

# Getting Things Done - The Art of Prioritization and Implementation

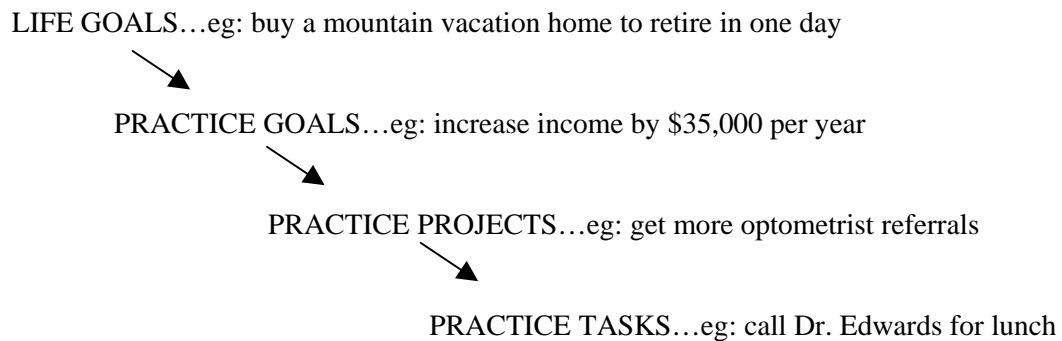
By John B. Pinto

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As an ophthalmologist, by the time your formal training is completed, and after accounting for vacation time, you only have about 8000 work days left to accomplish your professional mission. In these 8000 days you have to build a staff team, construct a business enterprise, refine your mastery over a complex body of clinical knowledge, and use this mastery to serve perhaps 30,000 different patients, all to improve the functional vision of about 60,000 eyes. That's it...just 8,000 days. This works out to about one hour per eye over the panoramic span of your career, which is rather a nice way to think of things.

This time passes swiftly. If you're the average doctor in his or her mid-40's, you only have about 4500 work days left. In another decade, you'll only have perhaps 3000 work days remaining. And by the time you finish this article, you'll have used up another 4% or so of one of those precious days.

So what can you do to extract the most value from each of these fleeting days? The first answer is to prioritize. And this prioritization flows downhill, from profound life goals to unremarkable practice minutia:



If you keep your eyes open to opportunity, hundreds of alluring new ideas arise every year—you only have time in your life to seriously pursue a fraction of these ideas. How do you know which opportunities are important? You have to know your long-term goals, which provide a critical context for focusing the limited hours of your day, and the limited days of your working life.

Consider the following scenario. Imagine you're a 48-year-old general ophthalmologist, who dreams of owning a five-partner subspecialty practice. You want to be the managing partner of this group, and work hard in this role for 20 years if your health can hold out. You want to continue performing cataract surgery, and pass along to your colleagues just about everything else. These goals are consistent with the following actions:

- Going to the Academy meeting and sitting in on courses related to being the managing partner of a group practice.

- Directing your administrator to strengthen her financial training to be ready for managing a larger organization.
- Getting good at delegating to middle management staff in the practice.
- Calling a recruiting firm to cast a net for your first partner-track associate.
- Hiring a personal trainer to increase your energy levels.

These goals, to own a larger group practice, would not be consistent with the following actions:

- Going to the Academy meeting and taking courses related to medical retinal care (You'll be delegating such cases in the future, remember?)
- Directing your administrator to learn now to scrub into surgery as a backup for your lead scrub tech (Such work would be a distraction if they're going to be running a business for you.)
- Holding on to lots of detailed projects instead of delegating. (You're going to be too time-poor to do everything well by yourself.)
- Failing to follow a diet and exercise regimen that will keep you vigorous well into your 70's

Here's a practical pop test: Ask if your actions in this past week, day-by-day, have been consistent with the outcomes you desire. If not, you'll want to align these to the greatest possible extent. Before reading further, fill out this simple grid:

"Actions I have taken in the past week"	"The larger goal I hoped to accomplish through this action is..."
<b>Example:</b> <i>"I visited an old friend from my residency (who performs cataract surgery faster than I do) to learn how I can shift from 2 cases per hour to 3 cases, to make it financially viable to develop a modest ASC."</i>	<i>"I would like to have my own surgery center one day, and can't afford this unless I'm a more efficient surgeon."</i>

Were the activities you wrote down in the left column in accord with the goals you wrote down in the right column? If not, what does this tell you about the way you're prioritizing your time? Do you need to adjust your goals (perhaps defining them formally for the first time in years), or better direct your actions to match your goals?

Sometimes the focus of your time and attention is not driven by your desires alone, but is bounded by practical realities. Let's say you would indeed love to develop an ambulatory surgery center. You've bought every book on the subject, and go to every possible ASC course. You have hired a few consultants to review the prospects and get the same answer back each time: "You can't develop an ASC because 1) your case volumes are too low to support such a center, 2) your market is so small that you'll never build to sufficient case volumes and 3) the regulations in this state prohibit the development of private ASCs." In light of these facts, it would be foolish for you to keep attending ASC courses, reading ASC how-to guides, and hiring advisors. Adjust your dreams; find another kind of practical ancillary service (an optical perhaps, or an augmented diagnostic testing pod) and put your energies into these more achievable goals.

### Managing Your To-Do List

You don't gulp down an entire steak dinner in one bite; instead, the meal is divided into discrete courses, and each mouthful is cut one at a time. Practice projects should be carved up the same way. Once you have prioritized the outcomes you desire, and have developed a list of projects, it helps to break each project down into its component parts.

A number of computer programs have emerged to automate your to-do list. Microsoft Project is a robust program designed for projects with hundreds of sub-routines...as would be the case if you're a general contractor building a new office tower. Microsoft Outlook, is a much simpler program, packaged with Microsoft Office, that allows you to arrange projects by initiation date, departmental area or responsible party. Perhaps the simplest and most familiar approach is to use Word for Windows to create the table shown below.

### Sample Action Grid

Action (Dated)	Who (one person)	Deadline	Progress Notes (Dated)
Replace the worn carpet in the Akron main office  Oct 2	Susan	Nov 20	Oct 15—carpet samples reviewed and order placed Oct 30—installation scheduled for Nov 13 Nov 10—date pushed back due to flood damage repairs work

Here are a few simple rules to accompany the use of such a grid:

- Date all action items, which should be a complete thought...even someone from outside of the practice should understand what you have written down in simple, subject-predicate format.
- Each item should have a single owner, not a committee.
- The deadline should be a specific date in the calendar, not "spring."
- If an item is approved but tabled until later, enter the "tabled to \_\_\_\_" date in the deadline column.
- Make sure that all progress notes are entered and dated by each responsible party on a networked or central/open-access PC at least 48 hours in advance of regular management meetings...then you can use the grid as both the agenda and minutes for such meetings
- Highly confidential items should be moved to a separate grid.
- Completed items should be removed to a separate archive file, and reviewed periodically by the practice's managers to assure that completed projects continue to be closed.

Whatever system you use—from a worn-out legal pad, to a dedicated computer program—it’s critical to foster an *accountable* environment, where each action item’s “owner” feels truly responsible for their line items, and where there is a formal consequence for not carrying out an agreed task. By starting with a clear understanding of the desired long-term outcomes for your life and practice, you’ll find yourself and your staff spending more time on purposeful activity, and less time on busy-work that robs each day of the precious hours you need to accomplish your dreams.

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