GETTING THINGS DONE

The Art of Stress-Free Productivity

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MAIN IDEA

Your ability to be productive is directly proportional to your ability to relax. Only when your mind is clear and your thoughts are well organized can you truly unleash your creative potential. Thus, the key to being more productive is to develop realistic and sustainable ways you can relax more.

And how do you become more relaxed? The answer is simple and direct – transform the way you work and the way you actually experience work by developing a trustworthy system to manage all the things you would ordinarily try and remember. In fact, the more you can clear your mind by downloading those "not to be forgotten" items into a failsafe system, the clearer you'll be able to think about other items and the more productive you'll become.

The human brain has creative capacities and powers many people only glimpse for a few minutes in their lifetimes. Instead of allowing their minds to function at high levels of performance, many people fill their brains with the mundane and routine details of everyday life. Or worse, they spend time endlessly repeating all the items and projects they are trying to juggle simultaneously. This is a huge waste of creativity. A better, more effective approach, is to put in place a good system to handle all those details, leaving the mind clear to focus on more important issues.

Thus, the key to getting more things done doesn't lie in learning how to do more but in how to think more clearly, and in creating circumstances where there is an absence of stress. To do that on a consistent basis day after day requires a system to keep your thoughts organized and structured on a continual basis.
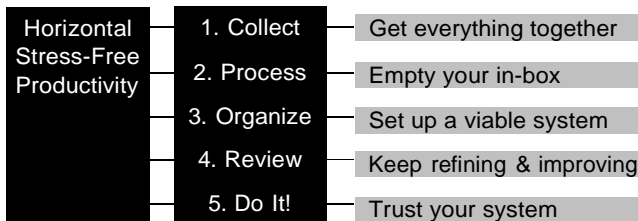
The clearer your mind is and the less worries you have about inadvertently forgetting important things, the more productive and effective you will be. To feel truly in control, you need two things:

1. A logical and thorough system for capturing everything (large and small) you feel responsible for.
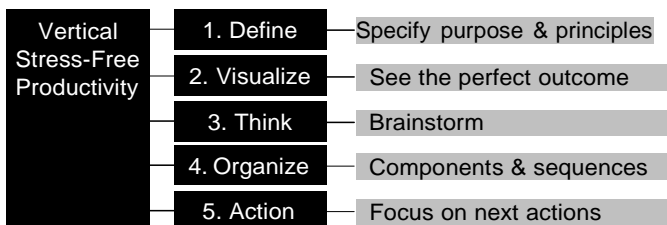2. A workable plan for knowing what the best "next action" is for every item in the system.

In essence, the real key is not to manage time, information or even priorities. The main challenge in getting more things done is to manage your actions using a system you trust and have confidence in.

To be productive and stress-free in the horizontal aspect of life (across a broad range of different areas):

Horizontal Stress-Free Productivity		
1. Collect	Get everything together
2. Process	Empty your in-box
3. Organize	Set up a viable system
4. Review	Keep refining & improving
5. Do It!	Trust your system

Similarly, productivity in the vertical aspect (managing projects) involves five steps:

Vertical Stress-Free Productivity		
1. Define	Specify purpose & principles
2. Visualize	See the perfect outcome
3. Think	Brainstorm
4. Organize	Components & sequences
5. Action	Focus on next actions

By putting this system in place in your life, there are three key benefits to be derived:

1. By collecting everything in one place and processing all your stuff through a single system, you'll eliminate all anxieties that important pieces are "falling through the cracks" and being ignored.

2. By continually asking, "What's the next action", you'll get a leap in personal productivity and a huge boost in genuine results generated.

3. By focusing on the outcome desired, you'll harness your mental and imaginative powers to produce what you want to happen with even less effort.

Section	
1	The Art of Getting Things Done

Main Idea

The clearer your mind is and the less worries you have about inadvertently forgetting important things, the more productive and effective you will be.

To feel truly in control, you need two things:

1. A logical and thorough system for capturing everything (large and small) you feel responsible for.

2. A workable and flexible plan for knowing what the best "next action" is for every item in your system.

In essence, the real key is not to manage time, information or even priorities. The main challenge in getting more things done is to manage your actions using a system you trust and have confidence in.

Supporting Ideas

If your mind is focused on trying not to forget something else, you'll be less effective in working on the item which you are attempting to think about. There are several potential reasons why some item may be "on your mind" while you are concentrating on something else:

· You haven't clarified exactly what your intended outcome is in this area.

