

Getting things done: how to achieve stress-free productivity

David Allen (Piatkus, 2001)

Are you one of those people for whom organising their stuff and their time comes as naturally as breathing? If so, you probably welcome hints on how to be even more effective. And if you are less well organised, you may despair of changing. But sometimes, it only takes a simple solution to make a huge difference.

The book does not give a simple once-for-all solution. We'd all like one, but we know that's not realistic! What it does offer are some simple processes which should enable us to be more productive – to maximise our output and minimise our input, so we can get the job done and have a life outside work.

The methods proposed are based on two key objectives:

- To capture everything you need to do into a system which is outside your head.
- To discipline yourself to make decisions about what you have to do, so that you can plan for your next actions.

My chief caveat about this book is that it is written for office-based people, and not everything will apply to those in ministry or leadership positions. But it's the kind of book which is quite quick to read, and changing just a few of the ways we organise our work could make a big difference to how effective we are for the next ten, twenty or thirty years!

Some of us may have learned to make 'to-do' lists, and to prioritise things on the list. Allen argues that as most professionals have so much more work to do than we used to, these old models no longer work. 'Big picture' solutions, such as a life vision, are one way forward, but in some ways they create *more* to do; they are not the complete answer to the problem of how to work more effectively.

The book offers a five-stage process: collect, process, organise, review, and do. This involves collecting all our tasks in as simple a system as possible and emptying it regularly, then organising them into various categories (ensuring we have a system of lists, folders and calendar), planning what to do when: 'do it, delegate it, defer it, drop it', and having a review system which ensures that nothing is forgotten.

One idea which I found very helpful was to look at levels of work in terms of 'altitude': the highest level (50,000 feet) is whole life, then going down to 40,000 as 3-5 year visions, 30,000 as one to two year goals, 20,000 as areas of responsibility, 10,000 as current projects, and the runway as current actions. In order to decrease the busyness of the runway, I need to look at a higher level, 20,000 feet, my areas of responsibility. If I am wearing too many 'hats', levels of responsibility, this will mean I have too many current actions waiting for my attention.

This is an entirely secular management book, but if you want to review your system of files and papers and lists, it could be a valuable resource.

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