

## Getting Things Done

The Art of Stress-Free Productivity

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### About the Author



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He is the author of two books -the international best-selling book, *Getting Things Done: the Art of Stress-Free Productivity* and *Ready for Anything: 52 Productivity Principles for Work and Life*. He has published numerous essays and articles in professional journals and periodicals on the topic of personal effectiveness. More than 150 of his original essays have been featured in his e-newsletter, "*David Allen's Productivity Principles*," with a global readership of more than 43,000 people. He is a popular keynote speaker on the topics of time and stress management, individual and team productivity, and high performance work practices.

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### Wisdom in a Nutshell

In this book, David Allen shares his breakthrough methods for stress-free productivity. While in today's fast paced world it is easy to feel overwhelmed with the sheer volume of things to do, there is a way to actually get things done. The trick is to get it out of our heads and into a trusted system that we can use whenever we need to. It is only when our minds are clear and our thoughts organized that we can achieve effective results.

## Chapter 1: A New Practice for a New Reality

The methods presented in this book are based on two basic objectives. The first is to capture ALL the things that need to get done (regardless of time frame) - and get them into a logical, trusted system outside of your head and off your mind. Second, is to discipline yourself to make front-end decisions about all the “stuff” you let into your life so that you always have a plan for the “next actions” that you can implement at any moment.

### The Problem: New Demands Insufficient Resources

Almost everyone nowadays has a sense of having so much to do and not enough time or resources to do it. This results in a lot of stress and anxiety. Here are some of the reasons why:

1. Work no longer has clear boundaries.
2. Our jobs keep changing.

*Work no longer  
has clear boundaries.*

3. The old models and habits are insufficient.
4. There is confusion between the “big picture” versus the “nitty-gritty” the company's mission and vision and end goals versus everyday tasks such as returning calls and emails and filing for instance.

### The Solution: The “Ready State” of the Martial Artist

Think for a moment about how it would feel to be one hundred percent in control of all the things you had to do, instead of having the vague suspicion that the things you have to do are actually controlling you. It IS possible. There is a way to stay stress-free, and get meaningful things done with minimal effort across the whole spectrum of your life and work.

#### The “Mind Like Water” Simile

In Karate, they say that one must have a “mind like water” in order to describe the position of perfect readiness. When throwing a pebble into the water how does the water respond? The answer is that the water responds appropriately to the force and mass of the input then returns to calm. In this same way, we must respond in the appropriate manner to “stuff” that comes up in our lives and return to calm. Clearing the mind and being flexible are essential.

### The Principle: Dealing Effectively with External Commitments

The stress that people experience in their lives comes from inappropriately managed commitments they either make or accept. These are called “open loops”. These open loops are made up of agreements that we make with ourselves, whether big or small, that we haven't done yet. It can be as big as closing the deal with the client, to something as small as buying new toothpaste.

Our subconscious mind keeps track of all these incompletes, or open loops, and drags our attention from the things at hand. Anything that you have accepted some sort of internal responsibility for, whether personal or business related, is an open loop.

#### The Basic Requirements for Managing Commitments

1. If it's on your mind, then your mind isn't clear. Anything that you consider unfinished in any way must be captured in a trusted system that is OUTSIDE your mind.
2. You must clarify what your commitment is and decide what you have to do to make progress towards fulfilling it.
3. Once you've decided the action to take, you must keep reminders of them in an organized system you can review regularly.

#### Why Things Are on Your Mind

1. You haven't clarified exactly what the intended outcome is.
2. You haven't decided what the very next physical step is and/or
3. You haven't put reminders of the outcome and the action required in a system you trust.

## Managing Action is the Prime Challenge

What you DO with your time, body, and attention are the real options to which you must allocate your resources. The real issue is the appropriate thing to DO in response to given choices. The real issue is managing actions.

## The Value of a Bottom-Up Approach

Intellectually, the most appropriate way to handle things is from the top down. Usually this starts with the corporate mission and vision, then defining objectives, and then focusing on the details.

