

## Managing Multiple Projects for Entrepreneurs

As an entrepreneur, you'll spend a lot of hectic energy trying to keep multiple balls in the air. While the experience can be exhilarating and heady, there's a real danger that something will slip through the cracks causing a major (and possibly expensive) headache later on. Moreover, not all missed deadlines are created equal because some represent windows of opportunity that don't come around very often. Experienced entrepreneurs recognize the need for a system that excels as a tool to help you manage your projects or to keep your business from devolving into chaos and you spending your days in a constant state of crisis management.

So now you know that you need a system, but what exactly does it need to be able to do? First of all, it has to be simple enough and informative enough that you want to use it. We're not talking about a large project management tool, for example. We're talking about something that allows you to stay on top of your projects, even the ones you delegate. After all, a phone call from a contractor can come at any time and you'll need to be able to summon the important parts of the project to the top of your mind quickly. Even if you haven't paid much attention to it in a couple of weeks because you've been deeply focused on other things.

It's a system that immediately shows you if your project is moving forward, or if not, why not. It immediately allows you to see what are the next things that need to be done. It shows you a score— a meaningful number or a grade that represents the overall quality or effectiveness of how the project is proceeding. And, especially for the projects that you are tackling yourself, it allows you to quickly transition to it after being immersed in something else, picking up where you left off with little delay.

That said, there's a lot of flexibility in how you implement it. Your implementation will depend on several factors, including what you're comfortable with and how you'll need to access it. There are two broad classes of implementation: "Cloud" and "local". A cloud-based solution gives you access from anywhere and at any time. Just pick up your phone, navigate to the page through a browser or an app, and you can be up-to-date. Cloud solutions can be implemented with apps like Trello or Asana, which, as of this writing, both implement free tiers in their offerings.



On the other hand, for a local solution you can choose between computer-based or paper-based. One's not better than the other. In fact, the only wrong solution is the one you don't use. If you are a notebook person who carries around a paper calendar/planner and keeps your meeting notes written in a Moleskine, then the paper-based solution might be perfect for you. In this case you can organize your project data in folders or sections of a notebook.

Not any "system" or process will do, of course. The system has to be able to give you a **snapshot** of the right information quickly, so that when you are not working on the project you can forget about it and not be distracted by it. You can be free to immerse yourself completely in whatever you are working on at the moment without worrying that you are going to forget or overlook something. However you do it, online or on paper, set up a table with the following information:

Project Name:		Date:	
Status:		Score:	
(If stalled) Waiting for:		While waiting:	
Next step:			
Tasks:			

**On the very last page of this document there is an example of this that you can print copies of if you like.**

The **tasks** should be listed in approximate order to be executed. Be sure you're clear enough when you list them that you don't struggle to remember what your note actually means (that old, "What was I thinking?" situation). You don't need all of the tasks for the project on there, just the next things that need to be done when you start working on it again. Their purpose is to make your transition to working on the project again fast and easy, so you don't have to fumble around trying to figure out where to start.

You also need to have a **score** for the project. This will be different for different types of projects, but it should be a number or a grade that gives you a sense immediately of how well things are progressing. For example, you might note the costs spent out of the budget: \$1634/\$2500, for example. Or you might note the revenue generated by the project so far. And if you have a target revenue, including that is even better. If you are expecting the project to eventually produce \$10000/month, and now it is producing \$2500, then \$2500/\$10000 is your score. Other scores include units sold, engagements (on social media), or even fraction of the way to completion. If you have a project of, say, making a social media strategy for the next six months, and you've completed two months, you could use 2/6 as a score. Also, sales or leads generated works for advertising projects, or parts complete like 4 of 10 chapters written.

Use whatever makes sense to you. If you choose to use something like a letter grade, make sure the meaning of the grade is clear. Teachers use something called a rubric for assigning grades to projects. Basically, a rubric is a chart that shows how many points the student is awarded for each category they need to perform, and what constitutes good or bad quality of each. The difficulty with a rubric is that if you overthink it scoring could be more difficult than the value you get from having a score in the first place. So if you use letter grades and a rubric, keep it very simple.

