT) shown in capitals
Quick Actions (QA) shown in lower case*

groupings. A 'To Do' list has these other two groups but fails to separate out those that take some time from those that take just a few minutes, and also fails to allocate tasks to a specific day.

Psychological ticking

You tick off each item as you complete it. For many of us this is a vital part of the process. You may like to offer a prayer of thanks to God as you do so. I am not the only person I know who, when doing something that is not listed on the page because unexpected, then writes it in so I can tick it! This is a moment of triumph. And I share the joke in a quick prayer.

Psychologically ticking (or crossing out if you have to) says that has been done – progress has been made. Even if something is going to be done over three days and is down on each day, you can tick when you have completed the first part of the task on day one, and again on days two and three. You cannot do that if not allocated in sections to different days!

At the end of the day you check out items that have not been ticked. You cross each one. You may decide to drop one or two, and you then rewrite others on a future diary page which you choose on the basis of urgency and how full the next few days are becoming.

At this point I like to draw a diagonal line across the page to tell me that day is over. You then go to bed with nothing outstanding – a huge bonus for your mental health in terms of lack of worry. The overall value is that this simple system puts you in control of your use of time.

It goes without saying that the creation of each day is a matter of prayer. The tool is an aid to discipleship and godly living. It builds your reliability as a Christian as well as your peace of mind. It can bring order to a chaotic life. It enables effective ministry in the service of Christ.

The weakness of a normal diary is that it only shows fixed-time things to do. The weakness of a 'To Do' list is that it tends to never be completed – although to be fair its original intention was to be a 'To Do Today' list. I recover that concept in this tool and overcome both these weaknesses.

The difference between Main Tasks and the Quick Actions, will simply be your expectation of how long tasks may take rather than on level of importance. If something in Quick Actions in fact takes an hour, and something in your Main Tasks is completed in ten minutes, it does not matter! But it can be helpful to see what quick things you can do in a ten-minute gap before a meeting and what, probably, needs longer time allocation.

This is all a practical application of sound advice from the Sermon on the Mount. 'Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.' Matthew 6:34 NIV.

So that is the 'To Do Diary' in outline. But what I have said so far begs a number of questions. Here are some I can think of.

Alternatives

1: Paper or digital?

What I describe has been designed for a paper diary as I feel that is a better tool for self-

organisation than a digital organiser. It is worth noting that a number of people have moved back to paper from digital after working with me and have found it refreshing.

A digital organiser has advantages of course. For engagements it means a staff team can share their diaries with each other (although you would only want this to apply to Timed Engagements). You should never be able to lose all your careful planning assuming it is all backed up in the cloud, whereas you could lose a paper version. It is easy and tidy to move things around as you can delete items without leaving a mark.

But I argue that a paper version has greater advantages. Simply writing things down is more straightforward than tapping into a computer or phone. You can find what you want more quickly. I am often at my diary page in less than five seconds when someone I am with is busy tapping away some time behind me. It is totally portable but of a size you can read with ease (assuming something like an A5 page-to-a-day diary). It will not be damaged by being dropped.

But this tool will of course work on a digital device. I will describe a paper version, but the techies will quickly see that it can work to the same ideas in digital and many of these assume some kind of 'To Do' list for each day or week. It simply needs to be split into two.

2: Work or personal?

Is this a work diary or a personal diary or both? Up to you, but if your work hours do not have rigid boundaries (as is the case with Minister and most church staff) it can be helpful to include everything in this system.

If you work 9.00 am. to 5.00 pm. every day then you might use the idea for a work diary and a separate personal diary since they operate at distinct and separate times of day. But for many of us in Christian ministry it is better to have them combined.

For this you can either mix up work and personal in each of the three sections of each page, or you might prefer (as I do) to have a fourth section just for personal tasks while, probably, combining both in the Timed Engagements section.

If you are going out to a friend for supper, that goes with all your work TE. It is important that you show all engagements together. But if you need to write to your child's teacher, that goes in a personal list combining both MT and QA.

Throughout this description tailor the tool to match the person that is you. What matters is that you take the basic principles and apply them. The detail needs to be fitted to you.

Objection: Doesn't all this take time?