However, it seems that the bottom up approach may be more productive. This is starting with the most mundane tasks and going up. Getting current on and in control of what's in your in-basket and on your mind right now will provide the best means of broadening your horizons.

## The Major Change: Getting It All Out of Your Head

The first thing to do is to capture and organize 100% of your "stuff" in and with objective tools on hand to get them out of your mind. This means having to sit down to MAKE A LIST. You can't skip this step, because your mind WILL keep working on anything that is still in an undecided state.

## Chapter 2: Getting Control of Your Life: The Five Stages of Mastering Workflow

No matter what the task, there are five stages that you go through as you deal with our work. These are: *collecting* the things that command your attention, *processing* what they mean and what to do about them, *organizing* the results, *reviewing* the results as options for what you choose to do, and lastly *DOING*.

### Collect

It's important to know what needs to be collected and how to collect it most effectively.

Gathering 100 percent of the "Incompletes" This means everything. Anything that starts with an "I have to", "I should" or "I'm going to" needs to be put out of your head and into a system.

#### The Collection Tools

1. Physical in-basket
2. Paper-based not-taking devices
3. Electronic note-taking devices
4. Voice-recording devices
5. E-mail

*It's important to know what needs to be collected and how to collect it most effectively.*

#### The Collection Success Factors

1. Every open loop must be in a system and out of your head.
2. You must have as few collection buckets as you can get by with.
3. You must empty them regularly.

### Process

After collecting our "stuff" and placing them in an in-box, we must then answer the question: What is it? After defining our "stuff" clearly we then have to ask the question: Is it actionable? In other words, can something be done to get rid of our stuff? There are two possible answers, yes or no.

If the answer is NO then there are three possibilities:

1. It's trash and no longer needed.
2. No action is needed now but something may need to be done later (incubate).
3. The item is potentially useful information that may be needed for something later on (reference).

If the answer is YES then the stuff is actionable. Two things need to be determined about actionable items:

1. What "project" or outcome have you committed to?
2. What's the next action required?

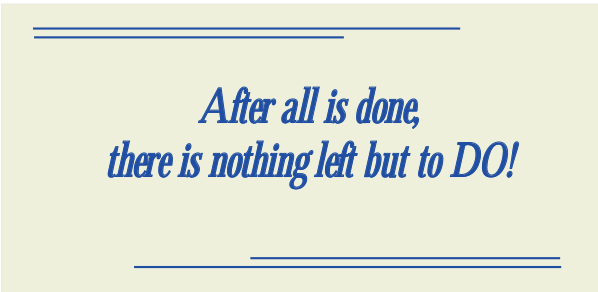
If it's about a project, you need to capture that outcome on a "projects" list that you can review weekly.

Do it, Delegate it, or Defer It

1. Do It. If an action will take less than two minutes, it should be done the moment it is defined.
2. Delegate It. If the action will take longer than two minutes ask yourself, "Am I the right person to do this task?" If not then delegate it to someone more qualified.
3. Defer It. If the action will take longer than two minutes, and you are the right person to do it, you will have to defer acting on it until later.

## Organize

For non-actionable items, the possible categories are trash, incubation tools, and reference storage. To manage actionable things, you will need a list of projects, storage or files for project plans and materials, a calendar, a list of reminders of next actions, and a list of reminders of things you're



*After all is done,  
there is nothing left but to DO!*

waiting for. All these organizational categories need to be physically contained in some form. They can be written in a notebook, put in a box, entered into a PDA or laptop.

Projects

A project is any desired result that requires more than one action step. You don't actually do projects; you just do actions that resolve them.

The Next-Action Categories

The next-action decision is central. That action needs to be the next physical, visible behavior, without any exception, for every open loop. Calendars are essential for time-specific and day-specific actions and day-specific information.

No More Daily To Do Lists!

