GETTING THINGS DONE

BY David Allen

Personal Development Book Summary Series

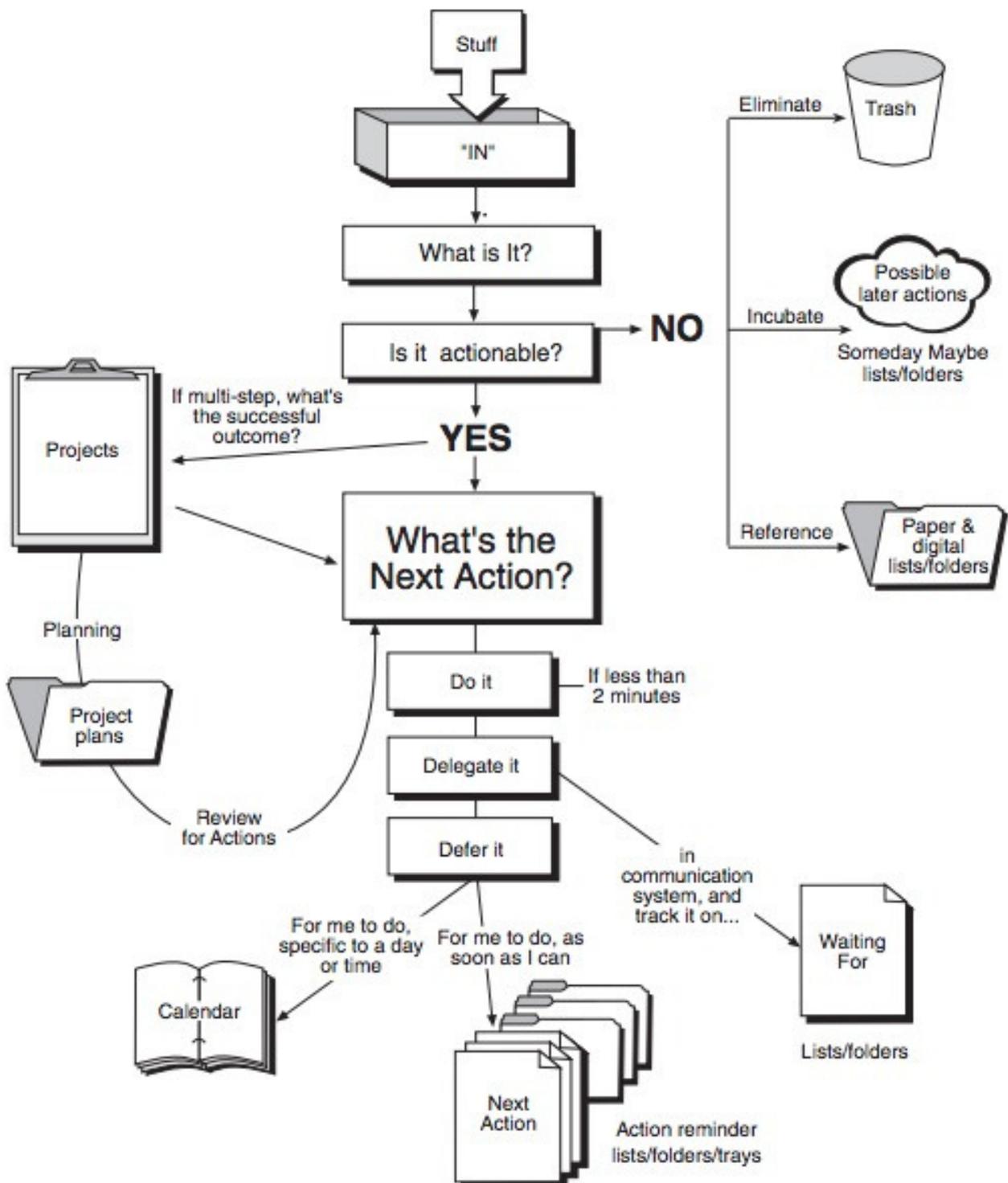KAMAHL SIMON

INTRODUCTION

Who is this book for?

