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Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity

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Book Review

Shawn Blau

David Allen, Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2001.

As any one who ever worked at an entrepreneurial start-up can attest, the biggest shock to the system the first day on the job is the sheer volume of work that is demanded. Not only are there many more hours of work per week, but each individual job requires so many different duties. And for the new businessowner, these demands are multiplied many-fold. What makes or breaks entrepreneurs in the first few years often is not marketing, managing, financing, or production, but simply whether or not they can crank out the amount of work that comes across their desks.

David Allen's book is by far the best guide I've ever read on how to increase one's personal productivity in the information age. Like many people, I pick up the popular "time-management" books as they come out, hoping to find something that will help me to become more productive. Allen's book is in a different class than any of these, however, because it doesn't prescribe time management at all. As the author points out, it's really impossible to "manage" our time, or our information, or our priorities at all. The only thing we can manage is our actions. Allen favors a bottom-up approach that focuses on "mastering the mundane."

Allen's model is based on one main psychological insight. He hypothesizes that to focus effectively on one task at a time, you must clear your mind of all other "stuff" that's clamoring for your attention, no matter how trivial any of this "stuff" may be. And the only way to clear your mind is to physically store away all your other internal commitments into a reliable "collection bucket," so your mind can feel free to focus on the task at hand.

Based on this main insight, Allen sets out three main "power" principles:

First, the power of the "collection habit:" collect 100 percent of all your incomplete jobs, internal commitments, and "stuff" into one central in-basket as soon as it crosses your radar. Second, the power of the "next action decision:" decide in advance for all your projects what you can actually *do* next to advance the project, even if you don't have time to actually do it now. Then give yourself a visible reminder to perform this action when you do have time. Third, the power of "outcome focusing:" for each project, first define "What's the successful outcome?" Then work backward to come up with physical actions that can advance this outcome.

At his next level of organization, Allen constructs a five-stage work model based on his three power principles. His five-stages of work flow are based on the following "core processes:"

1. *Collect* 100 percent of everything that commands your attention.
2. *Process* all the "stuff" that's collected according to its meaning and the appropriate next action.
3. *Organize* the results into easily accessible "buckets."
4. *Review* this organization on a weekly basis or more often.
5. Then finally, *do*. That is, physically perform the next action that will contribute to a successful outcome.

At the final level of organization, Allen creates a decision tree for all incoming "stuff," with eight possible branches:

- trash;
- someday/maybe (hold for review);
- reference (easily retrievable);
- projects (multistep tasks);
- project plans/support material (material required for each project);
- waiting for someone else;
- calendar tickler (to do at a specific point in time); and
- next action (to perform at the earliest opportunity).

It's a very elegant system, and I couldn't resist trying it out on my own overflowing pile of work. Are the book's strategies really practical? Yes, I know they work, because I tried many of them on myself.

- I took apart my old disorganized filing system, and replaced it with one single alphabetized "general reference file," and one perpetual "tickler file," as Allen recommends.
- I shelled out another \$30 to download Allen's instructions for PCs, and adapted my Microsoft Outlook system with his defaults.
- I got rid of all my calendars and to-do lists, and replaced them with one PDA, which I synchronized with my Microsoft Outlook.
- I collected all my "stuff" into one in-basket.
- I sorted all my email and all my tasks into separate "buckets," based on where I would physically perform the next action (e.g., at the phone, computer, desk, etc.)

- I made it a point to review my PDA and my MS Outlook every weekend.

None of these are easy tasks, but they do produce results. They do save time, and most importantly, they do give you greater peace of mind. I'm sold, and plan to adopt Allen's entire system.

Does the book have some shortcomings? Yes. For one thing, Allen is addicted to a spacey, "New Age" jargon that can be somewhat irritating, and distracts from his very specific and coherent model. Second, it would be much better if the author cited his sources, and added a usable bibliography. It appears that Allen picked up many of his techniques in the course of his work as an executive "coach." He seems to have collected bits and pieces from many valuable sources, but he doesn't cite any of them. Third, the book appears somewhat intimidating, because it outlines a seamless model of perfect workflow. It's very difficult to adopt his system all at once. Maybe one of his clients can install the whole system all at once, if there is an executive "coach" sitting at his side all day. But for the average person, it would be much more accessible if Allen included some examples of how real-life people actually put Allen's

techniques into practice a little at a time. Surprisingly, these examples are available on the author's excellent web-site (www.allenco.com), but they should have been included in the book itself. Fourth, since most of us depend on our PC for whatever limited organization we do have, specific instructions on how to adapt the PC to Allen's techniques would make the book much stronger. Again, these are available from Allen's web-site, but you have to pay him another \$30 to download them.

Finally, Allen could have used some of his own strategies on himself as he edited the book. His book seems to have been patched together from many shorter articles on executive coaching, several of which are available on his web-site. As a result, although Allen's model is unusually coherent and organized, the book itself is somewhat disorganized and difficult to follow in places. A more logical organization and a more unified presentation would have made the book stronger.

But all of these are relatively minor quibbles. This is an important book, with an important and useful message. It will be of great value to entrepreneurs, and also to those who work with them.

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