



GETTING THINGS DONE

How To Achieve Stress-Free Productivity

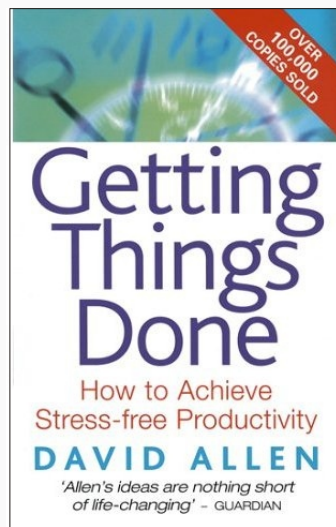
By David Allen; Piatkus Books Ltd., 2001

From the moment we wake up until the time we go to bed, most of us have an overwhelming number of things to do everyday, at home, at school, at work. We have to go at a hurried pace just to get everything done, and sometimes we feel that we have too much to handle and our lives are getting out of our control. We get home tired, stressed out and worried about the things we failed to do and all the other things that we have yet to do the next day.

"Getting Things Done" by David Allen describes an "incredibly practical process that can help busy people regain control of their lives", become more relaxed, and still get everything done. He

provides systems, tools, insights, and tips on how to accomplish more with less effort, be happier and more successful individuals.

[read the summary](#) ➔



About the Author/s:



David Allen is an international author, lecturer, and founder and President of the David Allen

Company, a management consulting, coaching, and training company.

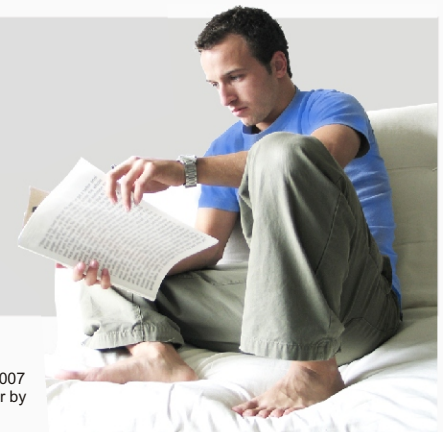
In the last twenty years he has developed and implemented productivity improvement programs for over a half million professionals in hundreds of organizations worldwide, including many Fortune 500 corporations and U.S. Government agencies. He delivers public and in-house seminars, executive workflow coaching, and consulting programs that address interactive and organizational productivity and alignment issues.

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I. Too Many Things On Your Mind

If you're a normal person, chances are you have too many things on your mind right now. This is the result of the world you live in-- people usually take on more than they have the resources to handle things.

In the era of globalization, the nature of jobs changes such that work no longer has clear boundaries. From assembly-line work, most jobs now call for "knowledge work." Companies are continuously evolving and people have to change and evolve to keep up. While your parents held the same jobs for forty or fifty years, most people these days are more like free agents, and change jobs and careers several times for continual growth

Aside from work, you are probably trying to do several other personal projects or tasks you want or need to achieve and accomplish. We want to be good parents, good daughters or sons, good sisters, good friends, good neighbors. And we work hard at fulfilling all these roles.

The commitments that you make with yourself and with other people constitute most of the things on your mind. And these commitments, once mismanaged or inappropriately managed, usually cause most of your stress.

It's likely that you have more internal commitments than you are aware of. From answering emails to taking out the trash, from making a presentation to seeing an aging

parent, all of these are on your mind at any given moment.

Every time you fail to do one of these or leave one unfinished, it stays on your mind and adds to your stress level. Why? Basically, because of three things:

- You haven't clarified exactly what the intended outcome is.
- You haven't decided what the very next physical action step is.
- You haven't put reminders on the outcome and the action required in a system you trust.

Unfinished or unfulfilled tasks and commitments are what constitute much of the pressure and stress you feel everyday.

II. Clear Your Mind

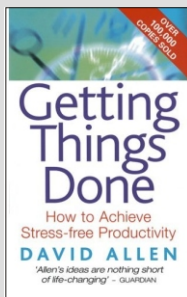
There is no way to achieve relaxed control if you keep things only in your head. The first step in taking positive action and gaining control is to get clarity on what you need to do, make decisions, and then take action. The key to managing all the "stuff" on your mind is "managing your actions."

"Managing actions" means making appropriate choices about what to do at any point in time. This may sound obvious, but the truth is, many people have no idea what next step they need to take to accomplish a project or a commitment.

Also, people say "I don't have time to _____" and feel overwhelmed by a particular project because they keep focusing on how big a task it entails. What you need to recognize, is that you can't do a project at all-- you can only do an action related to it. And most actions only take a minute or two, in the right context, to move a project forward.