Actually it takes very little time to keep the three sections running, and my reckoning is that it saves time in worry, missed ideas and uncertainty. It puts you in control of your day and when interruptions come as they will, you know what you can change and how so that you can cope.

3: Day or week?

What I describe is a day-by-day system so there is one page in three sections for each day of the year. Some Ministers have told me that it works better for them to do the Main Tasks and Quick Actions by week rather than by day. So you have engagements for the day but lists for the week. That needs a page layout that can be made to work for this. Fine – if that works better for you. As I say above, take the principles and apply them in a way to suit yourself.

4: Travel time or not?

For engagements away from base you can show a time for the event (such as '8.00 pm Pastoral Committee' meeting) but you may want to add in a likely end time and travel time. So you might show this meeting as '8.00 pm. Pastoral Committee (7.30 – 9.30)'. That may be unnecessary but some may find it helpful. If that sounds too stylised for you, not to worry.

How to set it up

Take a one-day-to-a-page diary (A5 size will be fine for most people). Now imagine the page has two horizontal lines across it to create three areas. Whether you divide it into three equal areas or make one of them longer than the others will depend on you and your work. If you have several timed engagements on most days you may need to make the first area almost half the page and cut back on the other two. The third area will usually need to be larger than the second. Start off at about equal and you will quickly work out how to adjust to your needs.

The three areas, you will remember, are

- Timed Engagements (TE)
- Main Tasks (MT)
- Quick Actions (QA)

You don't need to draw lines across your diary page or write out those headings. The first belongs at the top of the page, the second in the middle and the third nearer the bottom. But you might like to further distinguish between the

three to make it clear these are three distinct lists. I put my TE in red, my MT in CAPITALS and my QA in lower case, as in the illustration shown on page 2. That keeps the three areas clearly apart without the need to draw lines or show headings.

What restricts you are the 24 hours in a day. So TE + MT + QA cannot take up more time than you have available after considering sleep and preparation, eating and preparation, down time, family time, etc. Later on we shall add a further item into this equation: interruptions.

So if a page for the coming week looks pretty full and you then add in an extra meeting or a new task, you will need to move some other items around or cancel an engagement. You need to have a sense of urgency and priority for this. But the point is, expect there to be crossings out and revised days for several tasks.

If you include more than you actually achieve in the day, as you usually will, at the end of the day you simply transfer outstanding items to other days, as described above. They then become a concern for another day. They are no longer outstanding. You may drop some items altogether.

At the end of the year you have two options. You can run two diaries alongside each other for a couple of months, but a better way is to have a page at the back of the diary (most have some blank pages there) where you write down everything you might be putting in for January with a date. Then on 1st January you write all these onto their correct page in a new diary.

What if a role is impossible?

This tool can make a huge difference to your ability to cope with your work and other activities. But it assumes that your workload is still possible in the time you have without having a nervous breakdown. What if something changes and you find yourself in an impossible situation?

Examples

- A physical illness knocks you out for a week and you are off work for this time. No one picks up your work for you.
- You are tired after sleepless nights and cannot work at your normal rate.
- A colleague is away for some time and you have to cover for them in addition to achieving all that is normally expected of you.
- You simply have a job that one person cannot do – but there is no one else so it has to be you.

In all these cases the 'To Do Diary' system will help you stay on top, but there are other key decisions to be made. The problem is broader than the system and needs to be tackled in some extra ways. You need:

- to determine your priorities and be happy to say 'No' to tasks or events that are not top priority;
- to find creative ways of solving the issue, whether it is short or long term;
- to involve others, paid or volunteers, or buy in support in some way;
- to do some serious talking with whoever has given you this workload.

The 'To Do Calendar'

But how do you plan what to put in the Main Tasks area of each page? Timed Engagements get filled in as they are booked, just like a normal diary so that is straightforward. Quick Actions get jotted down as you need them (see later), but how do you decide what your Main Tasks should be each day? This is where you need a 'To Do Calendar', or rather two different forms of this.

The first form needs simply a space for each month of the year. Many office desk diaries have a section at the back for monthly accounts and these are perfect for use as an '**Outline To Do Calendar**'.