· You haven't decided what the best and most productive "next action" would be.

· You may not have in place a system which will provide you with reminders of the outcome and action you intend to take.

If any of these circumstances apply, a subconscious part of your mind will automatically assume responsibility to remind you. And if you get too many of these ongoing reminders running simultaneously, you very quickly start feeling overwhelmed. There will be a disincentive to take on anything new, because your mind will signal that you already have too much to do.

The key to greater productivity, therefore, is to get all the things you want to do out of your head and into a workable system that will dictate and control your actions. You want to manage your actions better, filling your time with small actions that lead towards your intended outcomes in all areas of your life.

A productive personal action management system:

· *Takes a "bottom-up" approach.*
Intellectually, most people naturally think time management systems should be "top-down" – first defining a lifetime mission, then critical objectives and finally implementation details. In practice, most people are so caught up in their day-to-day commitments the bigger picture gets blurry. Thus, a more effective approach is "bottom-up" – meaning you strive to get control of what's in your in-basket each day in such a way that you ultimately have time available to pursue additional activities that push the envelope outwards.

· *Features both "horizontal" and "vertical" control elements.*
Commitments, projects and actions need to be controlled horizontally and vertically. "Horizontal control" means you maintain coherence and consistency of direction across every area of your life. "Vertical control" means thinking up and down a topic or project, and working out the details involved. You need to be able to handle both the broad spectrum of tasks and complex projects.

· *Captures and organizes 100-percent of your "stuff".*
"Stuff" is defined as anything you feel responsible for which does not yet have a desired outcome or a next action step. For any degree of control to exist, there has to be some rational and consistent way to transform "stuff" into clear objectives and doable actions.

· *Progressively reduces and ultimately eliminates stress.*
Simply and purely because your mind will stop worrying about having to remind you about things you should not forget and start thinking about the matter at hand instead.

Key Thoughts

"I have searched for a long time, as you may have, for answers to the questions of what to do, when to do it and how to do it. And after twenty-plus years of developing and applying new methods for personal and organizational productivity, alongside years of rigorous exploration in the self-development arena, I can attest there is no single, once-and-for-all solution. No software, seminar, cool personal planner or personal mission statement will simplify your workday or make choices for you as you move through your day, week and life. But if there's no single means of perfecting personal organization and productivity, there are things we can do to facilitate them. As I have personally matured from year to year, I've found deeper and more meaningful, more significant things to focus on and be aware of and do. And I've uncovered simple processes that we can all learn to use that will vastly improve our ability to deal proactively and constructively with the mundane realities of the world."
– David Allen

"The art of resting the mind and the power of dismissing from it all care and worry is probably one of the secrets of our great men."
– Captain J.A. Hatfield

"A basic truism I have discovered over twenty years of coaching and training is that most of the stress people experience comes from inappropriately managed commitments they make or accept. Even those who are not consciously 'stressed out' will invariably experience greater relaxation, better focus and increased productive energy when they learn more effectively to control the 'open loops' of their lives. You've probably made many more agreements with yourself than you realize, and every single one of them – big or little – is being tracked by a less-than-conscious part of you. These are the 'incompletes' or 'open loops' which I define as anything pulling at your attention."
– David Allen

"Think like a man of action, act like a man of thought."
– Henry Bergson

"In knowledge work, the task is not given; it has to be determined. 'What are the expected results from this work?' is the key question in making knowledge workers productive. And it is a question that demands risky decisions. There is usually no right answer; there are choices instead. And results have to be clearly specified, if productivity is to be achieved."
– Peter Drucker

"Men of lofty genius when they are doing the least work are the most active."
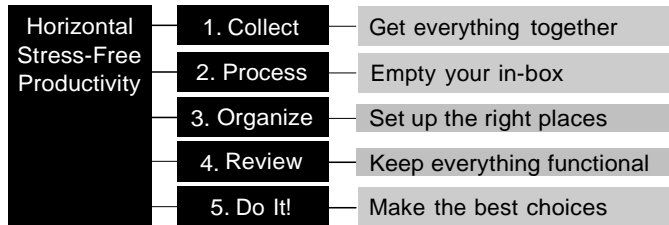– Leonardo da Vinci

