



Interview with David Allen, author of “Getting Things Done”

Michele Lisenbury Christensen’s notes from a February, 2001 interview by Steve Shull

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David: I’m the world’s laziest guy and the guy who works hardest at not working hard.

What distracts people is distraction.

There are two aspects of productivity:

There are two problems in life: You know what you want and don’t know how to get it or you don’t know what you want.

Steve: Making things up and making things happen. How do you define what your projects are? And how do you get them done?

The workforce has moved from work about doing to working about thinking. It’s like “work athletics”
What do you need to do to decide what to do.

I tell people they have to think about stuff more than they think but not as much as they’re afraid they do.

It’s one thing to collect things, but another to decide what to do about them.

Runway level vs. 10,000 foot level.

All work comes down to physical actions. This is about thinking about what actions are required to close the open loops in your world. You want to do it on the front end when it comes in.

Most people have allowed a much larger inventory of open loops into their lives than they even know. If they don’t pop that out of their heads into another inventory, it eats them up.

If you don’t get on top of that, it will eat you up.

There’s nothing wrong with piles. The original reason for a pile is to keep a placeholder to remind you you have something to do. They lose value when they get all mixed. Most piles are not just piles; they’re resource materials and things to do and things to throw away...

All you really need are lists. Instead of having piles all over the place you’re numb to, get a folder called “meeting” “phone calls” “with my secretary” etc.

Right now you have a lot of stuff embedded in those piles you want to take action on so they’re yelling at you. You need to throw those piles into your in basket and process them again so that you can categorize them and have them available when you are able to take action on them.

No system is perfect, but decide which ice berg you want to jump onto. If you have your feet on two icebergs, you’ll feel treacherous. I suggest you integrate into one system... The more high tech I become, the more I take notes freehand.

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People don’t distinguish between collecting stuff to process later and doing things. Your planner should be at the end of the process. Have a loose-leaf pad out. I throw away 80% of what I write down pretty quickly. I throw the notes into the in-basket, then process them and organize them. I am free to collect as much as I want. You want to separate the two processes: collecting, then processing.

In the organizer, organize based on the critical CONTEXT where you do the action. Once you go through your notes, look for “errand”, “Talk to wife about this” “incubation idea” etc.

Steve: Is it double entry?

Yes and no. Many times, I’ll collect and it gets right onto a to-do list. But other times I’m moving too fast for that to happen.

If I need to keep notes on a client, I’ll keep those in a paper file.

Most people need to take a lot more notes than they wind up keeping. You need a separate methodology and tool for note-taking. Then the challenge is to know how to dispatch the stuff. It takes 20-30 seconds to make that decision, do the knowledge work of processing the stack. This is your true work to make decisions about what these things mean to you.

Steve: Do you read e-mail on your palm?

No. I found I need the power of my computer when I’m processing e-mail.

Steve: What software do you use?

Just palm software and the desktop on my PC. I use the 3c because I like the color. I don’t have any additional programs except Album ToGo for pictures of my wife and dog.

Prioritizing is deciding what to do when.

You have to decide at any point what to do right then.

Organize actions by CONTEXT: What can you do where you are?

By TIME: How much time do you have?

By ENERGY: What are you capable of doing right now?

By Priority or strategy: What will give you the highest payoff if you do it?

My system is to make moment-to-moment decisions as to what to do, given all I could do and these three variables.

You have to dance between needing to process, working on things on your list, and responding to something that just came in. Before you’ve processed your in-basket, you may have stuff buried in there that’s lots more important and you don’t know about it.

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There are at least six levels on which you can look at work:

Tactical Strategies

Lifestyle You Want 5 Years from Now

Most people are too simplistic about what your priorities are. The old time management model says it’s not that important to track it, just write down your priorities.

I say, I track everything so there’s no open loop lost in my head. THEN I look intuitively at what’s next, based on those open loops. You make instinctive judgment calls anyway, so this is not new stuff I’m telling you. You want to set up your system so it moves from hope to trust. That’s the job of your system.

Steve: Are you saying forget about prioritizing?

No, I’m just saying don’t prioritize and then try to triage according to that. If you have high priorities and a phone, the best thing to do is make a call. But if that’s not one of your top 3 you’ll feel guilty for doing it.

I have two priorities: what I’m doing and everything else.

Steve: David’s system, over the past 3 years, has taught me to get things out of my mind and onto other systems so I don’t have to think about them. I have a file called “THOUGHTS”.

David: To me, it’s been a big surprise over the years. I’m not a neuroscientist, but I’m fascinated by how we think. When you file things in your mind, that is things you have some level of commitment to finish but that you can’t do in the moment you think of it. It goes into psychic RAM. When you think of it, you’re sure you won’t forget it. A moment later, you’re thinking of something else. IT goes into psychic RAM which knows no sense of time or place. It doesn’t know you can’t do it here or now, but it thinks you should. Once you learn how that part of your head works, you catch it when you think of it and throw it out of your head and into your in-basket, then park it somewhere that your brain trusts, so you can let it go. That frees up your mental energy. If you haven’t parked the results of your thinking, you live in angst because you’re thinking about what you should be thinking about what you should be thinking about.

The system manages much better than the brain did. Your brain’s job is to think of things to do and to do them, not to hold those ideas.

Steve: Using the in-basket effectively is one of the best things.