Most of the time, the real problem is not lack of time, but the lack of clarity or definition about what a project is, and what actions are required to do it.

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III. Horizontal and Vertical Action Management

You need to control commitments, projects and actions horizontally and vertically. Horizontal management means keeping track of all the things and activities that you need to do go to the drug store, visit your aunt, have lunch with a friend, water the plants, finish a paper, shine shoes, buy stamps, and others. In fact, you may be surprised at the volume of things you need to deal with in just one day.

You need to have a system to help you keep track of most of these things, supply the right information when you need it, and to allow you to shift focus from one thing to the next, quickly and easily.

Vertical management or vertical control means being able to think up and down the track of various individual projects and commitments. This is project planning in its broad sense. It's focusing in on a single endeavor, situation or person, and fleshing out the details, priorities and sequence of actions required to handle it.

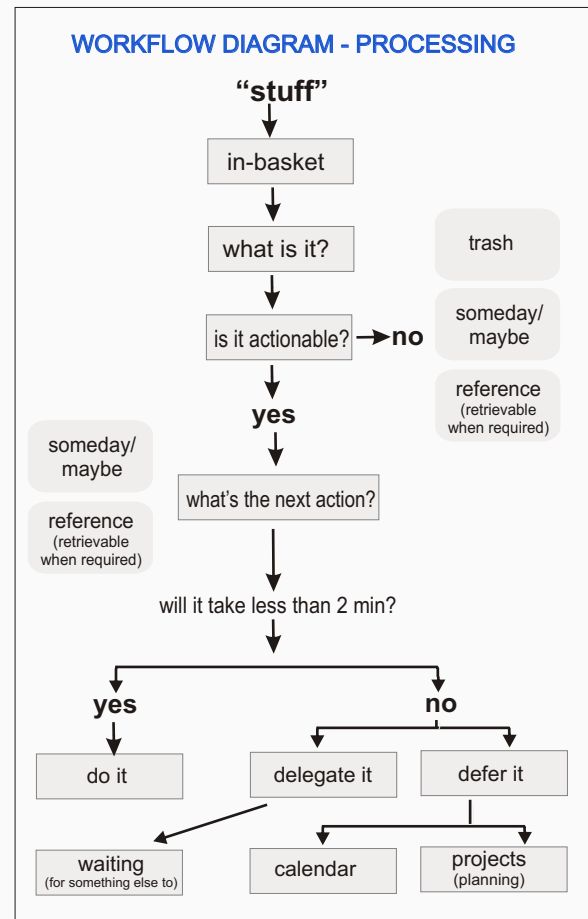
IV. Gain Control of Your Life: Five Stages of Managing Workflow

First, let's take horizontal management. To gain control of your projects and commitments, and ultimately your life, is to deal with them through a five-stage process:

1. **Collect** things that command your attention.
2. **Process** what they mean and what to do about them.
3. **Organize** the results which you...
4. **Review** as options for what you choose to...
5. **Do.**

The method is straightforward and is usually what most people do to accomplish things. But, what you need to do is to improve how they handle each of these stages. Most people are unable to collect all the things or process them

well; others are bad at organizing results, while others fail to review them consistently. If you are unable to do any of these first four stages well, then what you decide to do may not be the best choice.



A. Collect

In order for your mind to let go of the need to hang on to everything, you must know that you have truly captured and collected all the things that might represent something you have to do.

So first, just like filling a bucket, collect all the things that you consider incomplete in your life personal or professional, big or little, urgent or insignificant. This means all the things that you want or think should be different than it currently is, and that you feel committed to changing. Use various collection tools to do your collecting:



- Physical in-basket
- Paper-based note-taking devices
- Electronic note-taking devices
- Voice-recording devices
- e-mail

Having these devices, however, does not ensure successful collecting. Most people do use some of these tools, but still feel out of control. To make sure your collection system works, you should do the following:

- Every open loop must be in your collection system and out of your head.
- You must have as few collection tools or baskets as you can get by with.
- You must empty them regularly; this doesn't mean you have to do everything in your in-basket; it just means you have to regularly review what you find there, and then decide what to do about it. You don't keep it in there. Not emptying your collection baskets is like never dumping your garbage.

B. Process

After you've made your collection, you need to go over each item and ask yourself:

- What is it? Most of us keep things in our basket for days, months or years (such as emails from other departments, work colleagues, etc) simply because we failed to really identify what they are or what they mean to us, and if we really need to do something about them.
- Is it actionable? If the answer is yes, then decide what the action should be and do it. If the answer is no, then you can either throw it out, or keep it because it might need action in the future (incubate), or keep it because it could be useful information (reference).

