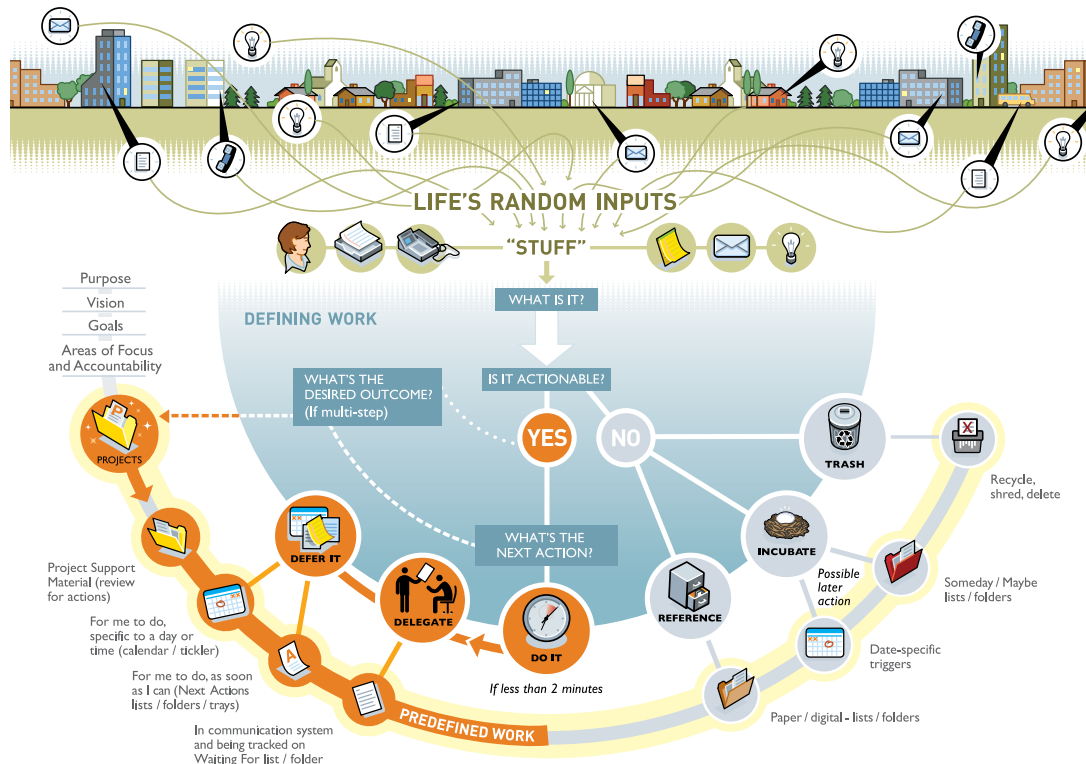


STILL GETTING THINGS DONE

The cluttered realm of productivity advice—and advisors—is ever-evolving, so why does David Allen's system continue to resonate after nearly 15 years?

By Elaine Lipworth



ABOUT ALLEN

David Allen studied history at the University of California, Berkeley. He began applying his productivity techniques in the 1980s when he designed a programme for executives at Lockheed Martin.

PRODUCTIVITY GURU David Allen shook up the business world with his best-seller *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*, published in 2001. He describes his method as a “mental spa”: Empty your head of clutter, he says, and you are likely to become wildly creative, energetic—and calm. The title of the book and the technique itself may sound like straightforward pragmatism, but the Getting Things Done (GTD) system has drawn many fans among the life-hacker crowd and beyond, as Allen’s impressive global roster of clients—Fortune 500 companies, musicians, filmmakers—attests.

The essence of relaxed sartorial fashion in faded jeans and a taupe cashmere turtleneck, Allen, 69, looks a decade younger, with boyish features and a lean physique. The charismatic consultant and author lives with his wife and business partner, Kathryn, and their King Charles spaniel, Suki, in a Zen-style apartment in Amsterdam overlooking the Rijksmuseum. His home office—inevitably—is pristine. You won’t find any complex set-ups here, just a computer, iPad, iPhone, in-basket and current project files.

As a new, revised edition of *Getting Things Done* debuts March 17, expanding Allen’s pioneering principles and philosophy, *Four Seasons Magazine* asked him to discuss the evolution of his approach to productivity, well-being and life.

Q: How did you originally come up with the GTD approach?