At the start of the year you write in the space for each month main activities you know you will need to be doing then. The idea is the same as for the 'To Do Diary' but it is just for MT and by month not by day.

Examples

- The seasons of the year may dictate some activity: so September needs a 'Plan Christmas' activity if this needs three months. If your preaching programme is by academic terms, you need an entry three months, say, before the start of each term to plan the series.
- Quarterly or annual activities may need to be listed. You write an article for a quarterly publication so you enter this in the month before the deadline to give plenty of leeway.
- You may want to add monthly activities too or have a separate list of these to save writing them out 12 times.
- There may be seasonal tasks such as a file clear-out every August.

- A Church Accountant may have January to March down to finalise the annual accounts and see them through Independent Examination or Audit.

Then at the start of each month you check these lists and enter them on a '**Current To Do Calendar**' for the month. This might be a sheet of paper but I like to have an engagement calendar hanging by my desk. I ignore the numbers 1-31 down the left hand column and simply list my Main Tasks for the month that I know about. It is in sight whenever I am at my desk.

At this point you may want to add in other things: current projects on the go, activity to prepare for main events that you have in your Timed Engagements, and so on. This list will omit weekly tasks because I know those go in, and will also omit tasks that book up at shorter notice, so it is not a complete listing of MT. But the 'Current To Do Diary' will list items from the 'Outline To Do Diary', current projects and activities linked to diary events that month.

All through the month you have this list in front of you and transfer items to your 'To Do Diary' in an appropriate way. You may prefer to do this week by week or fortnight by fortnight.

Many items in the Main Tasks lists will not have been planned far in advance. But when you consider a main task that needs to be done within, say, three months but not immediately, you add them to your 'To Do Calendar' because booking it in on a fixed day will not be wise when the shape of that week is not yet clear.

In the next three parts of this article, I explain each of the three sections of the 'To Do Diary' in turn.

God's gift of time

This article describes how to set up a 'To Do Diary'. But the context is an aim to use God's gift of time effectively in Christian service. You might like to ponder how Jesus used his time as recorded in the Gospels.

Read Training Notes TN43, *Did Jesus use an iPhone?*, in the Resources section of my website.

This covers Jesus' laid-back approach but also his driven agenda and his clear plan and priority before drawing out some lessons for us all. We need to seek to work to God's timing not ours, to God's agenda not ours, and to God's expectations, not ours.

How to use Timed Engagements (TE)

Each diary page has three sections. Assume for the moment that personal items are included in the three. In fact you will probably want to include all Timed Engagements in this first section in any case.

You then have three sections on each page with Timed Engagements as the first, and probably the most straightforward, one.

This section is for anything that you have a fixed time for. Here are some typical examples.

- meetings in person of any kind;
- meetings by Zoom, Teams or equivalent;
- church services, including any extra time you need to be on the premises;
- events of any kind which you need to attend;
- booked telephone calls;
- deliveries expected at a given time;
- hospitality: people staying or coming for or going to meals;
- exercise booked at the gym;
- personal and family time (if you are including personal);
- Main Task (MT) items that you want to do at a fixed time.

These are what you would normally expect to find in a diary. They may be written in a random order as they book, or you may try to keep them in time order, or you may have a diary marked by times of day so you show them at the correct spot. There is however one further idea you might consider for inclusion.

Should I book this engagement?

One advantage of the 'To Do Diary' system can be seen when you are asked to take a booking the next day, perhaps a meeting with someone.

They suggest 2pm. and you have no afternoon engagements so you might say 'yes'. But in the 'To Do Diary' you have filled the day with urgent MT and QA so it is clear that you will have to postpone something by taking this booking.

You have a much clearer idea of what needs to be achieved that day and can make a wise decision.

Prayer, Bible, family and me-time

Most of us will have a range of personal activity that is part and parcel of everyday life. Most will not want to formalise this by booking it in as Timed Engagements, but some find value in taking at least some of these items as engagement events in the diary.

You will probably not want to diarise sleep time. But there are personal items that at least bear considering for diary engagement. One example might be an hour's play time with young children. By putting this in as a Timed Engagement you might be saying to yourself and your family that you will take no other bookings at this time because you give time to your family then. You can tell someone seeking a meeting at that time that you already have a diary booking and it is unlikely they will press the point and ask who this is with.

