

Book Review
Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity

by David Allen

2001

*Reviewed by Economist Kris Freeberg, Making End\$ Meet
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As an Economist specializing in helping households, businesses, and organizations define and achieve their economic goals, I often find myself helping clients confront and surmount obstacles to their success. Often such obstacles are just “stuff” in houses, garages, basements, offices, desks, computers, vehicles, and relationships, commonly in paper form.

One tool I've found incredibly helpful getting such stuff out of the way is the Tickler File system, a collection of forty-three files – twelve for each month of the year, and thirty-one for each date of the current month – which one may use to schedule when to deal with the stuff, and get it out of the way without fear of losing it or forgetting about it, liberating one to focus single-mindedly on the task at hand.

While surfing the web looking for a convenient summation of the Tickler File system and its uses, I encountered David Allen, his organizations, and his methods, so decided to read his book. An outline of the book and an overview of his methods are available at Wikipedia:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Getting_Things_Done

In addition to these, below please find nuggets of useful tips I found especially pertinent or instructive in my work. Please use them in good health.

- **Mind Like Water.** He applies a martial arts paradigm to the goal of this method: emptying of the mind so that it is as still as a lake, and when disrupted, manages disruptions in such a way as to return to its original, peaceful state without delay, focused only on the present. He contends, and I agree, that one is most productive and effective in this peaceful, relaxed state, which he also calls a “black-belt management style.” Near the end of the book he elaborates: “There is magic in being in the present in your life. I'm always amazed at the power of clear observation simply about what's going on, what's true. Find out the exact details of your personal finances, clarifying the historical data about the company you're buying, or getting the facts about who really said what to whom in an interpersonal conflict can be constructive, if not downright healing.” Ironically, this slowed, placid state of mind is also a fast track toward enhanced productivity and career advancement.

- **Stuff.** He defines “stuff” as, “anything you have allowed into your psychological or physical world that doesn't belong where it is, but for which you haven't yet determined the desired outcome and the next action step.” One of his clients described it as “an amorphous blob of undoability.”
- **Project.** He defines a “project” as, “any outcome you're committed to achieving that will take more than one action step to complete.”
- **Work.** He defines “work” as “anything that you want or need to be different than it currently is.” He continues: “Many people make a distinction between 'work' and 'personal life,' but I don't; to me, weeding the garden or updating my will is just as much 'work' as writing this book or coaching a client. All the methods and techniques in this book are applicable across that life/work spectrum – to be effective, they need to be.” Such has also been my observation: the work/personal life distinction is schizophrenic. The fact is, we all have sixteen waking hours per day (provided we sleep eight as we should) in which to live. During those sixteen hours, our 'work' and 'personal lives' necessarily interact; they are interdependent. In fact, our best ideas about work often occur to us when we are not at work. So, like David, I too have abandoned the distinction, and (hopefully) the schizophrenia, that accompanies it.
- **Trust.** “When people with whom you interact notice that without fail you receive, process, and organize in an airtight manner the exchanges and agreements they have with you, they begin to trust you in a unique way. Such is the power of capturing placeholders for anything that is incomplete or unprocessed in your life. It noticeably enhances your mental well-being and improves the quality of your communications and relationships, both personally and professionally.”
- **On Understanding, Accepting, and Working Within Limits.** “[Once you understand your limits], you'll probably make fewer agreements. I know I did. I used to make a lot of them, just to win people's approval. When I realized the price I was paying on the back end for not keeping those agreements, I became a lot more conscious about the ones I made. One insurance executive I worked with described the major benefit he derived from implementing this system: 'Previously I would just tell everyone, “Sure, I'll do it,” because I didn't know how much I really had to do. Now that I've got the inventory clear and complete, just to maintain my integrity I have to say, “No, I can't do that, I'm sorry.” The amazing thing is that instead of being upset with my refusal, everyone was impressed by my discipline!’”
- **Bright People Procrastinate the Most.** “Because their sensitivity gives them the capability of producing in their minds lurid nightmare scenarios about what might be involved in doing a project . . . [bright people] just freak out and quit! Who doesn't procrastinate? Often it's the insensitive oafs who just take something and start plodding forward, unaware of all the things that could go wrong.”