A: I had my own problems with lack of clarity, and I researched practical techniques to handle that. Then I discovered that these skills applied to everyone else, too, and I spent three decades implementing them for organisations and individuals, who found they gained more internal clear space. That’s a cool place to operate from, whether you’re solving a business problem or hitting a golf ball.

Q: What do you mean by “clear space”?

A: Let’s use the spa metaphor. You cleanse your body, take a sauna, sweat it out. If you go through a nutritional programme, you get rid of the dross in your system. GTD is the elimination of mental dross. Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them—it should be relaxed and flowing,



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David Allen

like water. A clear space is the most optimally productive state.

Q: What does GTD entail?

A: The primary thing is to stop using your mental space as your office. You need to identify and clarify your commitments, and build an “external brain” for remembering and reminding you about them. It relieves the brain of pressure and gives it the freedom to make good creative choices.

Q: In such a crowded marketplace of business books and productivity advice, why do you think GTD has resonated globally for so many years?

A: In the old days, your job and your world were pretty much defined by whatever showed up in front of you: the baby crying, workers on the farm coming in for lunch. Until the 1900s, life was structured for you. Since then, the dramatic change has been that people have had to figure out what to do and when—as opposed to its being evident. The concept of time management was a totally new frontier. The late, great [management consultant and author] Peter Drucker said the biggest job that people would have would be defining what their work is. Figuring out what you need to do has become a necessity for almost everyone who is not in pure survival mode. A lot of successful people, like Warren Buffett, had already structured their lives to make sure their mind does not have to remember things. All I did was make what many successful people do implicitly much more explicit, so that you can do it better and more consistently.

Q: How is the world different now from the way it was when your book first came out?

A: The number of professionals who make executive decisions has expanded. More people are working for themselves, not for companies, and are more dedicated to their own professional development. And as we all know, the speed of change is much greater—how fast things have to be recalibrated and re-thought. The plethora of technology has created a lot of potential distraction. If you know what you’re doing, it

offers incredible opportunities. If you don’t know what you’re doing, it’s an opportunity to feel overwhelmed. So it’s even more important now than it was in 2001 for people to decide, “What really matters to me?”

Q: How does the new edition of your book address those changes?

A: The original GTD principles are still relevant and always will be. In 2090, when scientists go on an expedition to Jupiter, they’re still going to need some version of an in-basket to capture random thoughts that may be pertinent to the mission. But a big part of the new edition is about being appropriately engaged with your world—all of it. You have to know everything you’re not doing in a particular moment, and to feel OK about that. You’ll never finish everything, so you need to get comfortable with undone things. Productivity as a word has a lot of baggage, but productivity in my terms is just achieving desired results with as little effort as possible. So if you went on vacation to relax but you didn’t relax, that’s an unproductive vacation.

Q: How does life change with GTD?

A: You can see the bigger game. You don’t need time; you need perspective. How much time does it take to have a good idea? Zero. What you need is mental space to be able to hang out, daydream, be spontaneous. You need to clear the deck. And there could hardly be a greater elixir for health and well-being. GTD gives you the ability to be present in the moment. The food, wine and conversation at dinner are richer and more delicious. The blog is better written. The nap is more restful. The board meeting is more fruitful.

Q: If you decided to take a new path in life, what would be your Plan B?

A: I’d wait tables in a great restaurant, enhancing people’s experience of dining. All my work would be complete at the end of the evening, and I’d go home with money in my pocket.

Elaine Lipworth writes about culture, health, travel and lifestyle for U.K. publications including The Mail on Sunday’s Event and YOU Magazine.

THE FIVE CORE STEPS TO GTD

How to Bring Order to Chaos | Allen advises using the “two-minute rule”: If something can be done in two minutes or less, do it right away. For instance, if there’s a quick email to write, do it now. It will take you longer to track it and remind yourself later than to finish it in the moment. Also, keep a list of all the things that will take more than one step: Get new tires on the car, hire the assistant, get the kids into a new school, take a vacation. Most people have between 30 and 100 items on their list.



1 | CAPTURE

Identify anything potentially meaningful to you, and collect what you’ve identified in holding bins—an in-basket, notepad, voice recorder, etc.



2 | CLARIFY

Determine what to do with what you’ve captured. Clarify outcomes and specific actions—not just “get in touch with landscaper,” but “email landscaper.”



3 | ORGANISE

Park your information and reminders in appropriate categories such as “calls to make” or “errands to run.”



4 | REFLECT

Consistently review and renew your inventory of projects, actions and other commitments.



5 | ENGAGE

Take action, making confident choices about what to do.