Keeping Organized Goes Beyond a Task List

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DO YOU HAVE TROUBLE remembering and keeping tracks of tasks you need to complete? Has anyone ever suggested you use an electronic task list or make a list on paper? Have you tried either of these options without success? You may wonder why you have difficulties with this and wish there was something you could do to make things better. Perhaps you've realized that keeping organized is more complicated than simply using a list.

Working memory deficits are common for many individuals, especially those with ADHD. Working memory is the ability to hold thoughts in your mind while organizing and sequencing them, without forgetting what they are. Such capabilities come under the umbrella of executive functioning skills, which can frequently be a major area of impairment for people with ADHD. Executive functioning refers to a set mental processes used to complete actions or tasks (such as planning, organizing, task initiation, and self-regulation).

In making a visual task list, it is usually helpful and important to write down tasks one needs to complete in order to minimize the likelihood of forgetting items. At the same time, an area of difficulty—especially for those with ADHD—is that even when a person sees a bunch of tasks in a list, sometimes they may miss the organization of those items and the bigger picture. This occurs when items are not presented or organized in a manner conducive to how that individual processes information and executes items. Therefore, one type of visual task list system will not be helpful for all people.

So, what do you do if a project management system is imposed on you by your company, volunteer organization, or other group with which you work, and you find that this system is not helpful to you?

Worse, what do you do if you have to use it and struggle to do so effectively?

This can impact not only your own productivity, but the overall productivity of your group members.

A working example of team organization

Here's a practical example to illustrate this issue and how one might go about addressing it. Let's say one of the managers of a volunteer organization implemented a new electronic project management system for all group members. The program involved all group members seeing all tasks, including those not assigned to them. In addition, specific tasks were assigned to each person, with

due dates. The goal was to help everyone to more easily keep track of their own tasks, use reminder features to set due dates and notifications, and make keeping track of responsibilities simpler on the leadership team.

Now to understand this from a volunteer's perspective. A volunteer with this organization found the tool to be challenging to use initially. First, he found that when he did view the list of tasks, not all of them were relevant for him. This impacted his self-regulation in that because so much of the information, and sometimes the notifications, were not relevant to him, it made it less motivating to check the page itself as well as review emailed updates and notifications. The volunteer noted that as this continued, he increasingly ignored the program, and possibly missed items directly relevant to him.

To address the issue, the volunteer contacted the manager and explained his concerns. The two problem-solved together. Specifically, the manager was able to adjust things on his end so that no one got notifications for other people's tasks. Additionally, he was able to help the volunteer adjust his own settings to change how and which notifications and reminders he received.

From this exchange, there are several lessons to be learned.

- When you are required to use a new organizational system (or choose to do so), and it is not working in the way that you need it to, it is important to advocate for yourself to see if there are reasonable changes that can be made or that you can do yourself to make the tool more helpful.
- People in a leadership role may not always fully understand the intricacies of how someone interacts with a given program, and definitely does not know how individual people process information and what tends to work and not work for them.
- Whether you have a task list system set up for you or you create your own, having too many tasks on which to follow through or receiving notifications for items not relevant to you will make it difficult to use the program effectively.

Here's a simpler example of the last lesson. Let's say you have a task list and have thirty items a day on it to complete. Some may be important, while others wouldn't be a big deal if overlooked or skipped (such as order more vitamins within next two weeks). If you have so many notifications and get in the habit of ignoring them, it makes it easier and easier to keep doing so and not pay attention to the ones that you actually need. This essentially creates clutter in your mind as you are working through what items you need to actually complete. As a result, in the example noted above, one's visual working memory is taxed and it becomes more difficult to complete tasks.

Recommendations for success

To help maximize your success with any organizational system, especially a task list or something similar, here are several key recommendations:

- Keep systems as simple as possible, especially initially when you are getting acclimated.
- Start by adding a few tasks at a time to manage. Add more in as necessary once you are comfortable using a system.
- If needed, keep different task lists for work, home, and other items. This will limit the number of things on one list or program that you need to keep track of.
- Planning is essential. Even if items are included in a task list, you need to figure out when you have time to work on them based on your schedule. Therefore, it could be helpful to connect a calendar to a task list, block out times for specific tasks, or look at a task list and write out a daily plan based on your availability.
- If a system you are using is not working optimally, evaluate what the issues are. If you set it up yourself, try to make changes or find a new system. In situations where you have to use existing systems dictated by others, write down what difficulties you are having and identify why to the extent that you can. Then, try to schedule a meeting with someone in charge to kindly provide feedback and ask if there are suggestions on how to adjust the system on an individual basis in a way that works for you. In some instances, there may be settings you are unaware of that allow you to modify the system without it even impacting others. In other instances, an employer or supervisor may need to adjust how they input items or use some other method to make it easier. While there is no guarantee that someone in leadership is going to be able to make an existing system work perfectly for you, self-advocating can at minimum lead to finding ways to make systems at least somewhat better for your individual needs.

We hope that these recommendations with regard to task lists and taxed visual working memory will prove helpful to you in improving your own productivity, efficiency, and self-advocacy. Ⓐ

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