- **Show Up, or Blow Up?** “So when do you think most people really make a lot of their next-action decisions about their stuff – when it shows up, or when it blows up? . . . when I ask groups of people to estimate when most of the action decisions are made in their companies, with few exceptions they say, 'When things blow up.' One global corporate client surveyed its population about sources of stress in its culture, and the number one complaint was the last-minute crisis work consistently promoted by team leaders who failed to make appropriate decisions on the front end.”
- **Working from the Bottom Up.** As an accounting professor once told me, “It's hard to think Olympian thoughts when you are being nibbled to death by ducks.” In other words, by clearing your desk of trivia, you make room for what matters. It's much less frustrating than stumbling over trivia in pursuit of the important.
- **In-box.** He is a staunch advocate of having a literal, physical in-box or basket, both at the office and at home. One remark he made in a video I saw of one of his seminars was, “If you don't have an in-box at your house, then your entire house will become your in-box!” How true!
- **No Daily To Do Lists.** In his discussion about effective use of calendars, he remarks that daily to-do lists don't work because they're static and inflexible and clutter the calendar, obscuring “hard” commitments that must be done on a particular day, at a particular time. Carrying forward undone tasks is also demoralizing. Instead, he advocates keeping lists, but off the calendar. He calls them “Next Action” lists.
- **Lists.** Lists he recommends keeping include “Projects” (a sort of master-index), “Next Actions”, “Waiting For” (for delegated tasks and dependencies), “Someday/Maybe”, and ad-hoc checklists.
- **E-mail tricks.** He recommends creating folders for the above list categories in your e-mail program to store and organize pertinent e-mails in the same way, instead of letting them clutter your e-mail in-box. By beginning each folder name with an @ or =, these special action-oriented folders will sort themselves to the top of the list of folders.
- **The Two-Minute Rule.** “If it will take less than two minutes, do it now.”
- **The “Function Follows Form” Phenomenon.** Great tools can trigger good thinking. If you like your office, if you enjoy writing with a quality pen on clean papers, if you enjoy your personal organizer gizmo or computer, you're more likely to use them. One thing leads to another, and eureka, you get a brilliant idea.
- **On the Need for More Planning:** “After years of working with thousands of professionals down in the trenches, I can safely say that virtually all of us could be doing more planning, more informally and more often, about our projects and our lives. And if we did, it would relieve a lot of pressure on our psyches and produce an

enormous amount of creative output with minimal effort.” “The major reason for the lack of [such planning] is the dearth of systems for managing the potentially infinite amount of detail that could show up as a result. This is why my approach tends to be bottom-up.”

- **Back-Of-The-Envelope Planning.** He asserts the most productive kind of planning one can do is the informal kind one does literally on the back of an envelope in a coffee shop with a colleague: “Formal planning sessions and high-horsepower planning tools (such as project software) can certainly be useful, but too often the participants in a meeting will need to have *another* meeting – a back-of-the-envelope session – to actually get a piece of work fleshed out and under control.” Similarly, he asserts that in most cases a word processor with outlining capability is sufficient for planning most projects, not elaborate project-planning software. Keep it simple.
- **Weekly Review.** The Weekly Review is the time to gather and process all your “stuff”, review the system, update your lists, and get clean, clear, current, and complete. He suggests doing it Friday afternoons. He asserts this is a “Master Key” for stress-free productivity, which most people don't do . . . his observation is that most people do this yearly, before their vacation, if they do it at all.
- **“No time” means, “No clarity.”** He observes, “I have found that lack of time is not the major issue . . . the real problem is a lack of clarity and definition about what a project really is, and what the associated next-action steps required are.” He further asserts that a miniscule investment of time in creating the clarity to translate “stuff” into “work” will liberate the schedule and relieve the mind.
- **The Five Stages of Mastering Workflow:** Collect, Process, Organize, Review, and Do. Notice there are five stages, four of which, or 80%, are preparatory. This corroborates my belief that life is 80% theory and 20% practice. Most of the work lies in straightening out our theory; once we've done that, our practice will be effective and sweet.
- **The Five Phases of Project Planning:** 1) Defining purpose and principles; 2) Outcome visioning; 3) Brainstorming; 4) Organizing; 5) Identifying next actions.
- **The Importance of Uncomfortable Questions.** Ironically, the questions that put people on the defensive by challenging their legitimacy are the ones to ask if one hopes to be productive and effective. Like an obnoxious four-year-old, we should be regularly asking questions like “Why?” or like a petulant teenager, “What's the point?” or I would add, “So, what?” (Which is another way of asking, “What's the next action?”) In particular, asking why defines success, creates decision-making criteria, aligns resources, motivates, clarifies focus, and expands options. Although such questions may seem impolite, Allen asserts that what is truly impolite is allowing people to walk away from discussions unclear about their next actions. In the conclusion of his chapter on next-actions, he observes, when people enjoy clarity on

their next actions, “The light in their eyes and the lightness of their step increase, and a positive spark shows up in their thinking and demeanor.”

- **Normal Corporate Behavior.** Having been independently employed for the past dozen years or so, I sometimes feel out of touch with the corporate world and wonder what's normal, what I am missing. Reading Allen's book helped me answer that question. He observes, “Being able to bring all these ingredients [in his book] together, with appropriate timing and balance, is perhaps the major component of professional competence for this new millennium. But it's not yet the norm in professional behavior; far from it. It's still a daunting task to apply this awareness to all the aspects of personal and professional life. But even when only portions of the model are inserted, tremendous benefit ensues.”
- **Two Problems, Two Solutions.** He quotes a friend Steve Snyder who says, “There are only two problems in life: 1) you know what you want, and you don't know how to get it; and/or 2) you don't know what you want.” And he asserts the two solutions are to make it up, and make it happen.

Respectfully submitted,

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