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## The Busy Trap

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David Allen

### PRODUCTIVITY PRINCIPLE #49

*You can never get enough of what you don't really need.*

(COMMENTARY)

Though this profound personal-growth axiom usually refers to things like “others’ approval” (you really need your own), it is equally applicable to productivity. Many can never work hard enough, because working hard is not really what they need. They need to work on the right thing. Working hard at the right thing is not hard work, or haven’t you noticed?

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### QUOTES

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*“If you don’t know what you’re doing, you don’t know when to stop.” – unknown*

*“If it moves, salute it. If it doesn’t move, pick it up. If you can’t pick it up, paint it.” – U.S. military slogan*

*“If you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is stop digging.” – Will Rogers*

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

#### “IS IT OVERTIME ALL THE TIME?”

Recently while coaching an executive I discovered another subtle but very real level of the “busy trap.” You know the syndrome: “if I can just be doing SOMETHING that feels like I’m working with focus, I don’t have to deal with the angst about all the other stuff I probably should be doing...”

He had processed down to the last dozen or so emails in IN. They were the ones he wanted to keep in there, because he needed to spend time (more than two minutes) on each of the responses. He had already set up a category of Tasks in Outlook called “At Computer”. Because I wanted him to stop using IN for a holding bin, and taste what it was like to really get it empty, I nudged him to go ahead and move those emails out of IN and onto the “At Computer” list.

As he did that, you could see the light dawn. “Wow! Now I see all my work inventory in one place! And I now realize that I would let myself spend time on those emails before anything else, because that would seem the easiest choice to make. Now I can assess them immediately within the context of everything to do. They’re not lost, and they’re in proper perspective. I’ve been letting myself get sucked into the easiest being-busy thing, instead of feeling better about better choices.”

(Continued Pg.2)

## TIP

Edit email subject lines, when you store or reply or reroute. One tiny moment of mental effort and movement on your part so helps grease the processing skids for yourself and numerous others later in assessing what this email is about, as it morphs into different things with different purposes.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT (Continued from Pg.1)

Psychic RAM tends to bring to awareness items based on criteria of latest (most recent in time) and loudest (emotionally), which is hardly the most effective file and retrieval system. In a similar way, if your system of action reminders is haphazard (post its on the screen, phone slips on the desk, notes on your chair, people interruptions), your busy energy momentum will glom on to the easiest thing to maintain itself. But the most obviously in your face is hardly the best criterion for in-the-moment choices of what to do.

Stop. Do what you need to do to feel as good as you can about what you're doing. You can never be busy enough to dispel the need to be busy. And when you really choose the work you are doing, it's a lot easier to choose not to work.

*"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." – Albert Einstein*