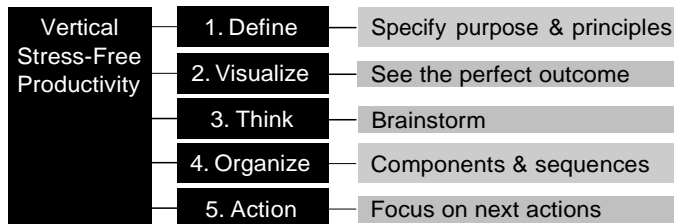*"Imagination is more important than knowledge."*
– Albert Einstein

Section 2	Horizontal and Vertical Stress-Free Productivity

Main Idea

To be productive and stress-free in the horizontal aspect of life (across a broad range of different areas):

Horizontal Stress-Free Productivity	1. Collect	Get everything together
	2. Process	Empty your in-box
	3. Organize	Set up the right places
	4. Review	Keep everything functional
	5. Do It!	Make the best choices

Similarly, productivity in the vertical aspect (managing projects) involves five stages:

Vertical Stress-Free Productivity	1. Define	Specify purpose & principles
	2. Visualize	See the perfect outcome
	3. Think	Brainstorm
	4. Organize	Components & sequences
	5. Action	Focus on next actions

Supporting Ideas

The horizontal aspect of our lives incorporates everything that has our attention at any particular time. To manage our workflow in this area productively and without stress, there are five discrete stages:

Horizontal Productivity	1. Collect	Get everything together

Your mind will only let go of low level tasks if it is confident you have a system in place which captures everything for future action. Thus, you need an "in box" which captures:
• Physical items and possessions.
• Notes taken down on paper.
• Electronic messages, e-mail and notes.
• Voice messages.
• Written or published materials.

The way you collect and consolidate all of these items can be high- or low-tech to suit your own requirements and preferences. What's more important is completeness – unless you are collecting everything, your mind will still feel a responsibility to remember some items itself.

This collection phase works best:

· *If you have as few collection in-boxes as possible.*
Ideally, you want to have as many in-boxes as needed but as few as you can get by with. Why? If you have too many in-boxes, your system will become unwieldy and duplicates will keep cropping up.

· *If you regularly and consistently empty each in-box.*
Your in-boxes are collectors rather than storage points. In other words, you don't want items to stay "in" the in-box for very long. Instead, items need to be processed regularly and consistent with your processing system. Too much stuff in an in-box generates stress, not results.

· *If every base is covered and nothing gets left out.*
You'll only stop worrying about stuff if you're confident everything that needs to is actually getting to your in-boxes. Putting stuff into your in-box for processing has to become an integral part of your lifestyle. That also means you'll need in-boxes which can literally handle everything:
• Supplies that you'll use regularly.
• Reference materials you want to keep for the future.
• Pictures, mementos and keepsakes.
• Physical equipment like computers, phones, etc.
• Physical mail, memos and paper notes.
• Phones message slips, business cards, handbooks.
• Voicemail messages and other audio materials.
• Video tapes and similar items.
• All items in electronic format, especially e-mails.

Again, the productivity system only works effectively if your head is cleared of everything you need to keep both professionally and personally – which will most likely mean your in-boxes will be filled to overflowing initially.

Horizontal Productivity	2. Process	Empty your in-box

Now that you've got everything together, the next challenge is to empty your in-boxes. The only way you can do this is to make a decision about what needs to be done in the future about each individual item from your in-boxes.

Your three standing rules in this stage should be:

1. *Process the top item first.*
Make certain each item gets treated individually, regardless of its relative importance. That way, you are committed to emptying your in-boxes irrespective of the importance (or irrelevance) of each item.

2. *Process only one item at a time.*
Commit to making a decision about each item as you come to it. Don't put anything back into your in-box to be decided later. Once you've picked it up, make a final decision about it.

3. *Never put anything back into your in-boxes.*
In-boxes are collection points for the start of the process, not places where items should reside indefinitely. Commit to the idea that everything will get processed and never deferred.

Now, with those three ground rules, how do you go about processing whatever is in your personal in-boxes? The process is quite simple, and consists of asking three key questions (with yes/no answers) which will dictate what is to be done with each item.

Question #1 – *Is this item actionable?*

If the answer is "No", then there are three possible locations you can put this item:

1. *Into a Hold File.*
This might be an incubate file for projects that are still gelling a little more, or you may set up this file as a calendar file. If items are not relevant by a specified date, they can then be discarded.

2. *Into a Reference File.*
This is for information that may be important in the future or you may need to refer to at some future time.

3. *Into the trash.*
Throw away as much as you possibly can.