If you live alone or are responsible for catering, you could make a case for blocking out a couple of hours every day to cook and eat supper and clear away or wash up afterwards.

What about time for Bible reading and personal prayer? Most of us will simply assume there is a booking for each day without having to detail this. But some might find it helpful to make it a Timed Engagement to ensure it does not get squeezed out. For CofE clergy who make the Daily Office their prayer time, this is likely to be in as a Timed Engagement, especially if it is shared with staff team or others.

Perhaps more obviously an evening or day off needs clear marking in the diary to ensure it is not encroached upon by anything else.

Unexpected activity

Up until this point the tool has assumed that each day can be neatly planned in advance. Would that life was so simple! Each of us finds that unplanned activity knocks every plan into the long grass. At this point we need to consider how to deal with this (although the issue is broader than just TE and includes MT and QA too).

Examples

- An emergency meeting is arranged by others with minimal notice and you are expected to attend.
- Something happens outside your control which sets up an urgent action on your part: a family crisis, a death or an accident.
- A colleague, a visitor or a telephone caller requires your immediate attention for half an hour.
- Someone else is unexpectedly ill or unavailable and you need to cover for them.
- Your car breaks down, or equipment does not work, there has been a break-in at church or there is a plumbing or electrical emergency.
- A task you had set yourself becomes much larger than you had estimated and so takes extra time to complete.

Some of these examples involve other people needing to interact with you in some way and so the unexpected activity becomes in effect a Timed Engagement, only you had no notice of it. Other examples relate to Main Tasks that need more attention than you had estimated.

If you had planned your day so that your TE plus MT plus QA were going to take up all your available time, you will be in trouble.

Principles

- 1 Interruptions may be at the heart of your role so do not see them as negative if they are. If you are a Pastor in any form, such interruptions may be what you exist for. If you are a Church Office Receptionist, much of your day will be interruption. So make sure you have a right attitude to such things.
- 2 Expect and allow for them. If you reckon that two hours in each working day is, on average, unexpected activity, never fill your diary page to more than a couple of hours less than the time you have available.
- 3 When a major interruption occurs be ready to shift engagements and work around for that day and the days that follow. Don't take such a rigid view of planning that you detest anything that forces you out of a clear plan. In fact the expectation of the 'To Do Diary' is that items will be moved around – the diary allows you to do just that.
- 4 Know the boundaries of your role so that you can assess every interruption immediately to see whether (a) it is as urgent as the other person makes out, and (b) whether you ought to be dealing with this or is there someone else? Know what your priorities are.

How to use Main Tasks (MT)

Your Main Tasks section is a listing of a small number of projects for that day that will probably take at least 45 minutes or so and most will involve being at your office or in your study. Anything less than 30 minutes goes in your Quick Actions (QA) and anything you estimate between those two times can go in whichever you want!

It simply does not matter if you get a few timings wrong. Some MT may be completed in 30 minutes, some QA may take 45 minutes. Of course some days TE may take up the whole day so there can be no MT at all.

If you have a busy calendar, and many Church Ministers and other staff do, you will have to ensure you are not being too optimistic about your MT. Even if you have a desk-day, there will probably not be more than three or four MT you fit in. Here is a range of possible MT entries.

1: Single-day tasks

As you might expect, you have something to do that involves being at base and you list it in the MT section. This really could be anything that will take at least 45 minutes and you are

creating a 'To Do Today' list for a specific date in your diary.

Examples

- You need to write an article for a publication, a paper for a meeting, a descriptive page for the church website, or a press release for the local media. Most of these ideas will be one-off and might perhaps take a couple of hours to think through, to write and to check.
- You have a minor leak in the loos and, as Administrator, want to investigate where this might be coming from before you ring for a plumber. It is not urgent and you are busy today so you diarise this for a couple of days' time.
- 'At base' might mean going out for a walk. There is a tricky issue you want to ponder and pray about and your best way of doing this is to have a walk around the local park. You diarise this just as though it was a task at your desk.

