

Drowning, not Working

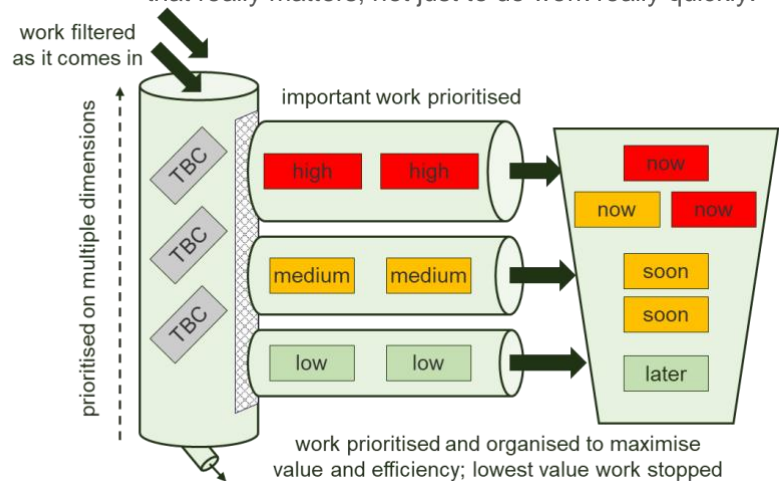
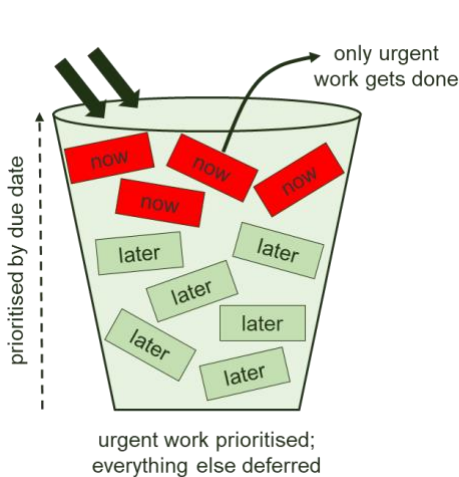
Many people who work in publicly funded organisations already have long to-do lists, with new demands pouring in all the time. Some demands are important, some urgent, and some neither. Many workers find themselves sinking in what feels like an uncontrolled torrent of work. When the flow of work feels overwhelming, urgency can become the default rule for prioritisation, leaving people to feel that they are drowning, not working.

Managing issues as they arise, and being responsive to the needs of governments and the public, are core functions of publicly funded organisations. Pressure to respond quickly on publicly or politically sensitive matters can encourage prioritisation based more on velocity than value. Most work is not immediately urgent but, if deferred, becomes urgent eventually.

External forces often dictate response times for urgent matters, such as timeframes for responding to enquiries from politicians or media. External parties often have the power to make their priorities into everyone's priorities, further squeezing the bandwidth available for work that is important, but may not be urgent. As the pace of demands has increased, workers are under growing pressure to prioritise work that matters now over work that matters most.

By default, many workers end up prioritising only based on urgency, which means that only the most urgent work floats to the top of the list. Everything else is deferred until it becomes either urgent or irrelevant. This approach means that all work is done under time pressure, so everything feels frantic all the time. There is never time and space to do anything really well, or to get ahead of a looming issue and avoid it becoming a crisis. Work is scheduled by due date, rather than in a logical or efficient sequence.

Rapidly shifting priorities reduces the control workers feel over their own work and their ability to understand what is most important. Less sense of ownership and lower perceived quality of their work tends to result in lower work satisfaction. Most people want to do work that really matters, not just to do work really quickly.



Diverting a small amount of time to actively prioritise and schedule work can make the difference between working and drowning. Defining clear principles for how work will be prioritised and organised also helps workers to give appropriate weight to factors such as importance and efficiency, not just due dates.

With the relative priority of tasks established, workers can schedule work in logical ways that improve efficiency. Doing related work in a sensible sequence, or in clusters, reduces the total effort required, reducing time pressure and making it less likely that future tasks will become time-critical.

Actively filtering and ruthlessly eliminating the lowest value activities, like meetings that are not directly useful, frees up even more time for higher-value tasks.

When organising work can stop being solely reactive to externally directed triggers and deadlines, people and organisations can improve their overall efficiency and focus more on the things that matter most.

Prioritising and sequencing work based on defined principles helps people to make better choices about what to do and when. More efficient scheduling means that fewer activities will be deferred so long that they become urgent, leaving more bandwidth to respond to genuinely urgent or unexpected demands.

Organising work based on what matters most can help workers to feel greater ownership of their work, and take greater satisfaction from it. Instead of feeling that everything is urgent all the time and yet nothing important gets done, workers can feel better, be more productive, and finally get their heads above water.