

When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.

-Will Rogers

The world has become increasingly complex and fast paced. More work is being done by fewer people with fewer resources. Workplace stress is rising and moral is dropping. I am stuck in this trend and it has had a detrimental effect on me for some time.

About twelve months ago I discovered the book "*Getting Things Done - The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*" by David Allen. I decided to see if it could help.

It was very impressive and very simple at the same time. I devoured the first three chapters that evening. After completing the first two 'how to make it work' sections over the weekend I was even more impressed. What David Allen presents in his book is a combination of simple tools and techniques that really works. In David's language: "I got it".

The following is some background about me, a book review and some implementation details for the corporate world. I hope you find it useful.

Robert J. Fairbairn

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Note: This is the second revision of this document. Many things have changed in my world: a new direction at work, new challenges at home, and a few falls along the way to a better life. Please take the time read this updated version as there are many changes and new observations.

Background and Context

As I have gotten a bit older and progressed further in my career, the speed of our world has pushed me to search for better ways to manage my work and my life. Many of us are looking for ways to keep up with the work and yet have dinner with the family.

In some ways I had seemingly accomplished this: I have been home for dinner 95% of the time for the last four to five years. But I paid a very high price of working many extra hours at home to make it possible. It is very easy to work all the time.

I needed a system to help me keep everything in order and if possible keep me in the groove! My trusty tools were standing in the way of gaining control over the information flow of my life.

There had to be a better way; I had just not found it. In the last year since implementing the David Allen methodology I have almost eliminated the work I take home and the extra hours I work. I can now go home in the evening and not worry about what I have left behind or what I have to work on. This has not come with some pain and frustration. Twice now I have fallen out of my weekly review process and back into having work fill all of my “spare” time.

Yes I still forget things; I am not a perfect user of the process. I have not reached that “Mind like Water” state that David Allen talks about. I am a lot closer and more and more I can see the pebble hit the water. There is a lot less broken in my world and I am better for it! I am more relaxed and I have more time to think, to play, to enjoy life, and to get more work done!

Let me tell you about the book, the process, and how I have made this work in my life.

About the book

The David Allen book consists of three parts:

Part 1: The Art of Getting Things Done

Part 2: Practicing Stress-Free Productivity

Part 3: The Power of the Key Principles

In Part 1, Mr. Allen describes the new practices, how to master workflow and some basics of getting projects under control. This section of the book was the revelation for me. I had been trying to schedule, categorize, and prioritize everything under the sun -- what a waste of time! Why categorize your contacts when the alphabet does it for you? *Finally, I have a way to see what I can do in the place I am in with the time and tools at hand!*

The last chapter of Part 1 is about project planning and what a project really is. It is amazing to think about projects in the light of a simple workflow: What is the very next single thing that I can do to move this project along? What a wonderful concept.

Part 2 of the book is where you start getting your hands dirty. Seven chapters in this section explain in detail how to make this process work. You will want the book with you when you hit your office, your home, and your email inbox with these best practices. *Make a copy of the workflow chart and put it up where you see it behind your monitor or your work space.*

Part 3 of the book is the gravy on the turkey at Thanksgiving. This is where the book really shows you how three key principles give you power over your work and your life. Use these tools, look at the results you get, pat yourself on the back but be prepared to be asked questions on how you got so organized!

For most people \$14 is not too much to spend on a book that will make their lives better. The cost of public training is reasonable for most companies, and the cost of personal coaching is well within the reach and the need of many executives.

I am a bit evangelical about this methodology because of what it has done for me. I am trying to extend the culture and methods are work and in the world around me. At least borrow the book from your local library to see for yourself what I am talking about. You will not regret it! It took me three days to reorganize my office, my email and some of my basic workflows to get in step with GTD (Getting Things Done); what a relief it is to have an empty inbox, an organized filing system and the knowledge that I have my work collected in a single system.

David Allen “*Getting Things Done*”
The Art of Stress-Free Productivity

Penguin Books:

ISBN 0-670-89924-0 (hc.)
ISBN 0 14 20.0028 0 (pbk.)

On the Web: www.davidco.com

There is an outlook add-in to assist in implementing a “high-tech” version of the process. <http://gtdsupport.netcentrics.com/tour/> will tell you more.

From the rear cover of the book:

In today’s world, yesterday’s methods just don’t work. Veteran coach and management consultant David Allen shares his breakthrough methods for stress-free performance that he has introduced to tens of thousands of people across the country. Allen’s premise is simple: our productivity is directly proportional to our ability to relax. Only when our minds are clear and our thoughts are organized can we achieve effective results and unleash our creative potential. From core principles to proven tricks, *Getting Things Done* can transform the way you work and live, showing you how to pick up the pace without wearing yourself down.

The Seminar and My Results

A couple of months into the process of mastering David Allen's system I was able to attend a two day seminar presented by Mr. Allen! The cost was reasonable at \$700 and the results for me are fantastic. Mr. Allen is an energetic speaker that knows his business very well. His humor and animated style helps to relax you into understanding the material. David lectures for two very full days with just enough time for questions and some good exercises. *Keep those notes and materials from the class, you will have written many things down that are valuable. Get those projects, actions, ideas into IN.*

A very enlightening segment of the class was to do mind sweep, I filled up two sheets of paper with "stuff" I did not have in my "system". Through the rest of the class I added another twenty or thirty items to my list and I was shocked: I thought I had captured all my open loops. The environment or mood created in the classroom is very helpful.

Subsequently I have found that there are times where flashes of insight let me get more and more issues off of my mind and into my "system". These things come and at odd locations and with unpredictable timing. This is why Mr. Allen suggests that you have something with you all the time to take down little notes for input into your system. (I am almost inseparable from my Palm Pilot for this very reason) On the davidco.com web site they have a little pocket notebook with a pen combo that you could take anywhere.