If the answer is "Yes", go on to the next question.

Question #2 – *Is this a single task?*

If the answer is "No", then you will need to move the item to your projects work area where it will grouped with all other items relating to that same project. That way, the item will stay part of your management system until the project is either completed or discontinued.

If the answer is "Yes", go on to the next question.

Question #3 – *Can this task be done in 2 minutes or less?*

If the answer is "No", you then have three possible locations you can put this item:

1. *Into your Delegate File.*
   This is the area from which you delegate the task to another person who is better suited than you are to doing it. Once a week, you then go through your delegate file and make all the appropriate assignments.
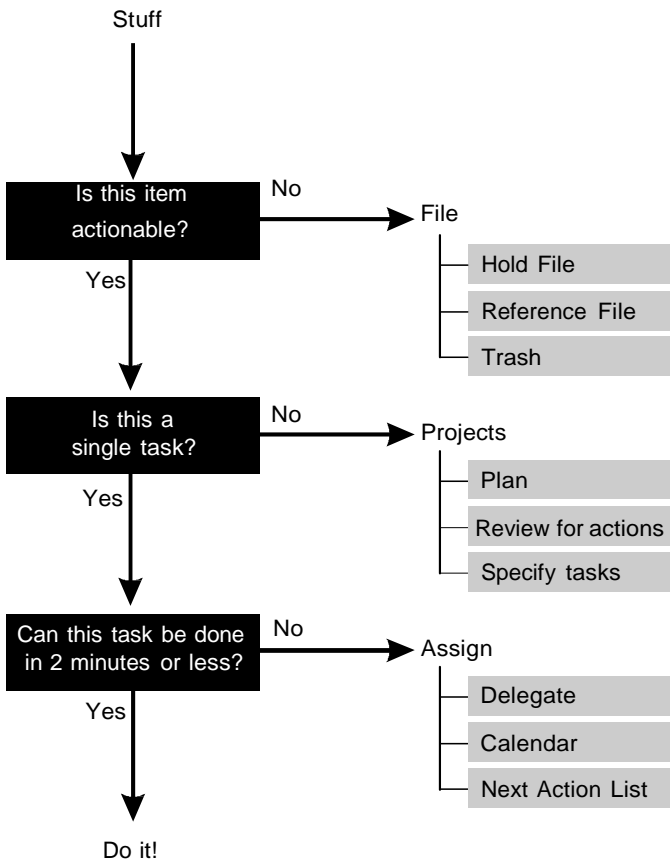
2. *Into your Calendar File.*
   If you need a block of time to accomplish this task, have a calendar where you set the necessary time aside. Your calendar file needs to be organized and referred to on a regular basis if it is to be very effective.

3. *Into your "Next Action List".*
   This is a file you keep close at hand. Whenever you get a few minutes spare that you weren't expecting, you can then grab this file and fill that time productively.

If the answer is "Yes", then go ahead and do the task immediately. Don't even bother adding it to your system. Get it completed and out of the way altogether.

This processing system for emptying you in-boxes can also be represented schematically as follows:

Stuff

Is this item actionable?	→ No →	File

Yes ↓

File
— Hold File
— Reference File
— Trash

Is this a single task?	→ No →	Projects

Yes ↓

Projects
— Plan
— Review for actions
— Specify tasks

Can this task be done in 2 minutes or less?	→ No →	Assign

Yes ↓

Assign
— Delegate
— Calendar
— Next Action List

Do it!

Horizontal Productivity | **3. Organize** | Set up the right places

The key to making your processing system work is to have a viable system in place to physically organize and structure all of your stuff adequately. Bearing in mind the fact your stuff may be physical items or in electronic format, some ideas on how to set up and organize your system's destination areas are:

File
— Hold File
— Reference File
— Trash
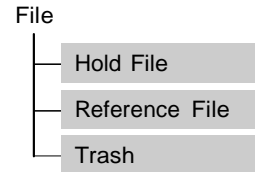
Your Hold File – for nonactionable data – should have at least a couple of different components:

· *A "Waiting For" List.*
  This would include lists of all the items you're waiting for someone else to do something on before you can complete them. This list needs to be reviewed frequently, and triggers or reminders built in somehow so when the other person has completed their part, that item then becomes immediately actionable. Depending on the logistics involved, a "Waiting For" list may be:
  • A written list kept in a central location.
  • Documents in a "Waiting For" folder.
  • E-mails moved to a computer folder named "Waiting For".