Deciding on the next action for something simply means deciding on the next physical, visible activity that needs to be engaged in, in order to move the current reality toward completion. It can simply mean making a phone call, writing down ideas for the next meeting, talking to someone, or doing research.

After you've decided on the next action, you have three options: Do it, Delegate it, or Defer it.

If an action takes less than two minutes, it should be done at the moment it is defined. If the action takes longer than two minutes, ask yourself if you're the right person to do it. If the answer is no, delegate it. If the action takes longer than two minutes, and you're the right person to do it, defer acting on it until later and track it on one or more "NextAction" lists.

C. Organize

After you've completed your processing stage, you will have eight categories of reminders and materials that will result from your processing (see workflow diagram). Together they make up a

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David Allen is an international author, lecturer, and founder and President of the David Allen Company, a management consulting, coaching, and training company.

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Having logged thousands of hours working with individual executives and senior professionals, David has developed a revolutionary, unique and highly practical system for improving personal and organizational productivity.

He is the author of two books -the international best-selling book, *Getting Things Done: the Art of Stress-Free Productivity* (Viking; 2001) and *Ready for Anything: 52 Productivity Principles for Work and Life* (Viking; 2003). 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 120,000 people. He is a popular keynote speaker on the topics of time and stress management, individual and team productivity, and high performance work practices.

To know more about the author, please visit <http://www.davidco.com>.



system for organizing just about everything that's on your plate. All of these categories need to be organized and physically contained in some form, such as a list or another retrievable set of reminders.

For non-actionable items (or things you said 'no' to in the diagram), the possible categories are trash, incubation tools (Someday/Maybe), and reference storage. For items that fall into Trash, you need to get rid of quickly. Someday/Maybe lists can be useful and inspiring, as they contain a list of things you might want to do someday, much like a parking lot of possible projects. This may include learning a new language, sport or artistic activity. The Reference file contains information that has intrinsic value and may be useful in the future.

To manage actionable things (the 'yes' group of items), you will need a list of projects, storage for project plans and support materials, a calendar, a next actions list, and a list of reminders of things you're waiting for.

A 'Projects' list need not be listed in any particular order; they just need to be on a master list that you can review regularly. For example, a partial 'Projects' list may look something like this:

- Get new staff on board
- August vacation
- Staff off-site retreat
- Publish book
- Finalize computer upgrades
- Update will
- Finalize budgets
- Finalize new product line

Project Plans and Support Materials are relevant information to help you implement your projects and that you can organize by theme or topic.

For next action categories, you need 1) a Calendar and 2) a Next Actions List. A Calendar is where you put three things:

- Time specific actions things you need to do at a specific time (appointments, etc)
- Day-specific actions things you need to

do on a specific day (reports, calls, etc) but not necessarily at a specific time

- Day-specific information things you need to know on a specific day (flight schedules, directions for appointments, etc)

The calendar should be sacred territory. If you write something there, it must get done that day or not at all. The only rewriting should be for changed appointments.

The 'Next Actions' list is where you put all the longer-than-two-minutes, non-delegatable action you have identified, which you need to do but not on any given time or day, and therefore does not need to go in your calendar. If you have only 20 or 30 of these, you can put them all in one file. But if you have more, it's better to subdivide them into categories, such as 'Calls', 'Project Head Questions', etc.

You will also need a "Waiting for" list for all the items that you have placed in the "delegate" category, and that someone else needs to do before you can take action.

After you have made all these lists, you will have to set up a personal organization system.

D. Review

After you've organize all your 'stuff', you need to periodically review it, to see what's getting done. After all, writing is different from doing. You need to be able to review the whole picture of your life and work at appropriate intervals and levels.

Do a weekly review of all your open loops or Projects, Project Plans, Next Actions, Calendar, Waiting For, and even your Someday/Maybe list. This also gives you an opportunity to ensure that your brain is clear and that all the loose strands of your past few days have been collected, processed, and organized.

The weekly review is the time to:

- Gather and process all your 'stuff'
- Review your system
- Update your lists
- Get clean, clear, current and complete



Aside from the weekly review, you also need to have a bigger view. This means you need to be clear about the big picture of your life, as well as a vision of what you would like it to become in the next year, in three to five years. You need to have a good idea of your main areas of responsibility (family, work, etc). This gives you a clearer perspective about what your current actions and projects have to be.

E. Do

Even with your personal organization system, every decision to act will still remain an intuitive one, whether you make a call or do something else. The challenge is to migrate from 'hoping' it's the right choice to 'trusting' it's the right choice. The basic purpose of this workflow process is to facilitate your making good choices about what you're doing at any particular time.

