

This is an excerpt from the book *Master Your Workday Now!* by Michael Linenberger showing you how to create a new and very effective form of to-do list—one that will help you get your workday well under control. To see more information on this book, go to www.masteryourworkday.com

CHAPTER 2



A Quick Start for Gaining Control

The underlying principles of the Control Your Workday Now solutions can be applied in a variety of formats. As I have said, my first choice is to use Outlook, but if that is not practical for you, or is not your preference, you can pick pretty much any medium you want and implement the solution. On your computer you can also use Excel, or even a word processing program. You can use a brainstorming program called MindManager, which is one of my favorite computer software applications. Or you can use any other program that allows you to create multiple lists.

However, what I emphasize in this book is how to use the solution on *paper*. It's the simplest approach and more mobile than any computer-based solution. It lends itself to a variety of work environments, and it may feel more natural to many of you who already use a paper-based calendar or task system. You can create the pages described below with a pen or pencil, or create them on your computer and then print them out. You can use the pages by themselves, or insert them into an existing calendar planner system. Whatever approach you use, I call this Control-layer solution the *Workday Mastery To-Do List*, and you will start using it in a very simple form right now.

Try This Now on Paper

As a quick start, using paper, let's explore rapidly the underlying principles of the Workday Mastery To-Do List. Using this quick start, you can actually begin to get your workday under control within a few minutes. Follow the steps below to manually create the Workday Mastery To-Do List. Or go to MasterYourWorkday.com for free downloadable templates (navigate to the templates page and choose the Level 1 Workday Mastery To-Do List).

1. Take out a piece of paper, either lined or blank (or open your word processor or spreadsheet program), and at the very top, centered on the page, place the label "Now Tasks List." See Figure 2.1 at right.
2. Just below that, flush left, write the label "Critical Now (must do today)."
3. Then about one-third of the way down the page, write the label (also flush left) "Opportunity Now (start this week or next, review list daily)". That's it for the first page.
4. Then take another piece of paper, and at the top of that page, write the title "Over the Horizon (Review Weekly)."

You've now got the basic Workday Mastery To-Do List in hand, all on only two pages. See Figure 2.1 on the next page for how this will look (with some sample tasks entered).

Populate the List

Let's start using it. Pull out any existing to-do lists that you might have, say in a journal or a collection of yellow sticky notes, or whatever else you are using now. You will be copying tasks from there into this template.

From those sources, or from your head, enter into the top section of the new template any tasks that you know you need to complete today. You should also glance at your e-mail in-box to see if there are any pressing actions in there. Write down a one-line summary for each action due today.

Write into the next section (the one titled Opportunity Now), those tasks that aren't due today but that you would like to start as soon as possible. Write

Now Tasks List	Over the Horizon (Review Weekly)
<p>Critical Now (must do today)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Send Artwork to Mary for review -Complete book review writeups -Set meeting with Suzanne -Call Ted regarding print quote <p>Opportunity Now (start this week or next, review list daily)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Start alternate printing quotes -Study joint venture opportunities -Call Donna re: review service -Decide on interview timeline -Figure out who does print media -Decide on new website url -Create quotes list -Schedule copyeditor next phase -Discuss YouTube strategy with Penny -Update project schedule 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Investigate galley printing options -Find overseas licensing options -Find painter for house -Designer for new office space -Set meeting with planning commission on streets -Decide on Spring party venue -Create manual for invoice processing -Find copyeditor for ad hoc work on newsletters -Invite insurance salesperson to next monthly mtg -Identify best sources of temp staffing -Create hiring plan for next quarter -Call Office Depot about bulk purchases -Conference room furniture: replace -Set meeting with executive committee re: planning -Buy books for library -Assign Printing project to Sally

Figure 2.1 The Workday Mastery To-Do List (Level 1).

down any tasks you would like to work on if you had the opportunity to fit them in today or soon.

