Getting Things Done
The Art of Stress-Free Productivity

David Allen
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Rating

8
10 Applicability
7 Innovation
7 Style

Take-Aways

• People often give too much attention to unimportant tasks and too little attention to critical goals.

• A stress-free mind reacts to new tasks like stones falling into a still pond: Large stones create large ripples, small stones create small ripples.

• A good organizational system generates appropriate responses to all tasks.

• Put every task you need to do now, later or in the future into a logical, organized system.

• Move everything from your head into a trustworthy system that you review regularly.

• Since you know that the task is captured in your system, you can stop worrying about it.

• Corral all of your stuff into designated baskets, boxes or folders.

• Use horizontal controls to place everything that commands your attention into an organized framework.

• Use vertical controls to plan projects effectively.

• To get projects under way, define your purpose and principles, envision the outcome, brainstorm, organize and identify actions.
Relevance

What You Will Learn
In this summary, you will learn: 1) How to master productivity in a stress-free way; 2) How to prioritize tasks effectively; 3) Which five steps will help you control your workflow; and 4) How to get fresh projects under way.

Review
The metaphor of the stress-free mind as a still pond encapsulates the message of David Allen’s best-selling book. When a stone is thrown into a pond, the size of the ripples correspond to the size of the stone. Allen points out that the essence of stress-free living is getting the ripples of your mind to correspond with the size of the tasks on your to-do list. But you don’t reach Allen’s placid pond via a quiet, Zen-like path. Instead, you calm the waters of your mind by building and maintaining a rigid organizational system that’s so efficient that you never have to worry about any task once it’s been fed into the machine. The popularity of this book probably owes as much to the stress level of the book-buying public as it does to the level of innovation to be found in Allen’s method of organization. Often, the actual time-management techniques that Allen offers can get lost in fancy jargon and fall short of his general observations about stress, productivity and the mind. But getAbstract recommends this manual for a productive life to anyone looking for help in dealing with stress and an overheating to-do list you’re sure to end up with a fresh approach or two in your in-box.

Summary

Beyond the Calendar
Many people today take on more projects than they can handle properly, thereby increasing their levels of stress. The projects themselves are problematic. Many of them are hampered by continual change and by fuzzy edges, so it is not always clear whether the job is finished or not. This lack of borders creates added work in organizations and spurs unnecessary, frequent memos and discussions about work in progress.

To accomplish your projects effectively and efficiently, you need to achieve the following two goals:

1. Capture everything you need to get done now, later or some time in the future in a logical, organized, trustworthy system that records everything outside of your own memory, so you don’t have to think about these issues until you are ready.

2. Discipline yourself to make advance decisions about how much information and instruction you allow into your life so you remain able to plan what you are doing and to change your plans as necessary.

You probably already have a complete calendar, but that isn’t a sufficient organizing tool, since it shows only a small portion of what you have to organize. Instead, you need a thorough, all-encompassing organizational system. This is particularly helpful for people who experience too much day-by-day or hour-by-hour distraction, which makes it hard to focus or to accomplish goals effectively.

A good organizational system is also helpful when you need to manage knowledge work, combining everyday details with the results of “big-picture thinking.”
Appropriate Ripples

To put yourself in the right mental state for getting things done, imagine that you have a mind like a body of calm water. If you throw a pebble into it, the water reacts appropriately. The ripples created on the surface are in proportion to the pebble’s mass and force of impact, and once the water has absorbed the impact, it returns to a calm, tranquil state.

Try to approach your tasks like that, so you give each one the appropriate amount of attention and effort – neither overreacting nor underreacting to the challenges.

To be efficient, you must manage your commitments appropriately, so you don’t make too many promises and add to your stress. Follow these three principles:

1. **If something is unfinished, release it from your mind** – Put it in a system you trust, essentially a “collection bucket,” so you can sort through the information when you are ready to do so.

2. **Be clear about exactly what commitments you have made** – Know precisely what you have to do to honor each commitment.

3. **Once you decide what actions to take, set up a system of reminders** – Review your reminders regularly, so you follow through.

To test how well this approach works, write down the name of the project or situation that concerns you most at the moment. Then write a list of everything you need to do to move the project forward: which steps you must take, who you need to contact, etc. Just completing this exercise should give you a greater sense of control, relaxation and focus.

Put your list of concerns and actions in a safe, separate place to get them out of your mind literally and metaphorically until you are ready to deal with them.

Managing Your Actions

Allocate your limited time by managing your actions. To begin, identify what you need to do, well in advance of when you need to do it. Clarify each project’s action steps before you start, rather than proceeding and having to spend more time dealing with problems as they develop.

Although many companies emphasize working downward from missions to objectives to the details of implementation, most people are so involved in day-to-day commitments that they have neither the time nor the breathing room to focus appropriately on the big picture. Thus, a good starting point is to get yourself up-to-date and in control of any issues that concern you right now, and then work on broadening your view.

Your commitments, projects and actions can all be planned and managed with horizontal or vertical controls:

- Horizontal controls coordinate your actions across all of the activities that engage you.
- Vertical controls guide your thinking through individual topics and projects, such as the sequence of tasks involved in a particular undertaking.

