

The Art of Stress-Free Productivity

On *Getting Things Done* by David Allen

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About ten years ago, I read the national bestseller *Getting Things Done*¹ by David Allen. In my travels over the last two weeks, the book was brought up by three colleagues in three cities, prompting me to write this short article for everyone who hasn't asked me about it yet.

I actually read *Getting Things Done* on vacation – yes, I read a business book on the beach – with many happy returns. Being able to think about my work habits while away from my office allowed some core concepts to sink in and motivated me to make immediate changes when I returned – simple changes that have saved me hundreds of frustrating hours over the past decade.

Allen made clear my core problem – that all the unprocessed emails in my inbox, papers on my desk, and piles on my shelves were constantly nagging at me, forever reminding me of all the stuff I needed to do, drawing attention and mental energy away from the thing I was supposed to be working on right now. Multi-tasking is a myth; we can only do one thing at a time if we want to do each efficiently and well, so being able to focus, truly focus, on the task at hand is critical to our effectiveness and productivity. We have to get stuff out of our heads that doesn't belong there right now. As Allen says, "There is no reason ever to have the same thought twice, unless you like having that thought."

Here's how I decluttered my physical and mental space, and you can too.

Email. It is possible, and actually easy, to keep your email inbox to one screen, by making heavy use of folders. I have five main email folders, each with numerous subfolders, so that every email is in its place, easily found when I need it, and out of sight when I don't. The first three folders are called Admin, FC (for "future clients" or prospects) and Projects (for projects I'm actively working on). When an FC turns into a project, I move the subfolder into Projects, and when completed, to Old Projects. If an FC fails to materialize into a project, it gets moved to Old FC. I sleep easier having processed my inbox every night, refusing to let emails pile up where they can chirp at me all day.

It's a good idea to get your inbox out of sight while working on projects that require longer periods of uninterrupted focus. Your emails can wait. If they were super urgent, your phone would be ringing.

Paper. Hard copy documents, mail (there is still some of that), articles you printed... all that stuff should be processed and moved out of sight. Processed how? By “traffing” them (T-R-A-F, not Allen’s terminology but the same idea²) so that each item gets dealt with. Note the same process applies to emails:

- Trash – The item is not important or won’t be referred to again – send to wastebasket or recycling bin.
- Refer – Send to someone else to be dealt with by them.
- Act – Deal with this yourself, now – by replying to the email, for example.
- File – Move it to a folder (email folder or physical file cabinet folder) to be dealt with later – and create a reminder, calendar appointment, or tickler to prompt you when the time comes.

Like most people, despite the push toward paperlessness and heavy use of our document management system, I still process and generate paper. To get the paper out of sight, and thus out of mind, I did exactly what the book told me to do: I got a label making device, three boxes of 1/3-cut manila file folders, spent two days going through all those piles, threw most of it in the shredder, and put the rest in alphabetized files. Why alphabetized, rather than grouped by category? Because it’s easier to find things later, knowing there are only a few ways you could have labeled the file containing the report from Larry on telecommuting: “Telecommuting,” “Remote workers,” “Report,” or “Larry.”

It’s important to purge the files from time to time – at least once a year – and not let the drawers get full, in which case you’d start creating piles again. Your file drawers must remain cozy, peaceful, and inviting!

Vague goals like “get more organized” or “be more productive” are generally not useful – we need systems, not just goals. The key to managing all of our “stuff” is managing our actions. Once we know how to process and organize our stuff, then we just need to create and manage lists (which might take the form of a weekly or daily calendar). I trust that the few tips shared above (see *Getting Things Done* for many more) will help you take actions to achieve your productivity goals and reduce stress.

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END NOTES:

1. *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*, David Allen, 2001.
2. TRAF is Stephanie Winston's system and is described in several of her books, including *The Organized Executive*, 2001.