And then, on the next page, the one labeled “Over the Horizon,” enter any tasks that are fairly low-priority and you know you don’t need to get to for a few weeks or more. That could be a big list.

That’s it; you have now started using the Workday Mastery To-Do List.

How to Use This List

So how to use this list? Most of it is fairly self-explanatory. Obviously, Critical Now tasks must be done today. The rest of the tasks on page 1 you will then work on as the opportunity arises, when you find time in between or after your critical tasks (and in between any meetings or other work).

Finally, Over-the-Horizon tasks (page 2) are just that; they’re beyond your concern right now, and so you need not attend to them until a weekly task review (we will discuss that weekly task review in a moment). This second page is a great place to store tasks you do not want to lose, but may not get to for a while.

There are some subtleties to using this system. Here are some recommendations that describe those.

Try to put all your tasks into this list. There are many benefits to listing everything in one place. Adhering to that means if an e-mail comes in with a to-do item in it, as soon as you read it, make a note of it on this task list; same with voice mail. With one place to list all tasks, when the end of the day comes, you can tell with one quick glance if you can go home or not, without leaving any critical things undone.

My next instruction is don't over-use the Critical Now section. Use the following test when placing items on that list: would you stay late at work tonight to complete this task if it were not finished at your normal departure time? If the answer is no (you would not stay late), then don't put it inside the Critical Now tasks section. Reserve that section only for tasks that really must be done today.

Next, the Opportunity Now list will build up rapidly, and you need to keep it relatively short so that you can review it easily. You should be reviewing that list completely at least once a day if not more, and I have found that if this list exceeds 20 items, you will not be able to do that. So once that list starts to exceed 20, take the lowest-priority items off of that list and move them to the second page, the page titled "Over the Horizon."

Next, if an Opportunity Now task has a specific deadline, enter the date of that deadline right at the start of the task description. For example, you might write a task as follows: DUE August 16, Sales Report. You can also put tasks with distinct due dates like that on your calendar if you like. But only do this for real deadlines; do not create artificial ones.

And finally, you should review the Over-the-Horizon tasks list (page 2) once a week. I recommend setting a Monday morning appointment to review that section. During that task review, if you find any items on that list that have become important, move them onto the front page.

That's really it—that's the Workday Mastery To-Do List in a nutshell, and I encourage you to start using this new system today. I think you'll find that it has a remarkably powerful effect on getting your workday under control.

I will present more about the theory underlying this system in the chapters ahead. What you just learned I call Level 1 of the Workday Mastery To-Do List.

You will also learn some additions to the system that make those pages a bit more complex (called Level 2 and 3), but they are just as easy to use. And you will learn a number of fine points that allow the system to cover more situations. But for now, please do start using this new, simple to-do list approach. I think you will find it very powerful.

Why the Word *Now*?

You may be wondering why the emphasis on the word *Now* throughout this solution.

There are a couple of reasons. First, all the tasks on the first page of your tasks list ought to be eligible to be done now. That means they are not dependent on other tasks, they are not waiting for a future date to arrive, and they are not such a low priority that you really don't intend to do them for a week or more. So the idea is that they are current tasks; you might even call them "as soon as possible" tasks.

The other reason for the term *Now* is that these are tasks you want in your awareness now. You only have so much mental capacity to consider to-do items. You don't want to try to consider too many tasks at once; doing so will add too much stress to your day. You cannot get to them all anyway, so there would be no sense in cycling through hundreds of tasks every time you consider what to do next. Instead, this is the small subset of tasks you want in your mind, or close to your mind, right now, and no more. Identifying this small Now Tasks list is a great stress reducer.

Also, the word *Now* is right in the title of this book. It comes from the concept of the Workday Now that I addressed at the start of the book; it is a key part of the workday mastery theory in this book. It is applied differently at each of the three layers: Control, Create, and Connect. As you will see in a moment, in the Control layer it refers to that period of time that you need to focus awareness, concern, and management attention on. That is your Workday Now.

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