2: One-week tasks

But there are some tasks that may take much longer than this. Preparing a sermon or major talk with notes and slides may need more like ten hours than one.

You might want to do it all in two periods, or your style of working may be to do two or three hours every day over three or four days. So you diarise it accordingly over an appropriate number of days when you are not booked elsewhere.

Examples

- You have the annual weed out of the youth work filing system to do this month. You can find three possible half-days and block these periods with this task. You are not expecting to complete it on one go but the diary system enables you to choose appropriate days and put in MT well in advance.
- The sermon idea as above: you show it as a MT on four days during the week if that is the way you prefer to work. Or you might prefer instead to show it as Timed Engagements. Either approach is fine.
- You are applying for a new job but the application papers are complicated. You feel you can cope if you have two or three goes at them rather than having to complete them at one sitting. So they go in MT on two or three different days.

3: Major projects

The idea here is to diarise projects that may be part of your workload over a longer period than a week. The principle is the same as the previous two categories.

Examples

- You are working on a new pattern of all-age services from the autumn. This involves research in other churches, writing papers for meetings and ascertaining the views of a wide range of people. This will probably be spread out over a month and you may well have a paper folder on the go all this time. But you will need a number of sessions at your desk in MT.
- You have a major event to prepare such as a special Sunday with visiting speaker. This may need a number of blocks of time three months in advance, then again just before the event. And then again just after it. You diarise time for these in your 'To Do Calendar' and then transfer the blocks to your MT.
- You have a one-year project to provide a much fuller set of policies than the church has at present. You add this to your 'To Do Calendar' for most months of the year and expect to see about one MT each week on this.

4: 'Pack' and 'Unpack' time

This is a name I give to the very necessary task of preparing for any meeting or event at an appropriate time, and then unpacking it afterwards noting all actions and ensuring paperwork goes back to its correct filing location.

If you do not diarise 'Pack' time you will not be prepared properly for the event, and if you fail to diarise 'Unpack' time you end up with everything dumped back on the desk which then gets muddled up with items coming back from other meetings and events.

Some meetings and events are simple enough for both these tasks to take no more than 30 minutes (such as your involvement in a weekly staff meeting if you are not fronting any particular item) and so this section is also covered under the QA heading. But for some events you will need an hour or more and these then go under MT.

Examples

- You have an MT on Tuesday for a service you are leading the following Sunday so

you can put the liturgy together and be in contact with musicians, lesson readers and others. You have another one later in the week to fill in more of the detail. And you give yourself an hour on the following Monday to unpack from the service: lessons to learn, details to file, messages you were given, people to thank for their contribution.

- You are chairing a Trustees meeting this week. You have already had one MT slot to work on the agenda with the Secretary, but a day or two before the meeting you block out another to decide how to lead on each item. You also block out another MT two days after the meeting (you already are booked with engagements the following day) to sort everything out.
- You have been away for a few days on retreat or on holiday. The Unpack issue here is to clear the 200 emails in your Inbox. So you may have an MT that fills most of a whole day so that within 24 hours you are back on top of your workload.

5: Recurring tasks

There may be some tasks that occur regularly, whether every week or month. You could book a whole group of these in in advance. So at the beginning of January you show a monthly task at the end of each month. The problem with this is that, so far ahead, you have little idea of what else will need your attention on those dates: you might have engagements taking you away, you might even be on holiday, or there may be more urgent business to fit in.

So here are two better ways of approaching this.

- 1 For a weekly or monthly task you write in the next one and add the word 'Diarise'. This is a simple code which tells you that when you tick the item having completed it you immediately book in the next one, about one week or month from now.
- 2 The second option for a monthly or quarterly task is to write it under the correct month or quarter in your 'To Do Calendar' at the start of the year. You then transfer it to your 'To Do Diary' each month or quarter when you can see what else you are doing.

