

David Allen - The Quisic Interview

*Fast Company magazine has called him the "personal productivity guru," but David Allen says he just wants to help busy people learn how to come out from under their mountain of "stuff." In over 20 years as a consultant, executive coach, and popular corporate speaker, Allen has worked to give people the tools they need to combat the inefficiencies that can arise as they gain greater responsibility for complex projects and decisions. In 2001, Allen published *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* (Viking), designed to be a comprehensive manual for those who are looking to rethink the way they keep their personal and professional lives in order. The book obviously struck a chord: It recently entered its 12th printing.*

Allen's approach to maximizing productivity is a mixture of common sense, unconventional insight, and fresh perspectives on what makes managers tick. Allen points out that his approach is not simply about building a system—it's about developing a set of intuitive processes that can help people to shed inefficient habits and to solidify their commitments to themselves and to others. Quisic recently spoke with the productivity guru about why managers owe it to themselves to re-organize their lives, if only to learn what it finally means to relax.

QUISIC: The economy has slowed down a little and many companies have entered into a "let's-wait-and-see" mode. Shouldn't people be finding it easier to manage their time and responsibilities?

David Allen: To some extent, that's true. During the long boom times, people had the stress of infinite opportunity. Now some of the pressure has eased off. But it's become a different kind of pressure: You know what you need to accomplish, but you have fewer resources to make that happen. And in a strange way, because of the events of the recent past, a lot of people have upped the ante in terms of how important it is to think about the quality of what they do. "Gee," they say, "maybe I should be a little more efficient and effective so I can get home and spend an hour doing some of the stuff that I really want to do." So there's been an interesting shift of age-old issues over the last couple of months.

QUISIC: An interesting claim you make in your book is that we all have natural ways of planning and executing our everyday actions, even actions that we're never really consciously thinking about. So how is it then that so many of us get overwhelmed with all this "stuff"?

DA: I think that the nature of "knowledge work"—as [the management writer and theorist] Peter Drucker has defined it in the last 40 years—has put a whole different spin on things, and has gotten us into somewhat unnatural situations. We naturally think about outcomes, we naturally move on them, we

naturally make decisions about how to get things done that we need to get done. But what's tricky is defining what "done" means, and then defining what "doing" looks like.

In other words, your work is not self-evident. You have to define it. And even though people are giving you stuff to deal with, they're not pre-digesting it for you. I don't know anyone who got their current job and who was given a list of the 63 projects—clearly defined—that were going to be required to fulfill their job requirements, and the 153 action steps they needed to take to make that happen. And that's what's new: In the old days, you just showed up and the work was self-evident. Today, everybody has to have their own individual responsibility to define what their work is—at both the outcome level and the "how-do-I-allocate-my-own-resources-to-make-this-happen" level. We haven't been trained to think that way.

QUISIC: Why are conventional tools such as calendars and to-do lists no longer enough for managing one's time and productivity?

DA: Most of those tools don't require you to sit down and do what I just mentioned, which is to define the actual work that needs to be included. In other words, you can get a calendar, and that will manage about 3 percent of your life really well—because only about 3 percent of work has to happen specifically on a day or a time. The rest of it just has to happen in and around all the other stuff you're committed to. But first of all, you have to define what it is that needs to go on there.

What passes for organization for most people is nothing but incomplete lists of still unclear things. People haven't been trained to do the thinking they need to make the front-end decisions, so that they know what to populate their systems with. All you really need are lists, but you need to decide what goes on those lists and which are the important lists to have, and that is not at all self-evident in the tools that people have been given.

QUISIC: What are the first things people should do once they've decided that they're really committed to improving productivity?

DA: Well, first of all, they need to collect and capture into some retrievable form, into one big bucket, every single thing they consider "open loops" in their life. At the same time, they need to make sure that they have a continual system to be able to capture the things that show up "out there," things that they either have some sort of commitment about or might have some commitment about.

In other words, they need to get everything out of their head and into their in-basket, into a few—but very seamless—kinds of buckets. To write it down, if you will. That's the first thing to do: to collect the inventory. The second thing you need to do is to train yourself to make decisions about all of that. In other words, what exactly is the nature of my commitment about this thing I just wrote down? What's the project, if there is one, that I'm committing to? And if there is an action—if it's an actionable item—what's the next step I need to take to move it forward?