After a year of working with the system I am doing pretty well. I have several failings that cause me extra work. First, over processing my inbox: This is mostly email. I have to remember to keep running Outlook offline so I only get new email when I want it. Second is the word YES, what power that word has to give your time and your control to someone else. I have created more work for myself by saying YES to things I should not be doing. You cannot be afraid of the word NO; it is the power to stop creating open loops, the power to get things done! In our accelerated work environment it is easy to get sucked into things that fill up the space you have created to think and work. Guard yourself from YES.

A NO uttered from the deepest conviction is better than a yes merely uttered to please, or what is worse to avoid trouble.

-Mahatma Gandhi

The third and the most important thing that I do not always do well is the weekly review. It is critical to your success, you must do it. Read that section of the book several times and refer back to it as you get down the road. This is the key to success and as with all good things part of the work of being organized. There is a cost to organization it does not come for free, the weekly review is a part of that cost, but it pays a lot more than your savings account does.

My job changed at the beginning of 2004 brining greater challenges along with the existing ones. I was working 60 to 70 hour weeks and NOT doing a review. I would go home and work till midnight every day and many hours on the weekend. I had fallen into the busy trap! *You cannot make this work without a weekly review.* Block out the time

in a place where you can work with all your tools at hand. Inform those around you that this is your time to think and work. Clear out the inbox and then **JUST DO IT!**

One of the very nice things that the David Allen Company allows you is to audit the class after you have taken it the first time at a reduced fee. This week I was able to attend a second seminar for a second time. David is as energetic and exciting as before, the presentation is the same, yet improved, like a fine wine aged another year or so. I made several new discoveries in the class and I am tweaking my processes a bit. I only added six items to my project/tasks lists during the mind sweep. (Hey I have not done my weekly review yet this week and that is less than I would normally add). During the “projects” portion of the class I completed another mind map of one of my existing projects and I have several actions that need to be addressed from that. I will get those Windows keyboard shortcuts remembered. I will look down my calendar further in my weekly review and I will look back to make sure I did not miss things. I am also going to take a few days for myself this year for reflection and self discovery.

I use a Palm Pilot as my portable computing resource and I extend that a further than David does. I have discovered over the years that many people around me react badly to me and think I am playing with my toys when I take out my Palm and enter data or check something in my mind. The first day of class I purchased one of the pocket notebook systems. I have already put it to good use and my wife will now not have to complain about my “toys” when we are at dinner or out to a movie. Finally I purchased the CDs of “Getting Things Done FAST” which is the seminar on audio. Now I won’t need to take up a seat in class next year! Oh and that extra set of templates now reside in my workspace at home for a ready reference.

I have validated what have started here, I re-energized myself and I relaxed even more. This is right for me and I just have to keep working on it. My self discovery continues.

Thanks David.

My personal implementation Of the David Allen "*Getting Things Done*" methodology.

After I had been working with the GTD system for a while I felt the need for some automation. I am a techno-geek. The following is an account of where I am today. Be sure that you understand the process and flow before heading down the automation trail. Automation is great, it saves time, but there are many subtle issues to think about and it can be a rabbit hole of non-productivity.

After reading the book attending a public seminar and trying every piece of software and hardware I could get my hands on I have settled on what I consider a baseline high-tech implementation of GTD for an enterprise user that has Microsoft Outlook/Exchange and their primary PIM (Personal Information Manager). Be careful of your "inner geek" it is very easy to keep playing with your implementation, tweaking, changing hardware and software. For many people GTD can be done with a three ring binder and some blank paper.

With Outlook at the core of the system David Allen has worked with Net Centrics to create an Outlook add-in to implement GTD. The add-in extends outlook by adding a tool bar, special views and some custom fields and linking. All of this makes executing the GTD flowchart a few mouse clicks which decreases the processing time to almost zero. It works!

With the GTD methodology and projects there are a few issues that need to be addressed when using computer based tools. The first problem is that the GTD add-in uses categories to setup places for actions; @Home, @Office, @Computer, etc. This is an issue with many devices that sync to Outlook. Devices such as the RIM do not use categories and that defeats the purpose of location based actions. The Palm OS systems currently only support sixteen categories thus if you create too many locations they will not properly sync with the Palm. The Pocket PC can carry down all of the Outlook categories. Note that I have been using the system in my current configuration for several months and I have these categories in place:

@Agendas, @Calls, @Computer, @Errands, @Home, @Office, @PDA, @Waiting For, @Personal, Projects, Someday

There is a small issue with the GTD add-in. If you add items in the PDA you will have to use the "Update Task Actions" button on the GTD tool bar, this links the Actions to the Categories.

One final note is to be careful with the day specific tasks so you do not get a bunch of alarms when you might not want them. (Sometimes these alarms will happen at midnight depending on high tech tool you are syncing to.) I have had many cases where I did not think when the task is created that I have automatic alarms set for tasks. GTD lets you manage that at task creation but you will have to activate the open task on creation flag in the settings so that your task can be edited before it is saved.

The magic of a personal filing system

David Allen helps you by getting your filing system organized. He uses a alphabetic filing system to hold all your reference files. Along with the alphabetic filing system for paper files I have organized my Outlook folders into alpha order and the My Documents directory into a similar structure. All of my reference material is in alpha order with folders for each project.

In my work environment it is cheaper to keep my working and reference emails on the server for both portability and for backup purposes.

I think that is all for now, I hope this has been enough of a stimulus to get you started!

Definition of Insanity

Doing the same thing, the same way...and expecting a different result.

-Roger Milliken

I would like to pass on my gratitude to David Allen and the team of professionals around him. Without the book and the training I would still be stuck trying to decide if a task was an A1 or a C3 and creating useless categories for my contacts list.

--rjf