If you can use horizontal and vertical controls effectively, you can get things off your mind and get things done. This will help you to feel comfortable and in control of your work and your life.
Mastering Your Workflow

To take control of your life, follow the five stages of mastering your workflow. These five stages help you manage the horizontal aspect of your life by combining everything that has your attention at any given time into an organized system.

The five stages for dealing with your workflow are:

1. **“Collect”** – You can use various types of collection tools, such as a physical in-tray, a paper-based or an electronic note-taking device, a voice-recording device or an e-mail message. To gather this information, get everything that draws your attention out of your head and into as few collection buckets as possible. Empty these buckets regularly, either by getting rid of material or processing it.

2. **“Process”** – With each item, ask yourself “What is it?” and decide whether to deal with it there and then, defer it for later action or discard it. If you are going to act now, decide whether to do it yourself or delegate it.

3. **“Organize”** – Set up an organizing system, such as putting nonactionable items in categories called “trash,” “incubation tools” or “reference storage.” If you plan to take action, put these items in the appropriate category, such as a list of projects, project plans and materials, a calendar, a list of reminders of next actions or a list of reminders of things you’re waiting for. Find a physical way to contain each of these organizational categories, such as a basket, notebook or file system.

4. **“Review”** – Set up a time for a weekly review. Then, go over all of your identified actions and options. During this time, process all your stuff, review your system and update your lists, so you feel clear, current and complete.

5. **“Do”** – Use four criteria to choose what to do. First, consider context, which is the location you need to be in or the tools you need to carry out an action (for example, at home with your personal computer). Second, consider whether you have the time available to see it through. Third, ask if you have sufficient physical or mental energy for the task. And, fourth, set priorities. That is, if you have the right context, time and energy, what action is the most important one to take now?

Project Planning

To launch your projects successfully, use five planning phases. These steps make up the vertical component of productivity management.

The steps, in fact, reflect the way that people unconsciously think and plan when completing a relatively easy task. However, not many people follow these steps when consciously planning a project.

For this reason, informal, natural planning often garners better results.

Natural planning reflects the kind of thought process you undergo when you address everyday tasks, such as getting dressed, eating lunch or simply having a conversation. Essentially, you engage in these five steps:

1. **“Defining your purpose and principles”** – Define what works for you, clarify your focus, align your resources and motivate yourself to act.

2. **“Outcome visioning”** – By creating this vision, you can create a focus that helps you to generate ideas and thought patterns that otherwise might not have come to you. This clarity will help you to imagine the results you want and thereby drive you to achieve a successful outcome.
3. **“Brainstorming”** – To consider multiple ideas, use tools that help you come up with options, such as mind mapping (displaying thought sequences graphically) or writing down ideas. Keep your mind open, so you don’t judge or criticize; emphasize quantity not quality. You can analyze and organize these ideas later.

4. **“Organizing”** – Identify the significant pieces you need for your project and sort them by various components, processes or priorities.

5. **“Identify next actions”** – Select the next action for this project and for future planning. Earmark tasks that you are waiting for others to complete.

**Stress-Free Productivity**

Now you can put these basic principles into practice by following these steps:

- **Set up your time, space and tools** – Create a block of time and prepare a workstation where you have the necessary space, furniture and tools. Basically, you need a writing surface and room for an in-tray, although you may want to add a fax, printer and other equipment. Even if you have an external office, set up some space at home with a system that is identical to what you have at your office, so you can work in both places. Your tools should include everyday supplies, such as an organizer and calendar, file folders, scotch tape, rubber bands and Post-it notes.

- **Collect or “corral” your stuff** – Allow a couple of hours for this step. Begin by searching for things that don’t belong where they are or that are incomplete. Put these things in your in-box. Leave supplies, reference materials, decoration and equipment in place. If something that needs action is too big for your in-tray, just write a note on a piece of letter-sized paper to represent it, date it and add it to your system. Begin by putting things from your desk in your in-box and then move on to other parts of your work space, including drawers, countertops, cabinets, shelves and other cubbies. A list of “incompletion triggers” can help you remember other things you want to add to your in-box, such as a list of projects you need to start, projects you have started but haven’t completed, commitments you must honor, financial constraints, communications you need to make, training seminars you want to attend and so forth.

- **Process your in-box** – You want to go from “in” to empty. Discard anything that you don’t need, complete any actions you can do in two minutes, delegate anything you can to others, put reminders of future actions into your organizing system and identify any larger projects. To be effective, process the top item first, move through one item at a time and never put anything back into your in-box.

- **Use organizing steps and tools to help you process** – Create lists and groupings of things you want to organize. Use digital or paper-based folders to hold your lists and any reference or support information that applies to your projects.

- **Make the best “action choices”** – Now that you are organized, you can determine what to do next, based on the project’s context, your available time and energy, and the priority of each action.

**About the Author**

David Allen is president of David Allen & Company, and has had more than 20 years experience as a management consultant, executive coach and educator. He is especially known for his work on productivity, and has been a keynote speaker and facilitator for many organizations, including Oracle, L.L. Bean, QVC and the World Bank. He writes a biweekly e-mail newsletter, “Productivity Principles,” and his work has featured in many magazines and newspapers, including Fast Company, Fortune and the Los Angeles Times.