Next action lists, calendars and other tools will make daily to-do lists not needed. It is virtually impossible to nail down all the things you have to do all the time and you are constantly writing and re-writing them and getting frustrated at the end of the day when many items aren't finished.

The "Next-Actions" List(s)

Your action reminders go on "Next Actions" list. This and your calendar are at the heart of daily action-management organization. If you have only twenty or thirty of these, you can put them under one general "next actions" list. If you have more than that, it would be a better idea to subdivide them, for instance, "calls", or "work".

## Critical Success Factor: The Weekly Review

The Weekly Review is the time to:

1. Gather and process all your "stuff"
2. Review your system
3. Update your lists
4. Get clean, clear, current and complete

A review is a way to keep yourself updated, and at the same time give you a feeling of being in control of all your "stuff".

After all is done, there is nothing left but to DO!

## Chapter 3: Getting Projects Creatively Under Way: The Five Phases of Project Planning

### The Natural Planning Model

Your mind goes through five steps to accomplish virtually any task:

1. Defining purposes and principles
2. Outcome visioning
3. Brainstorming
4. Organizing
5. Identifying next actions

Each step has its own purpose and is done one after the other instinctively-usually. Unfortunately, in the corporate world things and steps get a little confused.

These steps are essential to getting things done.

6. Get high quality mechanics/ file cabinets
7. Get rid of hanging files of you can

## Chapter 4: Getting Started, Setting Up the Time, Space, and Tools

### Setting Aside the Time

It is recommended that you set aside a block of time to properly initialize this process and prepare your workstation- whether at home or in an office. An ideal time frame for most people is two whole days, back to back.

### Setting Up the Space

You'll need a designated "workspace" to serve as a central cockpit of control. A functional work space is critical. Don't skimp on work space at. Don't share space. It is imperative that you have your own space.

#### Getting the Tools You Need

Here are some basic tools you'll need:

1. At least 3 paper-holding trays
2. A stack of plain letter sized papers
3. A pen/pencil
4. Post-Its (3x3)
5. Paper Clips
6. Binder Clips
7. A stapler and staples
8. Scotch tape
9. Rubber bands
10. An automatic labeler
11. File folders
12. A calendar
13. Wastebasket/ recycling bins

### The Critical Factor of a Filing System

A simple and highly functional personal reference system is critical to this process. Here are some success factors for filing:

1. Keep your general-reference files at hand's reach
2. One alpha or simple A-Z filing system
3. Have a lot of fresh folders
4. Keep the drawers less than three-quarters full
5. Label your file-folders with an auto labeler

## Chapter 5: Collection: Corraling Your "Stuff"

### Ready, Set...

*A functional work space is critical.*

There are three very practical reasons to gather everything before you start processing it. First, it's helpful to have a sense of the volume of stuff you need to deal with. Second, it let's you know where the "end of the tunnel" is. Lastly, while you're processing and organizing you don't want to be distracted psychologically by an amorphous mass of stuff that might still be "somewhere".

### ...Go!

#### Physical Gathering

The first thing to do is search your environment for things that don't belong where it is and put it in your in-basket. They all go into "in" so that you can process them later on. The only possible exceptions to the list are supplies, reference material, decoration, and equipment.

Start with your desktop then head to your desk drawers, countertops, inside cabinets, floors, walls, and shelves, equipment, furniture, and fixtures, and other locations where you may have gathered "stuff".

#### Mental Gathering: The Mind-Sweep

Once you've finished cleaning up your physical environment, you'll want to collect anything else that may be residing in your psyche. Write out each thought or idea that has your attention (no matter how small or insignificant it may seem) on a separate

sheet of paper, then process them individually like we did earlier. Later on, you will be able to sort through the papers and decide which to trash, incubate, file for reference, or put on a next actions pile.

#### The "In" Inventory

If your head is empty of everything, personally and professionally, then your in-basket is probably quite full but your mind should be blissfully empty. Now that your in-box is full, the next step is getting the in-box from full to empty.