· *A "Someday / Maybe" List.*
  This covers all those items that aren't of immediate relevance but which should be retained for future use. You can organize this in any of several ways depending on your personal needs and preferences:
 • As a paper based list of potential future goals.
  • On a calendar.
  • As a list of different lists.
  • In whatever electronic format suits.
  • As a "tickler" file where you mail reminders to yourself.

Your Reference File – also for nonactionable data – should also be deliberately and carefully thought out. The majority of whatever comes into your life will be reference material or trash. Deciding how much reference material you keep and how to organize it will usually be a personal judgment call. Some possible ways to organize your Reference File efficiently include:

· Alphabetical general reference files.

· Filing cabinets with area designated drawers or sections, depending on the amount of material stored.

· Rolodexes.

· Contact managers or diary based systems.

· Libraries and archives.

· Computer based files and materials.

Separating actionable materials from reference materials is a key to success in getting more things done each day. Unless you have the ability to make this distinction, a lot of time and effort can be wasted. Simply separating materials that are to be kept on hand for future use and items that require action will immediately boost and enhance your efficiency.

Projects
— List
— Plans
— Support Materials
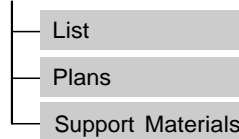
To handle and organize projects effectively, you'll need at least three basic components:

· *A Current Projects List.*
This is a comprehensive index of all the projects you currently have underway. The list doesn't even need to be organized by priority, size or urgency, it just has to include every project you're thinking about. Once a week, go through this list, and come up with some action steps to make a little progress on each of your current projects. That way, your current projects list becomes an inventory of where you want to head in the future.

· *Planning Outlines For Each Current Project.*
For each project on your list, you should have a 1-page summary detailing the project objectives and the potential steps which can be taken each week to make progress on that project. If you want, you can even fine-tune your project plans further by:
• Separating personal and professional projects.
• Compiling a list of projects you've delegated to others.
• Grouping projects together by categories or types.
• Breaking large projects down into subprojects.

· *Storage For Support Materials For Each Project.*
These are the resources you need to support actions or assist thinking about your various projects. Note these are not reminders to take action but reference materials. Depending on the format and amount of material involved, you might store these support materials:
• In file folders or drawers.
• In electronic format as attached notes, databases or e-mails.
• As loose-leaf pages in a notebook.
• In electronic organizers.
• In diaries and day planners.

Only if you have a consistent way to track all your projects and subprojects and all their associated components along with a reliable way to generate reminders on each project will your mind stop assuming responsibility for keeping track of all the details relating to projects.

Assign
— Delegate
— Calendar
— Next Action List
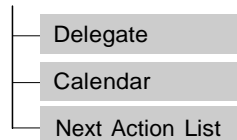
This is the action part of your system. You now want to be able to sort through all of the items you have to do yourself, and organize them so you'll be reminded to do them when you have time. You also want to group these items together in some sort of logical groupings, so that new items for action will be able to be added in on an ongoing basis. How you do this will be highly individualized, but first consider some ideas that work for other people.

To generate action reminders, try this:

· *Develop a Delegated Items List.*
Similar to your projects list, this will simply be an index of all the action items you've delegated to other people. You might have notes on each item showing who it was delegated to, and when further follow-up will be required. You can then transfer those follow-up deadlines to your calendar each week as you review your delegated list.

· *Maintain a Daily Calendar.*
First, make certain you have just one calendar, where everything goes. When you have a set appointment, enter it on your calendar. For an action item that has to be done on a certain day, write it on your calendar. Your calendar is not a daily wish list where you write the things you'd like to get done in an ideal world. Instead, you should only write down the things that absolutely must be done that day. You can organize your calendar in whatever categories make the most sense for your specific circumstances. For example, some common categories of action reminders include:
• Calls to make.
• Errands to run.
• Misc. items to do at the office.
• Things to get done at home.
• Agendas for people or meetings.
• Read/Review.
• Computer tasks and actions.

· *Always Have Your Next Actions List Close At Hand.*
If you have a list handy, whenever you get a few spare minutes for whatever reason, you can fill the time with productive activities. This list should be in whatever format makes the most sense for the way you work:
• A file folder with separate sheets for each item.
• A paper-based list in a loose-leaf binder or planner.
• A list stored in a digital assistant.
• A virtual list stored in some software program.

