MEDICLINIC

ACTION-PRIORITY MATRIX
Line Manager Toolkit

TOOL   **ACTION-PRIORITY MATRIX**

A key to successfully managing your tasks and activities, especially during a crisis, is having the skill to choose and prioritise your activities wisely and focus your energy where it can be most impactful. We all have the same 24 hours in a day and much of our productivity lies in our ability to effectively sort through a long list of tasks and requirements from multiple sources which all seem to be urgent and important.

However, if you choose your priorities poorly, you could easily find yourself having to constantly put out fires, being stretched thin on important deadlines or being bogged down in low-yield, time-consuming tasks that stop you from moving forward.
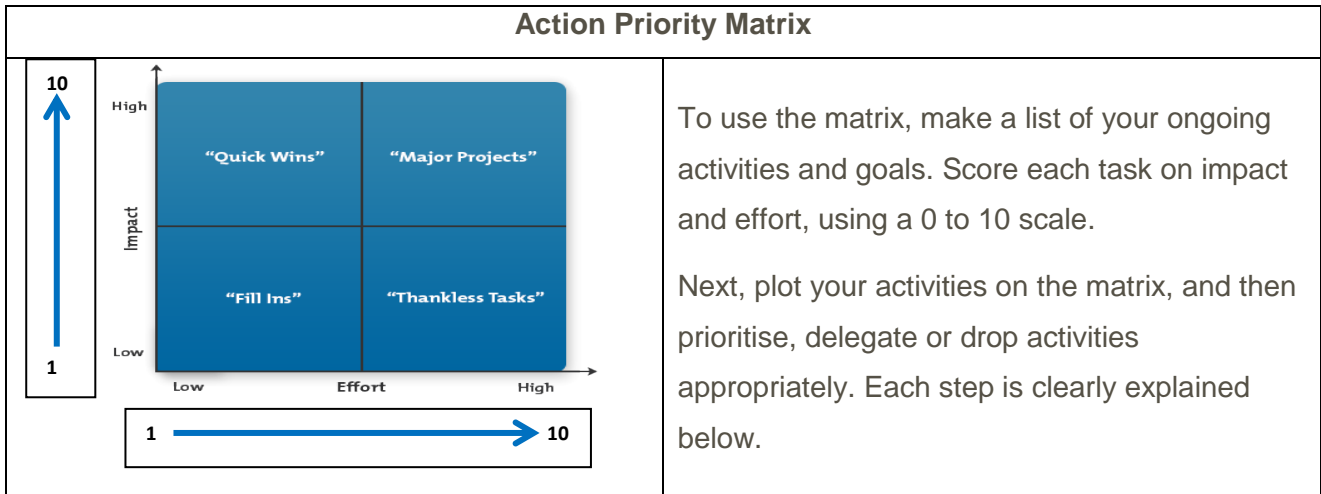
The **Action Priority Matrix** is a simple planning technique that helps you choose which activities to prioritise (and which ones you should drop) in order to maximise your time, effectively manage your workload and respond to changing priorities.

DISCUSS   **HOW TO USE THE ACTION-PRIORITY MATRIX**

The figure below shows the basic structure of the Action-Priority Matrix. The principle behind the tool is that you score each activity you want to complete on two scales – first on the impact of the activity and secondly the effort involved.

By plotting each activity on the Action-Priority Matrix, you can quickly see the tasks/projects that "steal" your energy and time and those that could give you the greatest return on your efforts.

Action Priority Matrix

To use the matrix, make a list of your ongoing activities and goals. Score each task on impact and effort, using a 0 to 10 scale.

Next, plot your activities on the matrix, and then prioritise, delegate or drop activities appropriately. Each step is clearly explained below.

STEP 1: BRAIN DUMP

- Write down a **list of tasks** that need to be accomplished within the coming weeks. Don't overthink this. Whatever naturally comes up first, write it down and keep writing until you can't think of anything new.

STEP 2 – SCORE THE ACTIVITIES ON IMPACT AND EFFORT AND PLOT THEM ON THE MATRIX

- **Score the list of activities** on impact (from 0 for no impact to 10 for maximum impact) and on effort involved (from 0 for no real effort to 10 for major effort). Tasks that are high on impact are those with long-lasting consequences or results. One way to evaluate the impact of a task is to ask yourself the following questions: "Will the project or clients suffer if this task isn't done?" and/or "Does others' work depend on me completing this task?" On the other hand, high effort tasks are tasks that tend to require recurrent focus and long completion windows (time).

STEP 3: PRIORITISE, DELEGATE, DROP ACTIVITIES APPROPRIATELY

- **High impact - low effort** tasks are quick-win tasks that you should do immediately. This will tick some important boxes and give you a sense of achievement early on. Not completing these tasks is likely to result in negative consequences in terms of your deadlines or goals.

- **High impact - high effort** tasks require proper planning and may also require additional resources (delegating, project planning tools). These are the things you usually never get around to doing, because they're too hard, and there's so much noise and operational need in between. The general rule for this group is to schedule time to work on these tasks. Putting them off will just bump them up until they become urgent, or are never addressed. You should probably have only a small number of tasks listed here. Do not leave such tasks until the last minute.

- **Low effort - low impact** tasks are referred to as "filler" tasks as you would only tackle those as and when you have spare time. Since the impact is low they do not require immediate action, but because the effort is

also low it can create a sense of achievement when those boxes do get ticked. Activities or tasks that fall into this category can easily serve as distractions. Eliminate these or leave them for later.

- **Low impact - high effort** tasks should be re-evaluated and probably dropped if you are unable to automate them. By deciding to drop or at least postpone these tasks to a later time you are able to lower your anxiety (as the immediate task list is reduced) and free up your time to focus on more high impact activities and projects.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

- **Keep Stakeholders informed.** As tasks move up and down the priority ladder, don't not forget to keep everyone up to date on the changes and how they impact the project deliverables and timelines.
- **Compile a plan and tracker** of your tasks and update regularly

Be mindful of optimism and wishful thinking. Be realistic in your appraisal of your tasks, especially when performing it for the first time. To mitigate this, consider three things: First, how much time would you need to complete a task if everything went as well as it possibly could? How much time would you need to complete a task if everything went as poorly as it possibly could? Finally, based on your answers to the above two questions, work out the average time required for this task.

Be mindful of inaccurate recollection of the time similar tasks took in the past. The best predictor of how much time it will take you to complete as task is to look at past results as accurately as possible. Ask yourself the following questions and answer them as honestly as possible: "How much time did this specific task take me in the past? What other factors could have influenced my time-frames? e.g. Did I receive additional help from team members in order to meet the previous deadline? Was I working on a different system which I am more familiar with? Was I working simultaneously on other projects at the time, which may have slowed down my progress?"

Be mindful of over-focusing on execution and completion. Do not get fixated on task duration and getting the task completed as quickly as possible, at the expense of the quality. Remember: your output should be about accuracy, completeness and consistency and NOT JUST TIME.

Be mindful of underestimating of the occurrence of random events. It is almost always never smooth sailing, therefore your plan must incorporate time for random events such as falling ill and being booked off work for a period, or perhaps something more urgent and important comes up and you are required to re-direct your efforts for a while.

Be mindful of scaling issues. As the size of the project increases our ability to accurately project its duration decreases. When the complexity of a project increases or project actions multiply over time, ensure you re-adjust your project time-frames accordingly.