## Chapter 6: Processing: Getting "In" to Empty

When you've finished processing "in", you will have trashed what you don't need, completed all less-than-two-minute actions, handed off to others anything that needs to be delegated, sorted off into your own organizing system actions that require more than two minutes, and identified any larger commitments or projects you now have based on the input.

*Do NOT put actions  
you would hopefully like  
to see finished on a certain day.*

### Processing Guidelines

1. Process the top item first.
2. Process one item at a time.
3. Never put anything back into "in".

### The Key Processing Question: "What's the Next Action?"

You're dealing with one item at a time, and you're going to make a firm next-action decision about each one. Just remember, if it is non-actionable it goes into one of three categories:

1. Trash - stuff that absolutely no purpose in your life.
2. Items to incubate - things that may be useful in the near future but require no action now.
3. Reference material - things you don't need at the moment but may be useful in the future.

#### Identifying the Projects You Have

The last step to getting to the bottom of your in pile is to shift your perspective from the single action details to the larger (multi-step) picture - your projects. It doesn't matter if you do this first or last. The important thing is that a project list (from planning a conference to planning a child's birthday party) gets written down and is maintained.

## Chapter 7: Organizing: Setting Up the Right Buckets

#### The Basic Categories

1. A "Projects" list
2. Projected Support Material
3. Calendared actions and information
4. "Next Actions" lists
5. A "Waiting For" list
6. Reference Material
7. A "Someday/Maybe" list

It is critical that these categories be kept very distinct from each other. Once you have these categories in mind all you really need to get started are lists and folders. Keep in mind that lists can take on the low-tech form of papers in a folder or a notebook, to a high tech software program.

#### The Actions That Go on Your Calendar

These are actions that must be done on a certain day and/or at a certain time. Do NOT put actions you would hopefully like to see finished on a certain day.

#### Organizing-As-Soon-As-Possible Actions by Content

There are some things that have to be done ASAP. It helps to organize these things by concept. For instance, emails that must be sent or answered can fall under the "At Computer" category, and the list should be placed near the computer. Here are some of the common context categories: "Calls", "At Computer", "Errands", "At Office", "At Home", "Agendas", "Read/ Review". This makes it easy for you to figure out which list to pick up at exactly the

time you need it.

#### Organizing "Waiting For"

These are the things you're waiting to get back from or get done by others. It is a list of everything you care about that other people are supposed to be doing. For example, you're by the phone and see that you're supposed to make a call to a client to ask for a proposal. You make the call. The document in question is now filed under your "waiting for" list while you wait for his/her reply. When the proposal comes in you put it into your "read/review" pile. Once you've read it, you can give it to your boss for approval and once again it is on your "waiting for list".

#### Project Lists

We discussed project lists earlier. Remember that project lists are comprehensive indexes of your open loops.

#### Projected Support Materials

Project support materials are not project actions or reminders, they are resources to support your action and thinking about your projects.

#### Reference Materials

These are things where no action is required, but you want to keep because it contains useful information you may need in the future.

#### Somedays/Maybes

These are things that you may want to reassess in the future. These could be a trip you want to take someday, a sport you want to learn, or books you want to read. These are things you put on the back burner, but make sure you put it in a place where you can easily refer to it when you want.

#### Checklists: Creative Reminders

One thing that shouldn't be overlooked in personal system organization is checklists. Checklists are recipes of potential ingredients for projects, events, and areas of value, interest, and responsibility.

## Chapter 8: Reviewing: Keeping Your System Functional

You need to review your system often enough to feel assured that you are doing what you need to be doing, and that it's okay to not be doing what you're

not.

#### What to Look At and When

First thing to look at is your calendar since it is the most time sensitive. This will probably be your most frequent review. Next, is your action lists. This is to check the list of all the actions you could be doing in your present context. If your calendar is trustworthy and your action lists are current, these may be the only things you'll need to refer to more than every couple of days.

