

How many things should there be? (Hint: Not 10)

by Jason Cohen on December 10, 2023

If we happened to evolve with nine fingers, we would have “Top 9” lists. So, a “Top 10” list probably doesn’t have the correct number of things.

How many things should there be on the list?



“Now I know that’s a lot of acronyms, so here’s an acroscopic to help you remember...”

1: Focus

It’s reductive to say only one thing is important, but it also ensures that it gets done, as quickly as possible.

3: Magic Number

Humans across the globe have always liked when things come in threes. Also you can remember them all.

7: Because 7 ± 2

From one of the most-cited papers in psychology, seven items is what the average person can keep in their head simultaneously. If you can’t keep it in your head, even when you’re trying very hard, it’s too many items.

5: Because with post-COVID brains, now it’s 5 ± 2

I have no data to support this claim, but I claim it nonetheless.

17: One per team

If you have 17 teams, perhaps you have 17 items. Normally this is too many items, but this is actually a repeat of “1: Focus” at the team level. It’s still arguably too many if people span multiple teams.

132: 100% completion

If there are 132 flags in the security audit, you could set a goal to address all of them. Getting through 100% of a specific set of things is a powerful statement. One could call this the same as “1: Focus” but with sub-items, where it’s nice to have a checklist, and nice to feel progress as the team gets through the checklist, and clarity on why there are 132 items specifically, and a clear state-change when the very last item is finished (e.g. “We pass this audit, and then [large customer] renews for three years.”)

402,302: Bankruptcy

An inbox with this many unread emails is the same as an inbox with no unread emails, except a number looms over your head. Declare “bankruptcy”—whether it’s the email inbox or the Jira backlog. Archive¹ it all. The important things will come back.

¹ “Archive,” rather than “delete,” because disk space is close to free, and if you *really* needed something after all, you still have it. Not quite Marie Condo.

Always Ask: **What is the purpose of this list?**

Given its purpose, should there be more things or fewer things? Is there a *good reason* why this the right number of things?

How many things should there be? (Hint: Not 10)

Usually, fewer is better, and the right answer is almost never “10.”

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