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Now we all have to Get Things Done

By Linton Chiswick

Published: April 22 2006 03:00 | Last updated: April 22 2006 03:00

It's Sunday, a cold mid-morning a little more than two months ago, and I'm attempting to fit everything - my entire life as it exists at this moment - into a chocolate-brown plastic in-tray. Theoretically, this isn't as difficult as it sounds. Anything that isn't where it should be, or that represents a project or agreement with myself that's pending, goes into the in-tray for future processing. Papers stacked around the office? That's easy . . . into the in-tray. Bank statements and bills in the big broken boxfile? Into the in-tray. Unopened letters? In-tray. Obviously I can't put the actual shower - which I intend to treat with a clear waterproof sealant - into the in-tray. So I write down "shower sealant" on a small piece of paper and put that into the in-tray, along with the other small pieces of paper that say things like "spare tyre", "leaves in drain" and "radio script". I'm emptying my mind of worries.

It doesn't feel that way, though. In fact, the whole process is so overwhelming I'm actually considering trying to put everything back again. Except now I can't remember where it all came from. I'm panicking, the paper mountain's head-high and I've lost the chocolate brown plastic in-tray somewhere underneath.

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A book got me into this mess and I'm relying on it to drag me out again. *Getting Things Done* is management coach and productivity theorist David Allen's bestselling guide to managing your life. *GTD* is a system that he developed during 25 years of coaching corporations - from Lockheed to Microsoft - government agencies and individual chaotics and its goal is "stress-free productivity", in which all is taken care of by the system, so you can focus on what's at hand. Allen, a martial-arts devotee, compares it with achieving the relaxed but focused state that is karate's holy grail. "Mind like water", he calls it, like a pond disturbed by a pebble, reacting to events with just the appropriate ripples before returning to calm again.

GTD is one of this year's Business Week bestsellers but it reached me, late last year, in a different form. By then it had mutated into what some people call a meme - the cultural counterpart of a gene, an idea or belief system killing off and replacing weaker ideas and systems. The *GTD* meme's replication environment was the internet. There were already countless blogs devoted to recording the *GTD* experience, written by conservative American housewives, by senior managers, even by a pastor. Somebody used their homepage to offer desktop "wallpaper" carrying David Allen's favourite maxims. There was a website where you could literally buy the T-shirt ("If it's on your mind, it's not getting done"). And as I write, a *GTD* prayer (The Lord's Prayer, rewritten in *GTD* lingo) is a buzz item on social bookmarking websites.

David Allen - a warm and engaging Californian who discovered his vocation during the West Coast's personal growth movement of the 1970s - has watched the internet community's adoption of *GTD* closely and his take on the subject is interesting.

"Here's the thing," he says. "Geeks are very viral, so they like to spread this stuff about.



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They're also game-players but they only like to play games where they know all the rules. Managing your in-basket is like playing chess or Go. You know there's a bottom to this thing and you know the moves to get there. This kind of completely closed system is very attractive to them."

So what are the rules? According to the book, which serves also as a lexicon for the organisationally ambitious (every concept has a name . . . *GTD* is its own language), all the papers piled over my in-tray are my "Open Loops". They're agreements I've made with myself and whether or not, and how quickly, I keep them is vital to my progress, my sense of self-worth, my happiness.

It's a concept rooted in the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s but where *GTD* is a significant advance is that it offers the modern worker - rattling around among more Open Loops and fragments of information than at any other time in history - an elegant and foolproof system for closing them.

All "stuff" - the endless and unstoppable incoming tide of information, tasks, requests, e-mails, letters, calls and personal responsibilities - passes from a physical or digital in-tray through a series of simple binary decisions.

First, does it require you to do something? If not, bin it, file it for reference or store it as (and here's another *GTD* term) a Someday/Maybe. A Someday/Maybe is a project or idea you don't want to act on now but you don't want to forget about either.

Perhaps its relevance depends on something further down the line, in which case it goes into your Tickler File, which will remind you to revisit it at the appropriate moment.

What if the item does require an immediate action? If it's a Project and can't be completed in a single step, it's first broken down into a series of Next Actions. Then, it's simple. If it takes less than two minutes, Allen suggests you do it right away and bask in the peculiar warmth of a task ticked off. If it's more demanding, you can delegate it or defer it by adding it to your calendar, what Allen calls the Hard Landscape of your schedule, among the other appointments, conferences and deadlines that make the actual shape of your week.

If it's simply a task, it's added to one of your Next Action lists (which are arranged by context rather than project . . . actions for when you're online, when you're by a telephone, in the company of a particular colleague). Crucially, *GTD* doesn't differentiate between work and domestic life. An Open Loop is an Open Loop - undone and unplanned, it will haunt you in the middle of the night or the middle of the day whether it's the radio script or the shower sealant. Once *GTD*-processed, it's in place, its completion inevitable. Mind like water.

Clearly the state of the in-trays - the plastic in-tray, the e-mail inbox - lies at the heart of the system. And *GTD* relies on a frequently emptied in-tray. Seeking moral support, I contact Albuquerque-based multitasker and *GTD* evangelist Marc Orchant. Orchant works full-time for a small, cutting-edge software company, which has adopted *GTD* as a company system, and he still finds time to write daily for a handful of blogs on subjects that include office culture, tablet computers and *GTD* itself.

He wants me to call him early in the morning, before the rest of Albuquerque is awake. (If ever there was a poster-boy for *GTD* . . .) I ask him whether that initial "Mind Sweep", in which you unload your life into an in-tray and then into the *GTD* system, had held terrors for him too.

"The first time you do it, it's overwhelming," he says. "You look at all this stuff you had buried in your head, stuck away in drawers or envelopes or nooks and crannies in your work place or home . . . I always thought I was an organised person - the first time I did it, I was astounded at how much crud I had piled up all over the place."

Two months later and, so far, I'm appreciating *GTD*'s streamlined beauty. It seemed a little like overdressed common sense before - we all break down projects into tasks, we all make lists - but the application of a demanding and watertight system reveals that what we really make are incomplete lists. And an incomplete list still requires that we worry about the details. It doesn't guarantee things won't fall through the cracks. *GTD* is an all-or-nothing arrangement.

Things are getting done. And when they're not getting done, they're not keeping me awake, because I know the system's taking care of them.

It's also been refreshing to think more deeply about the process of organising my work. I've been talking with Merlin Mann, a prolific and entertaining San Francisco-based writer whose 43 Folders website (named after a *GTD* Tickler File) is one of the best places to read about the system as it's practised. "These are skills that you aren't

taught in school," he says. "You go to school and you learn some history, you learn how to climb a rope but nobody really tells you how to manage your time."

He warns me, though, to expect difficult days ahead. I'll probably ignore my Weekly Review (in which all lists are updated) and start leaking information. (I don't tell him it's been about three weeks since my last check-up.)

Marc Orchant, similarly, foresees trouble at home.

"Sometimes my wife asks me a question and when I lean over and glance at my calendar or pick up my Treo [smartphone] to look up some information, she says: 'Can't you remember anything?' I look at her and say: 'It's not that I can't, it's that I choose not to.'"

To be fair to Mrs Orchant, I can see how that answer could be irritating. And when my own wife ends an argument with "Why don't you add that to your action list?", I deliberately stop myself pointing out it's called a "Next Action" list.

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