*"I absolutely know right now everything I'm not doing but could be doing if I decided to."*

#### Updating Your System

It is difficult to be productive and get things done when your lists are out-of-date. It is imperative to update your system.

#### The Power of the Weekly Review

The weekly review is doing whatever it is you need to do to get your head empty again. It's going through the five phases of workflow management- collecting, processing, organizing, and reviewing all your outstanding involvements. You know you're done when you can honestly say, "I absolutely know right now everything I'm not doing but could be doing if I decided to"

This can be done at any time you can block off at least two hours to review and update your system. This could be on a Friday afternoon at the end of the workweek or on long commutes home.

## Chapter 9: Doing: Making the Best Action Choices

When it comes to getting things done, you have to follow your instincts, and do what your heart tells you. There are also three basic frameworks that can be enormously helpful in the context of deciding your actions.

The Four Criteria Model for Choosing Actions in the Moment

1. Context - what could you possibly do where you are with the tools you have at the moment?
2. Time available - How much time do you have before you have to do something else?
3. Energy available - How much energy do you have at the moment, how much energy does the task require?
4. Priority - What is the most important thing for me to do?

The Threefold Model for Evaluating Daily Work

1. Doing Predefined work
2. Doing work as it shows up
3. Defining your work

The Six-Level Model for Reviewing Your Own Work

- 50,000 + feet: Life
- 40,000 + feet: Three to Five Year Visions
- 30,000+ feet: One-to-two year goals
- 20,000+ feet: Areas of Responsibility
- 10,000+ feet: Current Projects
- Runway: Current actions

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This model may be thought of in terms of altitude. Your priorities should sit from the top down. But, for actions taken it may be better to go from the bottom up. Just make sure all your levels align. For instance, a current activity may be to make a phone call. But, if that phone call clashes with something higher up, a long term goal of higher priority, you may want to rethink making that call.

## Chapter 10: Getting Projects Under Control

Which Projects Should You Be Planning?

1. Projects that still have your attention after you've determined their next actions
2. Projects about which potentially useful ideas and supportive detail just show up.

Tools and Structures That Support Project Thinking

It's a good idea to have good tools close at hand for capturing great project ideas when they show up. Thinking tools, writing instruments, and even a computer can be invaluable. In addition to these tools, it is also a good idea to have support structures such as file-folders, loose-leaf pages, and software tools.

How Do I Apply All This In My World?

You need to keep your "Projects" list as up to date as your "Next Actions" list. The key is to get comfortable with having and using your ideas. It is acquiring the habit of focusing your energy constructively on intended outcomes and open loops before you have to.

## Chapter 11: The Power of the Collection Habit

This system offers a method to keep your mind distraction-free, ensuring a high level of efficiency and effectiveness in your work and in your life. That alone should be a good enough reason to adapt these practices into your own life. But, aside from the practical reasons, there are also the psychological ones. Many times, people are stressed out and distracted in life. In some cases, they may even be disgusted or disappointed in themselves for not doing the things they said they were going to do. This system offers a way for you to stop breaking those subconscious agreements with yourself, and start feeling good and in control again.

## Chapter 12: The Power of the Next-Action Decision

The power of the question, "So what is the next action?" is extraordinary. Just deciding what the next step in achieving a goal is can be extremely



empowering and stress-reducing.

The Value of a Next-Action Decision-Making Standard

1. Clarity - Knowing exactly what it is you're suppose to do next.
2. Accountability - Knowing exactly whose responsibility the action is.
3. Productivity - Companies naturally become more productive under this model.
4. Empowerment - It dramatically increases your ability to make things happen with a concomitant rise in your self-esteem and constructive outlook.

## Chapter 13: The Power of Outcome Focusing

Empowerment naturally results for individuals as they move from complaining/victim modalities into outcomes and actions defined for direction. There is a sense of control, and power. It is a source of positive energy and focus. Over the years, it is becoming clear that positive projection of results can greatly influence actions and therefore outcomes.

*There is a sense  
of control, and power*