Getting Things Done is arguably the world's most well known book on productivity. The lessons in this book should be considered essential reading for anyone looking to pursue a more productive lifestyle.

About the author

David Allen is one of the leading figures in the personal productivity world. His book quickly became an international best-seller and was described by TIME magazine as "the defining self-help business book of it's time." David's goal was to create a balance in his life that meant that he could apply his full attention to whatever he was doing, if he was at work it was work, and if it was family time he could spend time with them without worrying about work.

In this summary

Getting Things Done is jam packed with information and ideas. In order to make this summary useful, actionable and concise I have summarised the main lessons from the book. Getting Things Done outlines a process called the "5 Stages of Mastering Workflow" which can be shown visually by the following model. For this summary I will summarise each stage of this process and define the key steps that need to occur at each stage in order to get things done. Here we go…

Stuff

"IN"

What is It?

Is it actionable? → **NO**

Eliminate → Trash

Incubate → Possible later actions / Someday Maybe lists/folders

Reference → Paper & digital lists/folders

If multi-step, what's the successful outcome?

YES

Projects

Planning

Project plans

Review for Actions

What's the Next Action?

Do it — If less than 2 minutes

Delegate it — in communication system, and track it on... → Waiting For / Lists/folders

Defer it

For me to do, specific to a day or time → Calendar

For me to do, as soon as I can → Next Action / Action reminder lists/folders/trays

BOOK SUMMARY

1. COLLECTING YOUR WORK

Simply put, the first step requires you to collect all of your work together, get everything out of your head. By doing this, you can stop trying to actively remember things. Everything will be put into a workflow and system that will do this for you.

In-Basket

David Allen describes the in-basket as a place where you gather all of your on going work. This can be in the form of an email inbox, a physical in-tray or apps such as Evernote. You will more than likely have more than one form of in-basket.

Ensure that everything you are currently working on ends up in one of your in-baskets, do not rely on your memory alone. Write everything down whether it be physically on paper in note form, or, as I personally prefer, writing a note in Evernote or creating a to-do item in Asana.

Allen notes that it's important to keep your in-baskets to a minimum. Your goal is to empty these baskets and move on to the next. The more in-boxes you are trying to juggle the harder it will be to manage these. Emptying these to empty is a key aspect in eliminating overwhelm and getting things done.

2. PROCESSING YOUR WORK

The next step in Allens process is examining everything in your in-baskets and establishing what needs to be done with these items in order to make them as finished. The majority of people make a crucial error and assume that everything needs to be dealt with as soon as they arrive in their in-basket. And then if they are not done straight away, things come unstuck and the tasks may never get done.

The key here is to process your work and prioritise your tasks in your in-basket.

What is It?

Allen suggests you answer the question, "what is the thing your'e dealing with?" Perhaps it's an email from HR but what is it actually about? Is it an unimportant update about employee contracts, or is it some boring reminder about health and safety? The key is to identify what the task is and then you can move onto the next question...

Is it Actionable?

YES - then identify which "project" the task is part of, and what the "next action" would be in order to process the task and mark as complete.

NO - more often than not, the stuff in your in-basket doesn't require any further action, at least immediately. In this case you either put it in the trash, mark it as someday/maybe or keep it for a reference (more on these soon.)

What's the Next Action?

This step, Allen explains, requires you to identify what the very next thing you need to do in order to have the task moving towards completion. He uses the example of a blog post; in order to complete the task a blog post must be written, edited and published. But at this stage, the next step may be simply drafting a topic or brainstorming ideas.

From here, ask yourself; "will this next-step take less than 2 minutes?"

YES - just do it, moving the task towards completion.

NO - then ask yourself if you are the right person to do this task? Or is it better suited to someone else? If this is the case, then delegate.