To see how it might work, suppose you are scoring an ongoing social media campaign for an account you are trying to grow. You may want to make a rubric based on engagement growth, with a grade assigned by the following chart:

Grade	A	B	C	D	F
Two-week growth in engagements	5%	2%	.5%	0%	Decrease %

To clarify, the point of this example isn't that these are good targets for your situation. The point is that you have to know what the grade means when you look at it.

You also want to be able to tell at a glance the **status** of the project. The status falls into one of four categories. It's either **pending** (hasn't started yet), it's progressing **ok**, it's progressing **slowly**, or it's **stalled**. If it's stalled, then make a note of what the holdup is and what can be



accomplished while waiting. For example, if you have a project of distributing flyers to local bulletin boards or workspaces as part of a multi-faceted advertising campaign, but you're waiting on the final design from your freelance designer, your project is stalled. Your snapshot should reflect why it's stalled (waiting for the designer) and what to do while waiting. For example, while the project is stalled you may be able to make sure you have all of the addresses you need, permissions, and even the push-pins. Your main task list will tell you what you need to do once the project gets un-stalled; that is, your designer delivers. Keeping your project information organized like this eliminates your uncertainty over what to do at any given time. **Update the snapshot whenever something changes.**

As an aside, you might also find it helpful to keep a list of project titles on a white board with a color coding like used in the text above. Draw a box next to the title in the color that represents the state of a project. You still need to go to the table to get the details, but you can see at a glance what's working and what needs attention.

Here is an **example** that will help clarify the ideas above. Ken is an entrepreneur and has four major facets of his business that he's going to work on for the next six to nine months, until he can hire some part-time help. He thinks of each of these facets as "projects."

His first project is a blog. His plan is to post frequent commentary on the immediate needs of teachers, along with a couple posts thrown in that show insights into the field and points out problems that his particular product solves. He's trying to establish himself as someone to pay attention to, and eventually emerge as a trusted thought leader. Each blog post really has the same basic tasks involved: Research and plan the next article, outline the article, draft the article, and finalize and upload the article to the blog. He has a schedule of two articles a month, and the status will reflect if he's getting them done on time or not. If he falls behind, he's stalled. He anticipates posting 12 articles in the next six months, so the project's score reflects how many out of the 12 he's finished (4/12, for example). His snapshot looks like this:



Project Name:	<i>Blog posts</i>	Date:	<i>3/15</i>
Status:	<i>OK</i>	Score:	<i>4/12</i>
(If stalled) Waiting for:		While waiting:	
Next step:	<i>Write draft</i>		
Tasks:	<i>Research and plan article</i>		
	<i>Outline</i>		
	<i>Write draft</i>		
	<i>Finalize and upload</i>		

Notice how Ken can look at this snapshot and tell immediately where he is in his blogging. He can come back to work on this project after a week away and immediately know he has to call up his outline and write a draft.

His second project is to develop an interactive website. He's working with a developer and a designer. The tasks reflect what they owe him as well as what he needs to do for them. At a glance he can see what needs to be done. The status reflects whether the project deliverables are being delivered, and the score is the number of working parts developed out of the total needed. He could also use amount spent out of the budget as the score, but due to the structure of the contract and payments he feels that using the measure of parts of the site built gives him a better understanding of how well the project is moving along.

Project Name:	<i>Website</i>	Date:	<i>3/17</i>
Status:	<i>Stalled</i>	Score:	<i>2/7</i>
(If stalled) Waiting for:	<i>3rd section design</i>	While waiting:	<i>Agreement on 5th section functionality</i>
Next step:	<i>Approve 3rd section design- pass to developer</i>		
Tasks:	<i>Weekly checks with developer</i>		
	<i>Weekly checks with designer</i>		
	<i>Approve designs</i>		
	<i>User testing each section</i>		
	<i>Find beta testers</i>		

Even though this project is probably top-of-mind, it's a good idea to have a snapshot just so in the whole scramble he doesn't forget that he needs to find beta testers— and that may take some time.