Examples

- Ministers who regularly lead services and/or preach may need a weekly slot preferably early in the week for preparation. Option 1 will be better here.
- You write an article for a quarterly magazine. The 'Diarise' option is not so good here because you will have little idea of your week three months in advance. So Option 2 would be preferable. In your 'To Do Calendar' you may want to add the item one month earlier than is necessary so you have plenty of capacity if things get delayed.
- Your job includes the updating of the church website every Monday. Option 1 is better so this goes in your Monday diary MT list. You then write 'Diarise' after it to remind you to add it in to next Monday's list. If you are not available next Monday you take a decision on when would be the best alternative.

6: Personal tasks

If you operate a three-part diary page (TE, MT, QA) you will include personal items in all three areas. If you use a fourth area for personal items, you can simply differentiate MT in capitals and QA in lower case.

Examples will come in all the categories listed above but here are some random examples. You will find a second list of shorter items in the next part of this article.

The danger here is to turn what should be time off into more 'To Do' lists! Different people will want to apply the principles of the 'To Do Diary' in different ways so find what suits you.

Examples

- You need to set aside time to do the ironing, go shopping, visit a friend, put up those shelves you've been promising for a year, or whatever.
- You may find it helpful to diarise time for exercise: going to the gym, going for a run, or whatever, especially if these intentions never seem to materialise if not listed anywhere.
- Completing your tax return or preparing personal accounts.

How to use Quick Actions (QA)

The QA area of each diary page is, for me, a lifesaver. I am an administrator with a poor memory so I need a fantastic reminder system that rarely lets me down. Welcome to QA!

You use the third area of each diary page for items of work that you estimate will take no more than about half an hour and probably much less, so they hardly earn a mention in the MT section and they are unlikely to be in your 'To Do Calendar'. But you can also add in reminders of all kinds, and action triggers which are relatively minor but which you may otherwise be worrying about.

If you can action immediately something which will probably take less than two minutes, do it NOW. Don't bother to enter it on your QA. If it may take a bit longer, or is a future action not for now, use QA. I show below a wide range of examples.

Remember that your TE + MT + QA should not exceed what you can cover in one day and should allow for a certain amount of unexpected inputs too that you need to respond to. QA items may not take long, but you cannot have too many if other activity fills most of the time available.

1: Action reminders

At any one time you will have a number of relatively quick actions you need to take but not immediately. 'Quick' means no more than about half an hour. You may not have to hand the information you need just at the moment, you may be away from base, you may not have time today, the action may not be due yet, or the person you need may not be available.

The QA enables you to diarise the action and then not have it on your mind. You meet it on the day you have entered it for and deal with it then. This works exactly as for your Main Tasks entries.

Examples

- You want to talk to a colleague about an issue but they are not around for the next three days. You simply add a reminder to your QA for four or so days' time.
- You receive an 'out of office reply' to an email saying the person is on holiday and incoming emails will be deleted (not good practice, by the way!). They ask you to resend next week. So you add a note to your QA for a suitable day next week.
- You have an account balance to pay due in two months' time. Simply add a

reminder one or more weeks before the due date and you pay in good time.

2: Awaiting response

You send an email or message to someone and are waiting for their reply but you don't want this to get forgotten about.

There are a number of ways of dealing with this. You can set up a PEND folder in your emails and leave the email there until it is answered. You check this daily and remove an email once it is replied to. For hard copy letters or notes you have a PEND file which you use in the same way. If your communication was spoken, it is not so straightforward how to give yourself a reminder: post-it notes get muddled and lost.

But in any of these cases your QA comes to your aid. You simply add a reminder there at a date to fit in with your engagements and to provide a suitable time of waiting. If, as you hope will happen, they get back to you before the reminder, simply cancel it (another tick!).

You may prefer to operate a pend file system for emails and a QA system for oral actions, or your memory may be good enough not to have to bother with noted reminders for some things. But the QA system offers a fool-proof check-up without the worry of trying to remember what is overdue.

Examples

- You send an email to someone asking for information from them and will wait for their reply. If you feel that three or four days is a reasonable expectation for their response, add a reminder in your QA for five days from now and file the email appropriately. You can now forget about it until you read the reminder.
- At a meeting a colleague says they will look out a paper you need and send it to you later that day. You immediately add a reminder to your QA for the next day in

case they forget, especially if they are very likely to need reminding.

- You order online goods with a seven-day delivery option. You add a reminder for one week's time to check they have arrived and payment has been taken correctly.