IF, it needs to be done by you, but it will take longer than 2 minutes - defer the task to later.
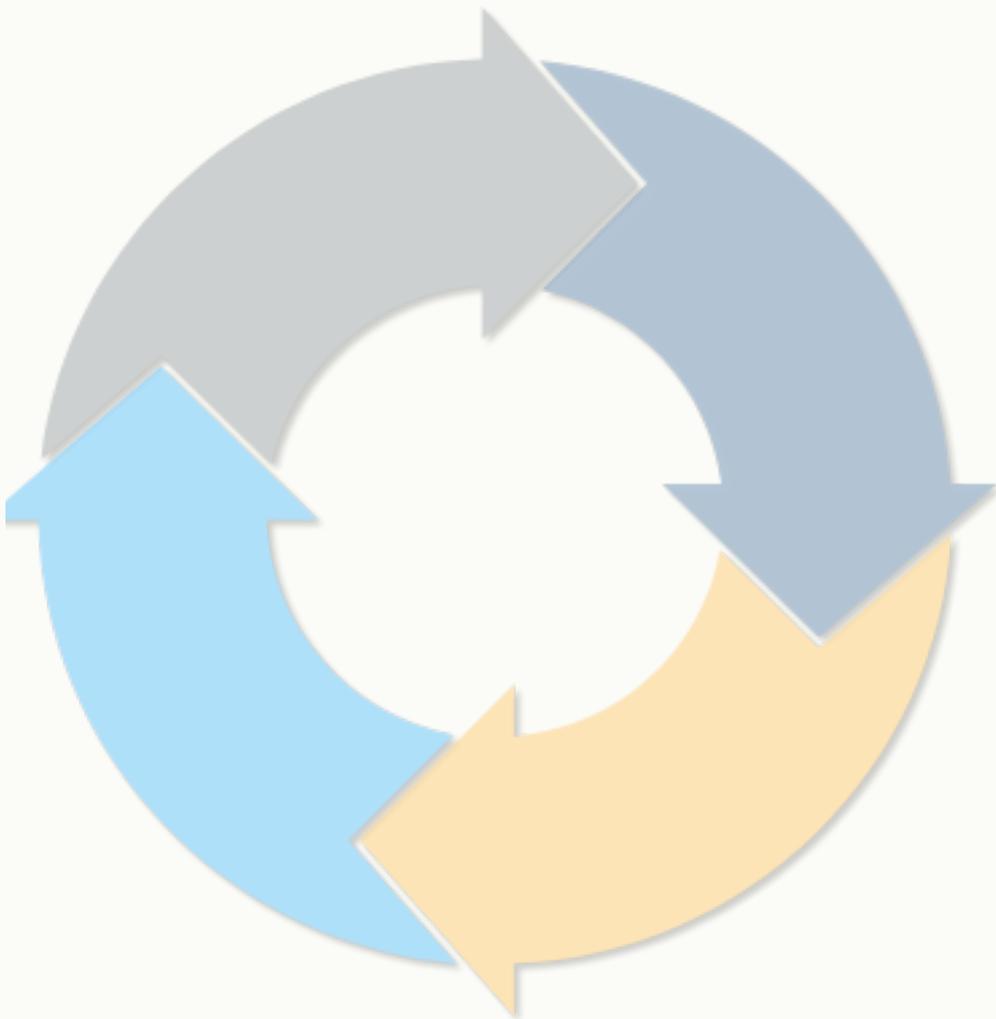
3. ORGANISING YOUR WORK

So your work has been gathered together, and processed. The next stage of Allens process means getting the stuff and tasks where they need to be in order to be useful. Allen suggests you organise your work into the following categories;

Someday/Maybe

This is what you use when a task is something you aren't going to do right now, and doesn't have an end date or time frame. It can be used for things you want to come back to one day. Allen uses the examples of a skill you'd like to learn or something you'd like to do in your business.

File these on a 'someday' list that you can review regularly.

TIP: I use a "Someday" tag in Evernote to collect ideas of things I'd like to come back to one day.

Reference

The reference category is best used for items that require no action from you but may be useful at a later date. Either a document with information, supporting research or a useful checklist.

TIP: Again, I keep useful articles and resources organised in Evernote and Google Drive.

Trash

Allen recommends simply trashing any items that you don't need to keep for reference and that you will never re-visit in the future. Don't keep things just for the sake of keeping them, you don't need any extra clutter.

Projects & Project Plans

Allen defines a project as a task containing more than 2 action steps. E.g. Planning a trip or planning a meeting. Actionable items can be identified and recorded under projects. Review these regularly.

