

Making the Most of Your Time: How to Use the 80:20 Rule to Prioritize Your Work

Most of us prioritize our work on the fly without spending much time either analyzing or prioritizing it methodically. This kind of instinctive prioritization, though useful enough, leads to loss of time, efforts, and productivity. Unless, you are a real genius (which is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration), the eighty-twenty rule of Pareto analysis can help you improve your career.

So, what is the eighty-twenty rule? Nowadays, it seems to have become standard industrial jargon without many of us apprehending its true focus and application. The Pareto analysis is a tool that helps you prioritize your work in a manner so that by using 20% of your efforts and time you can get 80% of that work done, which under normal conditions would have involved 100% of your efforts and time. This is how you can become more productive vis-a-vis available time and resources.

In the legal field, it often seems that most work already have priorities ascribed to them due to exigencies. You are just to follow those priorities and everything will get done. This was true as long as the traditional, linear workflow used to be followed. But in a modern environment, multitasking comes as part of the job, and one must learn how to successfully juggle priorities. This is where the Pareto analysis comes in. Incidentally, if you are wondering, Vincenzo Pareto was an Italian economist who observed that in almost every society, 80% of the wealth was owned by 20% of the population.

Essentially, Pareto analysis is an extremely simple method that involves:

1. Listing down the work you have to do, the problems, and all available options
2. Grouping the problems or options where they are part of the same larger problem or option
3. Ascribing scores to each group
4. Prioritizing work in descending order and start working first on the group that has the highest score

The thing to take into account when applying the Pareto analysis is that each bit of work already has its own priority according to situations and circumstances. You need to consider these pre-ascribed priorities to find your scoring method, and this will differ from problem to problem.

Another thing to keep in mind is that there are many methods to prioritize your work and like everything else, the Pareto analysis is not universally applicable. It comes in most handy in confusing situations and in situations where you have the luxury to prioritize. Sometimes, the work on hand is already of high importance and spending time to prioritize doesn't make sense. Then you do, what has to be done immediately, and for the rest of the work prioritize and plan their execution.

Let's consider an example. The problem is that clients are leaving your firm and you need to put things into order. The first thing you do is try to find out the reason and create solutions. Among client complaints, you find:

- Clients are not given patient hearing and most have to visit multiple times to get things across increasing their expenses both in time and money
- Clients often find their appointments are postponed
- The staff is unorganized and unsure of what is required to be done
- Phones keep on ringing and are not picked up

Now you group together the problems:

1. Lack of preparation: items No. 1 and 3 (31 complaints)
2. Lack of staff: items No. 2 and 4 (17 complaints)

By doing this analysis, you learn that 64% of the problem, (31/31+17) can be tackled by first addressing the problem of lack of preparation. Once, the staff makes it mandatory to be fully prepared in time, you might find that clients do not have to make multiple visits and as a result part of the second problem, i.e., postponement of appointments takes care of itself. Once things fall into place, it is possible that phones too, will no more be unattended and the need to increase staff has reduced in importance.

Feature

This is a simple example of how prioritization works. Methodical prioritization is always better than instinctive solutions. Probably, under normal methods, staff would have been recruited immediately to answer the phones with the

actual problems lying unaddressed. But with Pareto analysis, we can get to the root of the problem properly and address it in a more effective manner.

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