Once you know precisely what you need to keep track of to keep organized, all you'll need to develop to achieve that goal is a logical group of lists and folders. Another good idea is to use checklists. A checklist is nothing more than a recipe of potential ingredients for projects, events and other areas of interest. If you generate a checklist of what should be included in your next project each time a project is completed, over time you'll become better and better.

That same checklist philosophy can also be applied in all areas of your life, on an as-needed basis or in a more permanent and structured context. For example, you can develop checklists for:

· Everything you should take when you go on trips.

· What needs to be covered when organizing a conference, a training program, a meeting or a client conference.

· Your key relationships and what should be looked at.

· Your personal development progress and how effectively you are achieving both balance and progress.

· Your key areas of responsibility – work and personal.

· Your personal value statements, core beliefs and affirmations of those beliefs.

Used effectively and consistently, checklists can be great productivity enhancers and a tremendous boost to your effectiveness.

Horizontal Productivity	4. Review	Keep everything functional

Reviewing on a regular basis keeps everything functional and enables you to progressively move forward in becoming more productive and efficient in how you manage your workflow. It will also stimulate new and creative thinking about how to manage the key areas of your life.

How often should you review your system?

- *Daily – Review Your Calendar and Next Action Lists.*
  See what needs to be done that day, what appointments have been scheduled and what you can do with any available time to move your life forwards.

- *Weekly – Review Your Hold, Projects and Delegate Lists.*
  Evaluate what's happening in your life, and go through all the items you have holding, in projects or delegated. Maintain balance in your life by blocking out time in the coming week for specific items. This is your opportunity to clear your mind – by making certain everything gets out of your head and into your system. It's also a set time when new stuff can be added to your system with greatest effect. For some people, this weekly review is best done at the end of the current week, while others like to do it at the start of the following week. Either way is fine, but the key is to block out two hours for this to be done religiously each week. In summary, the weekly review is the best time to:
  • Gather all the stuff that's come into your life.
  • Process all your stuff efficiently.
  • Look at your calendar for the next week.
  • Review your system, and fine-tune where necessary.
  • Update your lists.
  • Purge your files of items that become irrelevant.
  • Get everything clean, up-to-date and complete.

- *Monthly or Quarterly – Review The Bigger Picture.*
  Periodically, you need to clarify your larger objectives, long-term goals, visions and values. How often this happens is a matter of personal preference, but every once in a while, you do need to take stock and check progress. In these reviews, you should:
  • Revisit your key goals and objectives.
  • Give thought to where you want to be in 3-years time.
  • Evaluate how your career is progressing.
  • Consider important lifestyle issues.
  • Look at alignment between your values and your lifestyle.
  • Assess your life and your work.
  • Make important decisions.

By reviewing your system regularly, you start to become more confident you're actually doing what needs to be done. In addition, over time your needs and personal preferences will vary. Unless you get into the habit of reviewing and adjusting your system on an incremental and regular basis, your system will slip out of alignment with your key goals and objectives.

A good system is never static. Therefore, the review process must be carried out on an ongoing basis. By combining daily analysis with the context of a weekly planning session and the perspective of regular big picture reviews, you'll be shaping and molding the system around the key areas of your life and your work. In other words, you'll be progressively developing an enhanced system which fits your life like a glove and which will enable you to achieve even more in less time than ever before.

Horizontal Productivity	5. Do It!	Make the best choices

The whole purpose of any workflow-management system is to enhance your ability to make good choices about what to do at any point in time. You become more productive because you have a system which identifies what the best use of your time is all the time.

So how do you use the system to decide what to do? There are three theoretical models you can use:

- *Four Criteria – For Choosing Actions Each Moment.*
  In order of importance, the four questions you should ask yourself when trying to decide what to do are:
  • What can be done right now with the tools at hand?
  • How much time is available before my next commitment?
  • How much energy do I have at the moment?
  • Of all my options, what's the most important thing to do?
  Based on your answers to these four key questions, decide what is the most productive thing you could be doing at any specific time.

- *Threefold Model – For Evaluating Daily Work.*
  During the course of an average workday, you'll generally be involved in three types of activities:
  • Doing predefined and planned work.
  • Doing work as it shows up.
  • Defining your work.
  At the end of the day, consider what kind of balance you struck between these three categories of work. Are you comfortable with that balance, and if not, what will you change to alter the balance in the future?