Waiting

Allen recommends creating a "waiting list" to keep a record of anything that is 'waiting' on something before it can be completed. For example, tag emails in your inbox that you are waiting for a reply for. A useful tip from Allen is setting reminders on your calendar to follow up with people you are waiting on reply from.

Calendar

Work that has been deferred but is time sensitive needs to go on your calendar. GTD stresses the importance of ensuring that your calendar is only used for these time sensitive items and nothing else. This could be things like: call John on Friday (day specific) and attending meetings (time specific).

Next Actions

Work that has been deferred but isn't time sensitive can go onto a list of 'next actions'. This list is where you go when you have spare time during the day to tick of some tasks. Allen suggests subdividing the list when it gets too long, e.g; phone calls to make, research to do etc.

4. REVIEWING YOUR WORK

Allen stresses the importance of reviewing your lists regularly, don't simply forget about them once they have been set up.

Use your calendar as your first reference for the day, check in with it first to identify how you expect your day will run.

During your down time, you can review "next actions" and get things done before your next calendar event.

The final task will be checking in on the waiting, projects and someday lists. This will not be an everyday event, but do check in from time to time to ensure these lists don't get too long and unmanageable.

One key step in Allen's process is scheduling a "weekly review" in your calendar. Use this time to address all of your in-baskets and lists to ensure that everything is organised, processed and managed well. This is the time to tidy up things, re-visit things that could perhaps be trashed or categorised differently. This is a time when an item on your "someday" list may become more relevant and you move it to your "next actions" list for the following week.

5. DOING YOUR WORK

The final step! Time to actually do the work! Your review should have already established what you should be doing next. Whether that be a calendar appointment or some down time to work on your next actions list.

The key is to establish what amount of time/energy you have before deciding which "next action" to tackle first. Also consider the context and the priority of the task. There will always be a range of tasks, some taking only 10 minutes and others taking an hour or two. It's important you priorities and schedule these appropriately.

And there you have it. This is a basic overview of the "getting things done" workflow for collecting, processing, organising, reviewing and doing work. It's a very flexible system which can be adapted and customised to how you like to work. I use a number of apps to stay organised and have spent a number of years refining how I use this system. Let me know how you're using this or a similar system to get things done!

CONCLUSION

Key Takeaways

1. COLLECT - collect all the things that have your attention and put them in you in-baskets. All tasks big or small, personal or business related!

2. PROCESS - take all your 'stuff' and ask if it is actionable. If YES and it can take less than 2 minutes, complete it immediately. Everything else can be delegated, referred or put on a list for later.

3. ORGANISE - this is where you arrange all of these referred tasks into categories.

4. REVIEW - sit down once a week and review all of your in-baskets and lists. Re-arrange as necessary.

5. DO - do the work, prioritise important tasks and work through your calendar and lists.

Further Reading

Arguably just as influential as Allen's Getting Things Done is Stephen Covey's The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. Covey explores a number of different paradigms, principles and habits that will help you become more productive!

Zen to Done by Leo Babauta is a really interesting and complimentary read. Leo has drawn the best concepts from the two most popular productivity systems; Allen's Getting Things Done and Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Successful People and created what he describes as the 'Ultimate Productivity System'.

The 4-Hour Work Week teaches techniques to increase your time and financial freedom giving you more lifestyle options. By automating a passive income and liberating yourself from unproductive tasks you can live the lifestyle of the 'new rich' – one defined by having, doing and being what you want. The author, Tim Ferriss, is an absolute genius and someone every entrepreneur or internet marketer should look up to.

Guidelines is my eBook that summarises the main lessons from 33 of the best-selling self-help books in one place. It is the ultimate book summary; Available as a 80-page ebook and 115-minute audio book. Guidelines lists 31 rules (or guidelines) that you should follow to improve your productivity, become a better leader, do better in business, improve your health, succeed in life and become a happier person.

Action Steps

1. Give this simple process a go! Only 5 steps to a more productive working day!

2. Take this even further by experimenting with Apps such as Evernote and Asana. These will take your productivity to the next level!

3. If you enjoyed this summary, download the full book from Amazon.