Next, he's developing a workshop that he expects to put on for local groups. His tasks are to write the presentation, make a slide deck, rehearse the presentation, confirm the presentation venues, present the presentation, and update the presentation based on feedback. His score will be how far through the task list he is, and the status will simply reflect if he's keeping to his schedule or not.

Project Name:	<i>Workshop</i>	Date:	<i>3/19</i>
Status:	<i>Slow</i>	Score:	<i>1/5</i>
(If stalled) Waiting for:		While waiting:	
Next step:	<i>Negotiate the presentation timeframe/ find art for the slide deck</i>		
Tasks:	<i>Write presentation</i>		
	<i>Slide deck</i>		
	<i>Rehearse</i>		
	<i>Update</i>		
	<i>Find more venues/audiences</i>		

A snag has developed with the first venue for the presentation. Getting this sorted out becomes his next step, but between phone calls he can work on finding the art for his presentation.

The last project he's tackling is increasing his social media footprint by building engagement on LinkedIn. His plan is to post a few articles to relevant groups over the next few months. The articles will be aligned with his blog posts and will hopefully pull people to his web site. He also wants to engage and connect enough to get to know a few individuals who are active in

his area of expertise on the platform. His major tasks are to write the articles, but he has the ongoing tasks of staying atop the “chatter” in his field and providing commentary. He decides he’ll measure the status of the project by whether he’s engaging six hours a week (OK), 4-6 hours (Slow), or fewer than 4 (Stalled). He’ll measure his score by the number of comments and replies he gets on his comments and articles.

Project Name:	<i>LinkedIn Presence</i>	Date:	<i>3/21</i>
Status:	<i>Pending</i>	Score:	<i>0/5</i>
(If stalled) Waiting for:		While waiting:	
Next step:	<i>Pick a blog post topic and expand on it</i>		
Tasks:	<i>Engage with groups/people</i>		
	<i>Research articles</i>		
	<i>Write articles</i>		

**He hasn’t started this project yet, but when he does he knows exactly what he needs to do.**

As an entrepreneur, Ken’s life, like yours, can be described as periods of extreme busyness punctuated by bursts of frenzy. That’s why it’s important to have a way to stay on top of all the moving parts in your business. The snapshots shown above (there is a blank one at the end of this paper than you can use as a template) allow him, as it will you, to come up to speed immediately when sitting down to work on a project, even if you’ve been away from it for a



while. It's impossible to hold all of the details in your head for anything but the project you're currently working on. In fact, you wouldn't want to. That would only clutter your thinking and detract from what you are trying to do at the moment. On the other hand, having a snapshot like shown above quickly calls everything back to mind when you start back in, so you can put it out of your mind without worry when you need to focus on something else.

And you can simply make copies of the ones I've supplied here, re-draw them yourself in your own software (maybe using your brand colors?), or set up something similar on Trello or Asana and keep it in the cloud. However you choose to implement it doesn't matter as long as it works for you.



**Answer a few quick questions to cement your knowledge and make sure you get the most out of this paper! Answers are at the bottom of the page.**

1. What are the important functions of a system for managing multiple projects?
2. How often do you update your snapshot?
3. When progress on a project has stopped because you are waiting for something from somewhere outside of our control, the status of the project is \_\_\_\_\_.
4. What six things are on a snapshot for a project that hasn't stalled?
5. True or False: If using cost as a scoring method, it can be useful to write it in terms of spent/budgeted like \$1000/\$1500.

1. Tells status, how well the project is going, and the next thing to do when you get back to it
2. Whenever something changes
3. Stalled
4. Project name; date snapshot was updated; status; score; next thing to do; tasks
5. True

