

# Time management for academics— forget about the Eisenhower method

I recently came to realize that I don't follow the famed Eisenhower method for time management. Instead, I like to Shuffle. Let me tell you how.

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Time management is key to success and to maintaining a healthy work-life balance. I was reminded that much at a recent career workshop where the topic was energetically discussed. Academics are like small business owners. There is only so many hours in a day and the incessant demands on our time can be overwhelming. This is perhaps one of the reasons why so many are leaving their presumed comfortable tenured university jobs for alternative careers. The great resignation wave has hit academia according to this recent report. Issues of work-life balance and mental health are often cited among the reasons. Given the essential role universities play in teaching and research, this doesn't bode well for the future of our society.

At the workshop, the Eisenhower method was introduced as the main method to help manage your task list in a time efficient manner. I probably heard of the Eisenhower methods years ago, but I admit I totally forgot about it by the time it came up in the workshop. It immediately occurred to me that I don't operate like this. I don't Eisenhower. Yet I think I'm doing fine managing a heavy workload while thoroughly enjoying my life and career. This post is the fruit of an introspective exploration of why I don't follow the Eisenhower method and my alternative take on time management.

What is the Eisenhower method? The method attributed to the 34th United States President Dwight Eisenhower consists of organizing tasks based on importance and urgency. Like other time management methods, first you identify and list your activities and then you triage them into separate categories. In this case, you assign tasks to one of the four quadrants of the "Eisenhower matrix" based on two criteria: how urgent and important they are.

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	<p><u>Quadrant I</u> <i>urgent and important</i> <b>DO</b></p>	<p><u>Quadrant II</u> <i>not urgent but important</i> <b>PLAN</b></p>
NOT IMPORTANT	<p><u>Quadrant III</u> <i>urgent but not important</i> <b>DELEGATE</b></p>	<p><u>Quadrant IV</u> <i>not urgent and not important</i> <b>ELIMINATE</b></p>

The Eisenhower matrix.

### The problem with the Eisenhower matrix

I see two major problems with the Eisenhower matrix when applied to academic life.

First, triaging tasks and activities into the *important and urgent quadrant* can be very challenging. I know from talking to colleagues that there is a tendency to place way too many activities in this category, creating the stressful situation where the list is always full with more tasks that can be reasonably completed. This generates the most stressful situation of all—the feeling of being constantly overwhelmed with things to do. Check the tongue-in-cheek tweets below about unfinished to-do lists and you will understand the problem. If you always have too many tasks classed as important and urgent, then you will continuously feel you are behind and unproductive. Anxiety levels would build up and will start affecting your performance and well-being. In my view, this constant anxiety about having too much to do is the main reason academics stop enjoying their work.

With a bloated must-do list, I also wonder how one would ever have time to achieve anything that's not in that all important and urgent quadrant. For example, how would you have time to join workshops about career

development and write a blog post like this one, considering that neither activities can be viewed as important and urgent.



Academics and time management. How does your to-do list look like?

The second problem with the Eisenhower method is that it's often impossible to determine beforehand what activities will turn out to be important. This is particularly true in academia. How would you know beforehand that the esoteric research seminar you decided to attend— not important and not urgent—will discuss a concept or a method that will totally transform your research program? How can you tell before reading this blog post—definitely not important and not urgent—that it will transform the way your work? 🤪 Serendipity plays an important role in academia. I wouldn't advise eliminating the many activities that tend to be viewed as not important and not urgent. Otherwise, you'll probably never chat with a colleague about some random bit of science, you will not read papers outside your field, you will not bother with Twitter etc. And then you will then miss a lot. Not just in accessing useful bits of knowledge, but also in creating situations where unexpected impactful opportunities have the potential to arise and transform your work and career.