- *Six Level Model – For Reviewing Your Own Work.*
  Broadly speaking, there are six levels from which your life can be evaluated and analyzed:
  • Lifetime.
  • The next 3- to 5-years.
  • The next 1- to 2-years.
  • Your areas of responsibility.
  • Your current projects.
  • Your current actions.
  To succeed, you'll actually need to manage all these levels in a balanced and measured approach. There needs to be alignment between each of these levels to motivate you to do what needs to be done. Most time management systems suggest a top-down approach, where you start with your life's goals and work down from there. In practice, a bottom-up approach – starting with the details of your immediate world and looking at where you're heading, is usually more effective and practical.

Only one thing is certain. There will always be a larger list of things you're not doing at any specific instant in time than what you are doing. The key to feeling good about your actions is not only deciding what to do but also what you won't do. Your action-management system is intended to help you feel good about both.

To succeed, you have to trust your system implicitly. You must have confidence you are collecting, processing, organizing and reviewing all current commitments and potential activities unerringly. You have to feel confident your system accurately reflects your life.

To manage your workflow in the vertical aspect of life (projects), there are five stages:

Vertical Productivity — 1. Define — Specify purpose & principles

- Why is this project important?
- What standards and values do I expect to be complied with in the fulfillment of this project?

By answering these questions right at the outset, you develop a greater level of motivation and lay the foundation for the direction in which you want to head. Thinking about the purpose of any project in depth will trigger and prime your internal planning processes. This will then be tempered by a focus on your principles which effectively create the boundaries for your project. Ultimately, your principles will end up becoming a reference point for the way the project will be completed.

Vertical Productivity — 2. Visualize — See the perfect outcome

By imagining, in a positive way, what success in the project will look, sound and feel like, you start focusing on filling in the details. In fact, many times, you won't even be able to see how to actually do a project until you can visualize yourself completing the project and enjoying the benefits.

Besides, visualizing the wildly successful completion of your project will generate tremendous enthusiasm and momentum. The more compelling the mental picture, the more motivated you'll feel to making it happen.

Vertical Productivity — 3. Think — Brainstorm

Now that you can almost taste success, it's time to figure out how to get there. If you're too restrictive at this stage, there will be little room for creativity to flourish. Therefore, you want to put together a collection of ideas on how to do the project – good ideas, little ideas, big ideas, crazy ideas, the lot.

In other words, you want to brainstorm or do some mind mapping. You want to generate a large pool of ideas, with the most impractical and unwise to be discarded later. To brainstorm effectively:

- *Avoid making judgements.*
  The more you evaluate, challenge or criticize the ideas being put forward, the less likely it is something original will emerge. You want to encourage the free and unfettered flow of ideas, in search for a great idea. Save the critical analysis for later and realize you're not committed to doing everything that's put forward at this stage.
- *Go for quantity, not quality.*
  This keeps your thinking expansive. The more ideas you have to start with, the greater the likelihood an idea of quality will emerge through the brainstorming process. Generate as many ideas as possible to start with.
- *Put analysis and organization in the background.*
  Analysis, evaluation and organization of your ideas will come later. Encourage out-of-the-box ideas that are creative and original rather than limiting your brainstorming to only those ideas which are practical and workable. That's not how breakthroughs emerge.

Vertical Productivity — 4. Organize — Components & sequences

Frequently, when you get all the available ideas out in the open, natural relationships and sequences will start to emerge. The natural sequence which tends to be followed in organizing your ideas is:

- Identify the bigger, most significant pieces – the major components and subcomponents, sequences, events and/or priorities.
- Sort the pieces by whatever criteria is most applicable:
  • Components
  • Sequences
  • Priorities
- Fill in the gaps and start adding whatever amount of detail is required.

Every project will have its own amount of structure and detail that will be required in order to get things moving.

Vertical Productivity — 5. Action — Focus on next actions

Now you've got your project outline together, what are you going to actually do about it? In this stage, you specify exactly what you'll do, what resources will be required, where those resources will come from and do some reality-based practical planning.

The basic points:

- Each project will have "moving parts" – components that will require the completion of some other component first. Sit down and analyze what aspects of the project can be implemented and how that next action will be completed.
- If you decide more detailed planning needs to be done first, make a decision about what the next step is in the planning process and clarify when that next step will be completed – and by whom?
- If the next action on a project is delegated to someone else, set up a follow-up deadline on which you will actually contact that person to check progress.
- Set up a schedule and find some pieces of the project that can be worked on immediately, even if the culmination of the project itself is still many months away.