3: Recurring actions

Some reminders are recurring. Someone, probably a Treasurer, needs your monthly expenses form every, well, month. You decide to complete the form and send it off on the last day of each month, or within two or three days of that if you don't have desk time that day.

One way of sorting this is, at the start of the year, to add 12 QA entries for the final days of each month. But at this point you don't know whether you will be available on those days. A better solution is the 'Diarise' action.

Here you add in a reminder for this month on the final day or thereabouts. Add to this note 'Diarise' and that means not only do you tick the action when completed, you add the same reminder in to one month from now when you have a better idea of your movements.

Other examples

- You lead a fortnightly meeting. It needs a reminder emailed out to everyone in the group a day or so in advance. You might try to remember to do this but you are almost certain to slip up from time to time. Use the Diarise function as your fail-safe reminder. Simply say in QA 'Remind X group about meeting – Diarise'.
- People to phone: perhaps a list of elderly people living on their own who appreciate a monthly call from you. Each time add a 'Diarise' action and the next call is booked.
- Every Friday you need to check your home calendar matches your work diary for the coming week. You may be fine about remembering this but if not, jot it down in your QA for next Friday and add 'Diarise'.

4: Keeping promises

We all make promises to support and encourage other people. But do you keep yours, especially if you are telling someone you will pray for them in two weeks' time when they move house? Here are some examples where the QA system can help.

Examples

- You tell someone that you will pray for them for their interview in a week's time. Pop it down in your QA for the day and you will remember to pray for them as promised. Even better, add a reminder on the previous day and then message them then to wish them well and assure them you are praying.
- You tell a friend you will pass on their news to someone else when you see them in ten days' time. You may remember to do this, you may forget, but your friend may be relying on you. So add it to your QA for the day of the expected meeting and you bring it back to your memory.
- Someone tells you they are going into hospital in four weeks' time and gives you the date. Add a note to your QA a few days before this date and you can send them a card or an encouraging note at the right moment.

5: Spreading the work

Sometimes you have something to do that does not take long but which needs plenty of thought or prayer. You may want to add that item to your QA on each of the next three days, as a daily reminder that you might take 20 minutes to ponder on it rather than book in an hour today.

This is on the same principle I described for spreading out a major project over more than one day, but here you are expecting to spend 20 minutes a day rather than a couple of hours.

Examples

- You want to make a list of creative solutions to a problem you are facing. You feel you do this well when you give yourself 15-minute bursts of activity and then leave it until the next day. So you diarise the item in your QA over three days this week and next when you can see if you have some desk time. You may want to add 'Diarise' to the final one in case you need more time.
- You have four student essays to mark and each one takes 20-30 minutes. But you have no time this week when you are at base for an unhurried two hours. You do however have shorter times when you could mark one essay a day. So instead of showing one MT on one day you add in four items to your QA on different days.

Be flexible with QA

Remember, you may diarise in QA for a future date and then find you have TE that take up all that day. So don't be afraid to move QA items around, or to cross them at the end of the day and move them to a different date. They can be treated rather like fillers for those odd moments when you have a short gap.

- You have a more major item of work to do such as writing an article for a publication (see in MT above), but you then want to sleep on it and reread it the next day before you send it off. So the main task of writing goes under MT, but the job of checking it through and mailing it goes in the next day's QA.

6: Sudden thoughts

Perhaps you are in the middle of something when a sudden idea hits you which may have nothing to do with the work in hand. You ought to drop a line to that person. You wanted to find a suitable book to lend to someone. You said you would ask your spouse about something and have only just remembered. In each case this may disturb the present task in hand or worry you if you are on a visit. Jot it straight down for either today if you will have time later, tomorrow if you are not booked out all day, or later if that is really your first opportunity and the job is not urgent. Then you can forget all about it and focus on the work in hand.