So that's the processing step. People need to train themselves to make these decisions on the front end instead of on the back. Then, you need to organize the results of all this into a coherent set of categories that keeps different things in different places, and that feeds the stuff back to you when you need to see it. In other words, if you want to be maximally productive, when you get to a phone, you need to see a list of every single phone call you need to make in your life.

Finally, you need to keep this "stuff" out of your head and keep it current, so that your brain can move to a different level of control, instead of constantly trying to remember and remind. But in order to do that you have to have a trusted system. And in order to trust your system, you have to stay engaged with it. And this means managing yourself and making sure that you have regular executive time with yourself to make sure you've captured everything, made the decisions you need, and organized the results appropriately.

Lastly, you need to make sure that you're using your system—from this more elegant, elevated, executive place—to trust your intuitive choices about what you do at any time, as opposed to just hoping that what you're doing is right, and getting caught up in the "busy trap." These are the big keys to managing horizontally across your life, to handling all the stuff that we have to deal with these days.

QUISIC: Management gurus tend to put so much emphasis on high-level things like vision and goals, but you emphasize that the real need is to think bottom-up as opposed to top-down. Why is that so important?

DA: You need to think at all the levels—appropriately and responsibly. You can't ignore any of them. I tend to focus on the bottom-up issues because most people don't. These are the ones that are often their weak suits: How do I make sure that things actually get done down at the very operational level in my life? Even when you're thinking at 50,000 or 40,000 feet, it all comes down to commitments to make things happen in the world, and that means that it comes down to physical engagement and involvement. A lot of people are not as responsible to themselves about how they manage the singular details of their operational life as they are about dealing with the bigger vision stuff.

QUISIC: A key element of your approach is always knowing what the required "next action" is for every project or activity. But what advice can you give to people whose biggest problem seems to be deciding what their next action should be?

DA: If you can't decide, it just means you need more information, so there's an action step you need to take in order to get more information. This could either be external—"I need to go externally and do some research or find out more data"—or it might be internal: "I need to sit down and draft ideas out of my own head and then see what shows up," or "I need to sleep on this for four weeks." There are still actions that you need to take, but it's about facilitating the decision-making process itself.

In other words, you don't know what to do until you know what to do. That's why things hang up—it's

that people haven't decided what "doing" looks like. This isn't hard—it's just 10 to 15 seconds of thinking that a lot of people are avoiding about a lot of stuff!

QUISIC: What kinds of things can stand in the way of sticking to a new productivity routine once it's been adopted?

DA: Well, the biggest barrier is people's addiction to stress. If you're someone who's used to having constant stress in your head, then you may not be comfortable doing what you need to do to reduce it. So the biggest thing is just to stick with it and make sure that you keep giving yourself enough reinforcement about being in control and having a clear head, so that at a certain point you have to do it, just like you have to brush your teeth and you have to take a shower.

I don't have to make myself clean up my in-basket and get my head empty: I can't stand it when it's not that way—but it took a while for me to change my own internal standards so that I would adopt the behaviors I needed to make that happen. In a more simplified operational way, it just means that once a week, you've got to come back to the well and get yourself cleaned up again, and get used to what it's like to have a different level of focus.

QUISIC: How can changing the way that people organize their lives lead to changes in leadership and productivity on the organizational level?

DA: Well, ultimately, it's all about focus: Where is my focus? What am I focused on? Am I focused on the right things at the right time? A good system doesn't give you answers to those questions, but what it does is facilitate your ability to free up your focus, your ability to trust your intuitive judgments about what to do—and your ability to trust that once you've made a decision, it will ultimately happen: It will actually get implemented out there. One of the things that kills inspiration is to be inspired and to not have things actually happen in the world as a result. A good productivity system ensures that there's some sort of a connection between the vision aspect of what you do and operationalizing it.

QUISIC: It can be surprising to hear you claim that, ultimately, it's really about learning how to relax rather than executing actions in a perfect sequence. That raises an obvious final question: Is this really any way to run a business?

DA: Well, it's certainly a better way to have a life. See, "relaxed" doesn't mean flabby and unconscious: You can be running a four-minute mile, and you'd better be relaxed in order to run that fast. The idea of relaxation means being able to be appropriately concerned and engaged based upon the situation at hand, and to not be over- and under-reacting based upon a lot of things that you're not managing very well. The paradoxical idea of "relaxed focus" is the highest—the most effective and productive—place to operate from. If I can throw you out of balance, I can control you: People's kids know that, and so does their competition. So your ability to respond—which is your "response-ability"—requires a head that is not distracted in how it's dealing with the world.