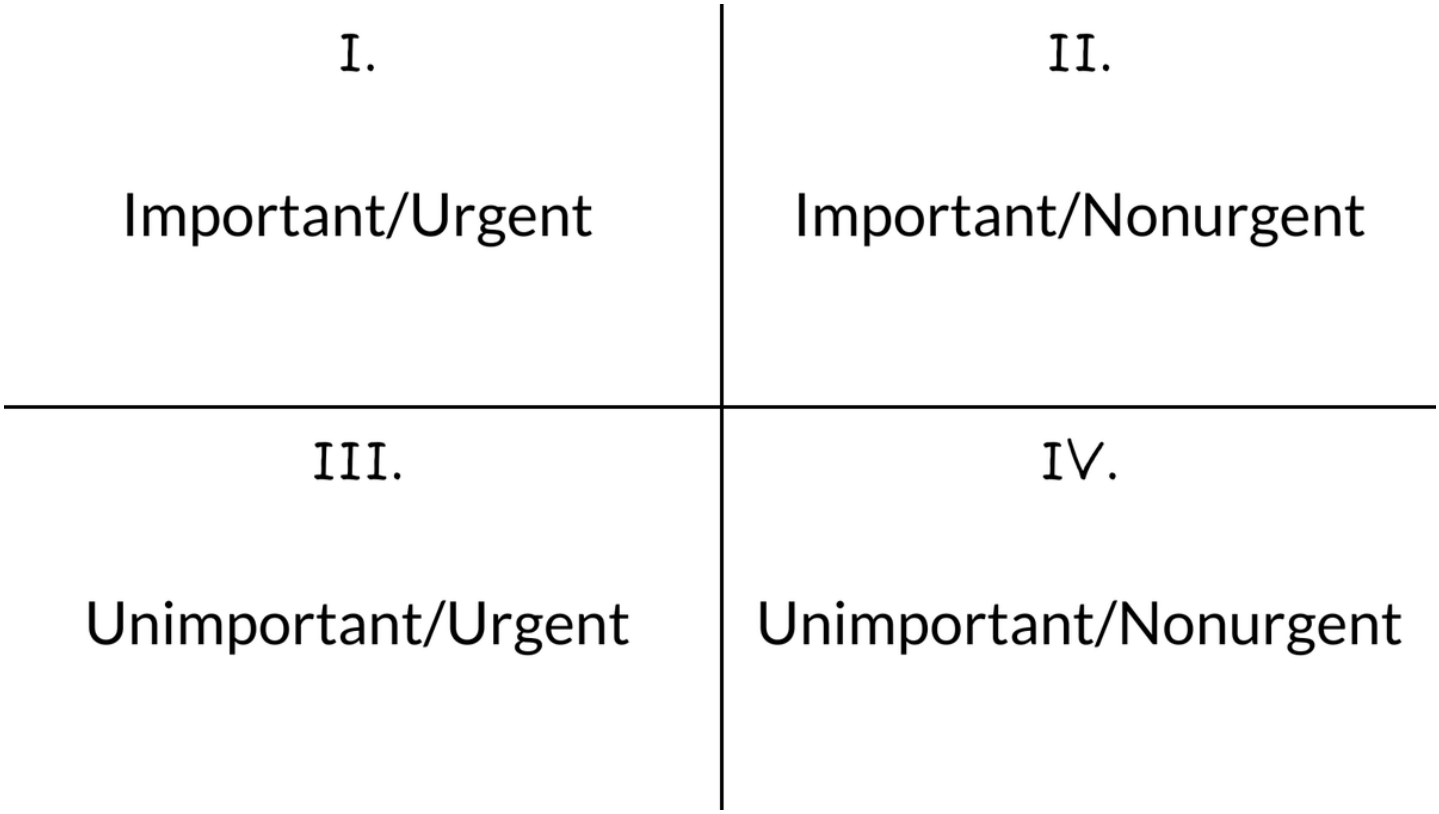
Twitter Thread by Billy Oppenheimer



Billy Oppenheimer
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Researchers studied how people decide what to work on.

This is interesting...



Researchers conducted 5 experiments to study...

When a to-do list is filled with tasks of varying levels of urgency and importance, how do we decide which task to work on?

Researchers separated tasks into 4 categories:

I. Important tasks that are urgent.
II. Important tasks that are nonurgent.
III. Unimportant tasks that are urgent.
IV. Unimportant tasks that are nonurgent.

I.	II.
Important/Urgent	Important/Nonurgent
III.	IV.
Unimportant/Urgent	Unimportant/Nonurgent

In study after study,

"We demonstrate that people are more likely to perform unimportant tasks [that are] merely characterized by spurious urgency."

They call this tendency to prioritize Category III tasks, “The Mere Urgency Effect.”

I.	II.
Important/Urgent	Important/Nonurgent
III.	IV.
Unimportant/Urgent	Unimportant/Nonurgent

We tend to choose Category III tasks (unimportant but urgent) because...

"The limited time frame embedded in urgent tasks [diverts] focus away from the magnitudes of task outcomes."

Essentially, time pressures cloud our thinking of what is important and what isn't.

People who perceive themselves to be busy are especially susceptible to The Mere Urgency Effect because...

"Chronically paying more attention to task expiration time, [they] choose lower-payoff tasks more often when these tasks are merely characterized by urgency."



An experiment to mitigate The Mere Urgency Effect found...

"[It] was attenuated when the magnitudes of task payoffs were made salient at the moment of task choice."

The researchers suggest: "shift attention away from task completion windows to task outcome magnitudes."

TL;DR

Researchers demonstrated we have a tendency to prioritize what is urgent over what is important.

"The Mere Urgency Effect leads" us to sacrifice what will be most beneficial in the long term in order to focus on unimportant tasks with shorter completion windows.

Finally, the mere urgency effect demonstrated in this research has significant practical implications for individual decision makers, managers, and policy makers. Our findings help individuals understand when and why suboptimal consequences might occur in daily tradeoff decisions between urgency and importance. Once we appreciate that attention is drawn to urgency, we see how this innate propensity can lead to suboptimal consequences beyond what is documented in the current research (i.e., earning fewer chocolates, making less money, and winning a lower-value gift card). We may sacrifice health, family, and other important aspects of our lives in order to focus on less significant activities with shorter completion windows, especially when we seem to be working more and perceive ourselves to be busier.

"I have two kinds of problems: the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent." — Dwight Eisenhower, quoting Dr. J. Roscoe Miller

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Here's the full paper.

"The Mere Urgency Effect"

https://t.co/03gZ5S9lr0

In everyday life, people are often faced with choices between tasks of varying levels of urgency and importance. How do people choose? Normatively speaking, people may choose to perform urgent tasks with short completion windows, instead of important tasks with larger outcomes, because important tasks are more difficult and further away from goal completion, urgent tasks involve more immediate and certain payoffs, or people want to finish the urgent tasks first and then work on important tasks later. The current research identifies a mere urgency effect, a tendency to pursue urgency over importance even when these normative reasons are controlled for. Specifically, results from five experiments demonstrate that people are more likely to perform unimportant tasks (i.e., tasks with objectively lower payoffs) over important tasks (i.e., tasks with objectively better payoffs), when the unimportant tasks are characterized merely by spurious urgency (e.g., an illusion of expiration). The mere urgency effect documented in this research violates the basic normative principle of dominance—choosing objectively worse options over objectively better options. People behave as if pursuing an urgent task has its own appeal, independent of its objective consequence.

Keywords: mere urgency effect, urgency, importance, task completion window, task payoff, dominance violation