I like sport metaphors. To me doing stuff—whatever that is—is very important. If you're sitting on the bench and not playing in the game, you will never get a chance to score a goal. You have to cast a wide net to create opportunities. My number 1 advice to early career scientists is to be generous with your effort and avoid a careerist calculating attitude. And then, only then, opportunities can arise. You rarely know what will be useful in the future, but you can tilt the odds in your favor.

If I were to apply the Eisenhower Matrix to my professional activities, I would definitely struggle with classifying in the not important and not urgent quadrant many of the activities that I enjoy and that I think have

been beneficial to my career development. I deeply value many of the activities that can be viewed as not important and not urgent: having lunch with my lab, socializing with colleagues, tweeting, blogging etc. And the matrix calls for eliminating these activities. No way, Eisenhower.

### **The Kamoun Shuffle**

My approach is to Shuffle. I triage my activities in two big categories and I'm constantly shuffling between them.

The one major category consists of all the *activities that are not optional*. The stuff I absolutely have to do as part of my job. Basically, what I'm getting paid to do. This would include anything from administrative service, teaching and mentoring, writing papers and grants etc. Other activities, say reviewing a paper or a grant, become not optional once I commit to them. In other words, this is the stuff that I can't get away with ignoring. I guess I could ignore some of these activities to a certain degree. But then I would run into the problem of becoming dysfunctional and unprofessional.

The second category is pretty much everything else I do. This would include chatting with colleagues, reading papers, attending seminars, tweeting, writing and reading blog posts and so on and so forth. What defines this bin is that *all of this stuff is optional*. These are the activities that are generally fun and that I enjoy doing. Unlike the not optional category, I can avoid things in this bin if I don't like doing them, if I'm too busy or simply if I want to have a break to recharge.

Thus my time management consists of shuffling between these two categories. My goal is to make sure that the category of non-optional tasks doesn't overwhelm my daily life and that I always have some time for the optional and fun stuff.

Shuttling between the must-do and the fun stuff works like magic for me. My anxiety level pops up of course when the must-do list swells up. Then, I simply focus on clearing a bunch of items from the must-do list to bring it back to a sane level. But most importantly, I make sure to consciously devote time to the optional stuff. Because I view the optional activities as fun, this tends to relax me and keep my stress level in check. Sometimes, I would even spend time on the fun stuff as a reward for striking some of the more painful tasks from the must-do list. Say I have a tight deadline for giving a lecture or writing a review. Once I'm done, I will make sure to free up time for having coffee with my lab, reading the latest papers, tweeting, blogging etc. Rain or shine, my time management goal is to spend say at least 2–3 hours a day doing the fun stuff. And I manage this on most days.

**NOT OPTIONAL****OPTIONAL****MUST-DO**

- the stuff you cannot get away without doing
- prioritize
- do it as fast as you can
- can be boring and painful but that's what you get paid for

**FUN STUFF**

- the stuff you enjoy doing
- no need to prioritize
- make sure to spend 2-3 hours per day on this
- some of these activities will turn out to be useful and productive, you just don't know how at this stage

The Kamoun Shuffle

I find the Shuffle absolutely critical to my well-being and mental health. Because I have clearly defined a long list of optional activities as fun, I generally end up enjoying doing them and having a fun time doing my job. At the same time, I know from experience that serendipity would occasionally result in unexpected opportunities and positive outcomes even with the most trivial optional activities.

**Do the Shuffle, people.**

I realize that I'm in a privileged professional position, which makes it easier to keep the must-do list in check. Indeed, it's probably easier for me to apply the Shuffle method given that I have relatively limited teaching and administrative duties. Nonetheless, I think it's still worth trying to emulate the Shuffle. For one thing, definitions matter. So one take from this post could be to redefine Eisenhower's important and urgent quadrant as the not optional must-do list. My take home message would then be to keep this list to a strict minimum and to make sure to save time for all the other stuff you do and have fun while doing them. Just one simple message people: Do The Shuffle.

Alan Walker - Faded (Remix) 🎵 Shuffle Dan...



Do The Shuffle.