The Power of the Habit of Collection

It’s really teaching yourself to have the freedom to capture and express with abandon. We grew up thinking things better be right before we write them. We have culturally constipated brains. Linus Pauling said the best way to get a good idea is to get a lot of ideas. So capture them ALL and THEN hi-grade them. It’s a very different energy: capturing and expressing vs. organizing and selecting.

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I’m a visionary sometimes and when I’m in that mode, I want to grab the idea. Don’t make me organize. Other times, I want to play a game I can win; I want to get something done. Let the system reflect both very important aspects of our productivity. We all do both: visioning and implementing, but it drives us crazy if we have both at the same time.

Steve: If a client shares a great thought, I just throw it into my in-basket. I don’t have to think about it all day. It’s captured and I can look at it later.

At home, I have note pads all over. If I have a thought, I write it down. I take it to the office and get it into the system so I can act on it.

David: Look around now to see something on your desk. If you pick up one item at a time and ask yourself :

1. What is this?
2. Is it actionable?

NO: Trash: It could be trash.

OR: Incubate: It could be actionable later. Put a note in your calendar or put it into a tickler file.

OR: Reference: It could be something you want to have accessible for your information.

YES: What is the next action? If it’s actionable, there’s a next step. Make the decision about what the action is. Either do the action right now (if it’s 2 minutes or less, DO THIS). If it takes longer than 2 minutes, capture it and process it.

Can I delegate this? If so, do so. If not, track it on a list that’s context-specific (e.g. at computer or on phone or with spouse)

If this action won’t finish the project, if it’s a multi-step project, you may want to create a project based on this. Projects are things you want to complete that one action won’t finish.

Recap:

Is there action?

NO:

Toss,

Tickle

File

YES:

Delegate – give to someone else

Do – if under 2 minutes, do it now

Defer – into system

Next Actions Vs. To Do:

Most to-do lists are incomplete lists of unclear things. Most of the things on your list are not really decisions. You haven’t really decided. It’s a listed in-basket.

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My next actions are for projects I've already processed and am committed to doing and I'm attracted to them rather than repulsed by them.

Steve: Would you know what to do by looking at your list?
Are there some things you haven't completed your thoughts on?
Are you carrying undone items from day to day or year to year?

One thing I've learned from David is to categorize items. I have a call list, a prospect list, an errand list.

You don't have to think when the action is already defined and categorized by context. You can just do it.

David: I'm so lazy I've got it set up so I only have to think once a week. Once a week, I go through every open loop and squeeze my brain out for anything in there. Crank-widget jobs are very psychologically healthy because there's less stress. You just do it.

I make my own decisions about what widgets to crank, but I do that once a week. So I just get pointed at actions, all day, either by what comes up or from the lists.

Half my life is not on the list; I do it as I think of it.

Do you have more to do than you can get done?
The only way you can feel good about what you're not doing is to know what you're not doing. Many of you have not defined what you're not doing. You wonder "What's out there I'm not getting to?" Even if we don't do it, if we know it's out there, we know what's left to be done, we can rest knowing we'll do it when we have space, rather than struggling to remember.

If you have a big project, with more than one action, like a document you need to draft, 2 calls to make, and 2 things you're waiting for, track all those parts you can keep moving on, even while you're waiting on others.

The project plan is something you need to think through. These are small projects themselves, not next actions. If you plan past the next action, you're overplanning. Just track the next action. Boil it down to the next action. When that's done, just take the next action.

You need to know where the outcome is and what the next action is. Keep taking the next action.

At the 40,000 foot level, you want to look at what your life really means: personally, spiritually, financially.

In my current newsletter, the essay is about the murky, swampy place between thinking and doing. That's the project place.

Do you have all the projects you need to do to make those things all maintained.

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A lot of people are good at asking you what's important to you, but they aren't good at grounding it in action.

Participant Question: What is your opinion about balance between work and the rest of life?

David: I don't distinguish between work and anything else. I think of work as anything I want to do that isn't done yet. I just do next-to-next-to-next-to-next. I just live in my zone.

For some people, working till 11pm is life balance. Is it in balance for you? Is it something you need to do for your career? Trust your intuition and your heart. Make sure you're paying attention to those things.

The important part is to know what needs done at work and at home and to know that you're moving on all of them.

Have you ever told yourself, you don't have time to do a project?

That's true! You can only do physical actions! The project is just a final outcome. The STEPS are the part you can do. I don't go “install backyard lights” I dig a ditch, plug this in... Take actions.

Steve: Where do you plug projects in?

I use flat lists. They aren't tied into each other. It might be nice to do that, but you have to keep the lists alive. The weekly review is the critical behavior.

Which looks more effective: finish website or draft ideas? You have to work with that part of you that needs those little doable achievements.

I have action lists that are agendas. I have separate people as separate items.

Anywhere

Calls

Computer

Computer-Web (things I have to be connected to the web for)

Errands anywhere

Errands Ojai

At Home

At Office

Waiting For

Date-specific or Time-specific lists go into the calendar.

Steve: If you want to work smarter in your life, David's seminars are a great place to start. I've done the seminar, the one-on-one coaching, and the book. This system is very practical and very doable. Each of you has the ability to get things done. It's defining the system.

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David: The best way to get in touch with us is to e-mail. You can e-mail me directly at david@davidco.com or call 805-646-8432. Amazon has the book for \$19.95. I suggest you read the book first. It's a cheap place to start.

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