Examples

- You are reading a policy manual when a story triggers a thought that you really ought to contact a certain friend to see how they are getting on. You could interrupt the reading to do it now (especially if it will take no more than two minutes!) but it will probably take longer than this. Add it to your QA for tomorrow and go on reading the manual.
- You see someone at a distance at a church service and realise you have not spoken to them for weeks. But they leave before you get to them. You might want to give them a ring as soon as you are home, but they might be preparing Sunday lunch and not welcome an enquiry just then. So you decide to give them a ring later and add it to your QA.
- You think of something you ought to do just as you are dropping off to sleep at

night, so you worry and stay awake. Keep your diary beside the bed and jot the reminder down for tomorrow. Then you can go to sleep without worry. If having the diary by the bed brings work into the bedroom, have a pad of post-it notes and use them. Then transfer to your QA the next morning for a suitable date.

7: Far-ahead reminders

So far we have covered things that need to be actioned quite soon. But the system works just as well for actions that may be months away. Here are some examples.

Examples

- You tend to forget your wedding anniversary (or other major event) with disastrous consequences. So you add a QA item two weeks in advance to plan on something to buy your spouse.
- Someone asks you to contact them again in six months to see how they are getting on in a new role. You simply add a reminder in your QA for six months from now and then relax.
- Your printer toner lasts about four months for each new cartridge. You don't want to buy too far ahead just in case you need to buy a new printer in the meantime, but neither do you want to use the present cartridge up and be without for a couple of days while the new one is delivered. So whenever you insert a new cartridge, add a QA note three months ahead to order a new one.

8: 'Pack' and 'Unpack' items

I dealt with the concepts of 'Pack' and 'Unpack' in the previous part of this article. This is the idea of diarising time before and after meetings and events so you prepare everything you need and then put everything back where it belongs and diarise actions.

Some events, services or meetings will need a Main Tasks entry a day or two beforehand for 'Pack' and possibly another one the day after for 'Unpack' and all actions that you will have agreed to manage. But some meetings and events will be simpler than this and so your 'Pack/Unpack' entries will fit in QA.

Examples

- You attend a weekly staff meeting and need 15 minutes to prepare for it, ensuring you have the papers you need

ready, pausing to think through the items you have been told will be covered. Use the QA to pack up the previous day or early that morning. If you don't do this you may arrive at the meeting without papers you need or having failed to consider the issues being addressed.

- A reminder about an early morning engagement you must not miss the next day. QA for the previous day for both a reminder and 'Pack' time.
- You get back from church on Sunday. You deliberately did not take your diary but you jotted down on a post-it note three actions you need to take. Now you need five minutes to diarise those but not for today which is a day off for you.

9: Personal tasks

If you operate a three part diary page (Timed Engagements, Major Tasks, Quick Actions) you

will include personal items in all three areas. I have included a few in the above examples. If instead you use a fourth area for personal items, you can simply differentiate MT in capitals and QA in lower case within the one area to keep them apart.

Examples

- Reminders to send birthday cards to friends and family – in QA a week in advance of each birthday. Perhaps a 'present' reminder a month in advance of family occasions.
- An MOT reminder for the car. You are probably sent one but you may need more notice than this gives to ensure you can book the car in with your garage.
- Reminders for when large annual bills become due: a week in advance of holiday cottage balances, house insurance, etc. to ensure sufficient bank balances.

So there is the 'To Do Diary'. Adapt it to fit yourself but keep in mind its foundations.

- 1 You keep your engagement diary and your 'To Do' list together: they are both lists of what you hope to undertake, but one has times attached and the other does not.
- 2 Separate out what will take a reasonable amount of time from actions that may only take five or ten minutes. But still list everything (unless less than two minutes, say) so you are not relying on memory.
- 3 You populate the Main Tasks items from a 'To Do Calendar' which lists items to cover month-by-month as opposed to day-by-day.
- 4 The action of ticking items when achieved and ruling off the page at the end of the day give you reasons to celebrate and track success.
- 5 Your concerns if they exist are about a day at a time, not a list which haunts you.
- 6 You can deal with unexpected actions in a logical way.
- 7 Your use of time is part of your Christian discipleship, and the creation and application of all that has been described here is a matter of daily prayer.

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A50. See also Training Notes TN11, *Keeping a time log*, TN23, *How to do 'To Do' lists*, and TN84, *How to say 'No' when you should*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A50 under Leadership (with a link to Administration).

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