Overall, much of the project thinking doesn't need to be elaborate. In practice, much of this thinking is "back-of-the-envelope" style – the kind of thing you could do by scribbling things on the back of an envelope. From time to time a more formal structure or written plan may be required, but for many projects, a casual approach tends to be the most productive.

Of necessity, project execution needs to be an inclusionary process. Everyone needs to feel like they are contributing in meaningful ways if their best efforts are to be drawn out. Again, a casual approach tends to work best here, since formal planning sessions using high-powered tools are usually effective only if they are supplemented by informal meetings where people sit down and flesh out the details.

Most of the time, a system for organizing the horizontal aspects of life will work fine but it's worthwhile to have the ability to plan and execute projects on as-needed basis.

Section 3	The Three Key Benefits of the Getting Things Done System

Main Idea

By putting this system in place in your life, there are three key benefits to be derived:

1. By collecting everything in one place and processing all your stuff through a single system, you'll eliminate all anxieties that important pieces are "falling through the cracks" and being ignored.

2. By continually asking, "What's the next action", you'll get a leap in personal productivity and a huge boost in genuine results generated.

3. By focusing on the outcome desired, you'll harness your mental and imaginative powers to produce what you want to happen with even less effort.

Supporting Ideas

Taking each of those benefits in turn:

· *The Benefits of the Collection Habit.*
When the people you work with begin to notice you always follow through on every assignment you're given and every undertaking you give, they will trust you and have more confidence in your abilities. Similarly, on a personal level, you'll find feelings of being overwhelmed about all you have to do will be replaced by a sense of release and control. And that, in turn, generates enormous personal energy and enthusiasm for life. From an organizational perspective, if everyone in the entire organization is personally disciplined and organized enough to follow through on every commitment they make, great things can and will happen.

· *The Benefits of Making Next-Action Decisions.*
It's highly frustrating when something is discussed again and again without any action being taken. By contrast, when individuals and groups focus on always deciding what the next action should be and then actually getting out and doing that, a tremendous sense of purpose will emerge. Procrastination will be banished, and a solid track record of success will be generated. Asking, "What's the next action" forces everyone to be clear, accountable, productive and empowered in actually getting the work done.

· *The Benefits of Focusing on Positive Outcomes.*
People who habitually focus on generating profound results always do and achieve more than those who spend their time addressing vague, gnawing background concerns they should be doing something else. By identifying with clarity and precision exactly what they want, the challenge then becomes how to make it happen. It's always impressive and awe inspiring to realize just how much people can actually accomplish when they set their minds to it and become committed. This system makes it possible for people to avoid any confusion caused by fuzzy or unfocused thinking and instead zero in one precisely what they want and how they're going to do that.

Key Thoughts

"The best place to succeed is where you are with what you have."
– Charles Schwab

"The secret of getting ahead is getting started. The secret of getting started is breaking your complex overwhelming tasks into small, manageable tasks, and then starting on the first one."
– Mark Twain

"Thinking is the very essence of, and the most difficult thing to do in, business and in life. Empire builders spend hour-after-hour on mental work while others party. If you're not consciously aware of putting forth the effort to exert self-guided integrated thinking, then you're giving in to laziness and no longer control your life."
– David Kekich

"Those who make the worst use of their time are the first to complain of its shortness."
– Jean de La Bruysre

"Fanatacism consists of redoubling your efforts when you have forgotten your aim."
– George Santayana

"You've got to think about the big things while you're doing small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction."
– Alvin Toffler

"The knowledge that we consider knowledge proves itself in action. What we now mean by knowledge is information in action, information focused on results."
– Peter Drucker

"This constant, unproductive preoccupation with all the things we have to do is the single largest consumer of time and energy."
– Kerry Gleeson

"To ignore the unexpected (even if it were possible) would be to live without opportunity, spontaneity and the rich moments of which 'life' is made."
– Stephen Covey

"To make knowledge productive, we will have to learn to see both forest and tree. We will have to learn to connect."
– Peter Drucker

"We must strive to reach that simplicity that lies beyond sophistication."
– John Gardner

"To consistently stay on course, you'll have to do some things that may not be habits yet: keep everything out of your head; decide actions and outcomes when things first emerge on your radar, instead of later; and regularly review and update the complete inventory of open loops of your life and work. I hope by now you at least have established a reference point for the value these behaviors create. Don't be surprised, though, if it takes a little while to make them automatic. Be patient, and enjoy the process."
– David Allen