At 3:22 on a Wednesday, how do you choose what to do? Given your personal organization system, you can apply criteria for choosing:

- Context (some things can only be done at work or at home, near a computer or a phone)
- Time available (don't start a 30-minute task if you only have 10 minutes; do something that takes 10 minutes or less to accomplish)
- Energy available (don't begin a difficult task when you are feeling tired; do something less taxing)
- Priority (ask yourself; given your context, time and energy available, what task would give you the greatest payoff?)

Doing entails: doing predefined work (tasks in your Calendar or Next Action lists), doing work that shows up (unexpected tasks, visitors to entertain, emergencies), defining your work (breaking down new projects into actionable steps, and processing your inputs as you do them).

V. Getting Projects Under Way: The Five Phases of Natural Planning

The five phases of natural planning is vertical management, or simply, advanced common sense, in accomplishing tasks and projects. Natural planning entails:

1. Defining Purpose and Principles
2. Outcome visioning
3. Brainstorming
4. Organizing
5. Identifying Next Actions

1. Defining Purpose and Principles

Before planning and doing a project, ask yourself 'why?' Almost anything you are currently doing can be enhanced and galvanized by more scrutiny. Why are you going to your next meeting? Why are you having friends over? Why are you hiring a marketing director?

Asking 'why' helps you define success, creates decision-making criteria, aligns resources, motivates, clarifies focus, and expands options.

2. Outcome Visioning

Next, you need to envision an ideal outcome for a project. You must have clear picture of what success would look like. This gives you the power of focus, which can create ideas and thought patterns in your head that you wouldn't have otherwise. So you need to create a clear outcome in your head, define what it is you want to accomplish, see yourself actually doing it.

Three basic steps for developing a vision are:

- View the project from beyond the completion date
- Envision "wild success" (suspend "Yeah, but...")
- Capture features, aspects, qualities you imagine in place



3. Brainstorming

Once you know what you want to happen, and why, the 'how' mechanism comes into play. The most popular technique for brainstorming is "mind mapping", or simply creating a graphic format for your ideas. In mind mapping, the core idea is presented in the center, with associated ideas growing out in a free-form fashion around it. This is external brainstorming, putting ideas down in a tangible, physical form, such as writing it down on a board, using Post-its, or outlining a program on the computer.

The great thing about external brainstorming is that it allows you to look at your original ideas, and think up of new ones. This is called distributed cognition.

So when you brainstorm, just let ideas flow at this stage. The key is expansion, not contraction, so the more ideas you generate the better. Just empty your mind of all your ideas and analyze them later. Brainstorming keys also include the following:

- Don't judge, challenge, evaluate, or criticize
- Go for quantity, not quality
- Put analysis and organization in the background

4. Organizing

If you've done a good job of emptying your mind, you will feel a natural organization emerge. Organizing usually happens when you identify components and subcomponents, sequences or events, and priorities. This is the stage where you can use structuring tools, from informal bullet points, scribbled literally on the back of an envelope, to project-planning software like Microsoft Project.

Once you perceive a basic structure, your mind starts to fill in the blanks. Here is where the Basics of Organizing need to be done:

- Identify the significant pieces
- Sort by: components, sequences and priorities
- Detail to the required degree

5. Identifying Next Actions

The final stage of planning comes down to decisions about the allocation and reallocation of physical resources to actually get the project moving. The key question to ask is: "What's the next action?"

VI. Getting Started: Setting Up The Time, Space and Tools

To get started on vertical and horizontal management of your 'stuff', set up a block of time and prepare a workstation with the appropriate space, furniture and tools. If your space is properly set up, it will reduce your resistance to dealing with your 'stuff'.

An ideal timeframe for most people is two whole days, back to back. But if you don't have the luxury of getting two days free, just start the process of collection and you will instantly see the payoff from this process. You can set aside a weekend or a holiday to do this. But be sure to clear your time of any other commitments.

It is imperative that you have your own space to do this, and have your papers untouched by others. Don't share your space with a spouse, or sibling.

If you're committed to the full implementation of this workflow process, you will need the following supplies:

- Paper holding trays
- A stack of plain letter-size paper
- A pen or pencil
- Post-its
- Paper clips
- Binder clips
- Stapler and staples
- Scotch tape
- Rubber bands
- Automatic labeler (try the Brother labeler as it's the most user-friendly)



- File folders
- A calendar
- Wastebasket/recycling bins

VII. Making the Best Choices

In the end, of course, deciding and doing really comes down to a matter of trusting your heart, your spirit or your gut. The vertical and horizontal workflow process outlined in this book only gives you a better idea, and a better standpoint for doing so. 💡

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