

# How to get things done

We could all use a little help when it comes to managing our time and workflows. Online communication methods may have made it easier to share, but now we also have so many places to check for incoming information. **Jo Alcock** looks at how to bring it all together with smart ways of working, and reviews some time-saving tools.



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I HAVE been testing different methodologies and tools to help me manage my workload for a number of years. My current role is solely project-based, and managing tasks to keep all projects progressing over different time spans is therefore crucial. I use a number of different techniques within both my work and personal life and hope that by sharing some of these I may be able to help you refine your own productivity system.

## What is 'Getting Things Done'?

Getting Things Done (GTD) is a productivity methodology devised by David Allen (see 'Resources'). It consists of a series of processes to help organise information and make decisions about what to do and when. GTD can be used as a full system, or certain elements of the system can be used. The system is a cyclical, ongoing process, though for the purposes of this article we will progress through it in stages from collection to action:

- 1 Collect
- 2 Process
- 3 Organise
- 4 Review
- 5 Do

Once you have integrated the system into practice, you'll only spend a few minutes at each stage of the process throughout the day, but the initial setup may take a little longer.

### 1 Collect

The aim of the first stage of GTD is to collate all sources of incoming information together and record any actions or goals currently stored in your memory – one of the core principles of the GTD philosophy is to clear your mind in order to enable you to fully focus

on tasks. It is important to find an accessible storage system that you trust and are able to record everything in (e.g. a physical in-tray or an email inbox). You don't need to do anything with the items during this stage, just collect them all together as best as you can. Include everything from short specific tasks to long term goals.

### 2 Process

This is the stage where you begin to process what to do with each item of information you have collected. You'll need to go through every item and ask each of the following questions to help you decide where it should go.

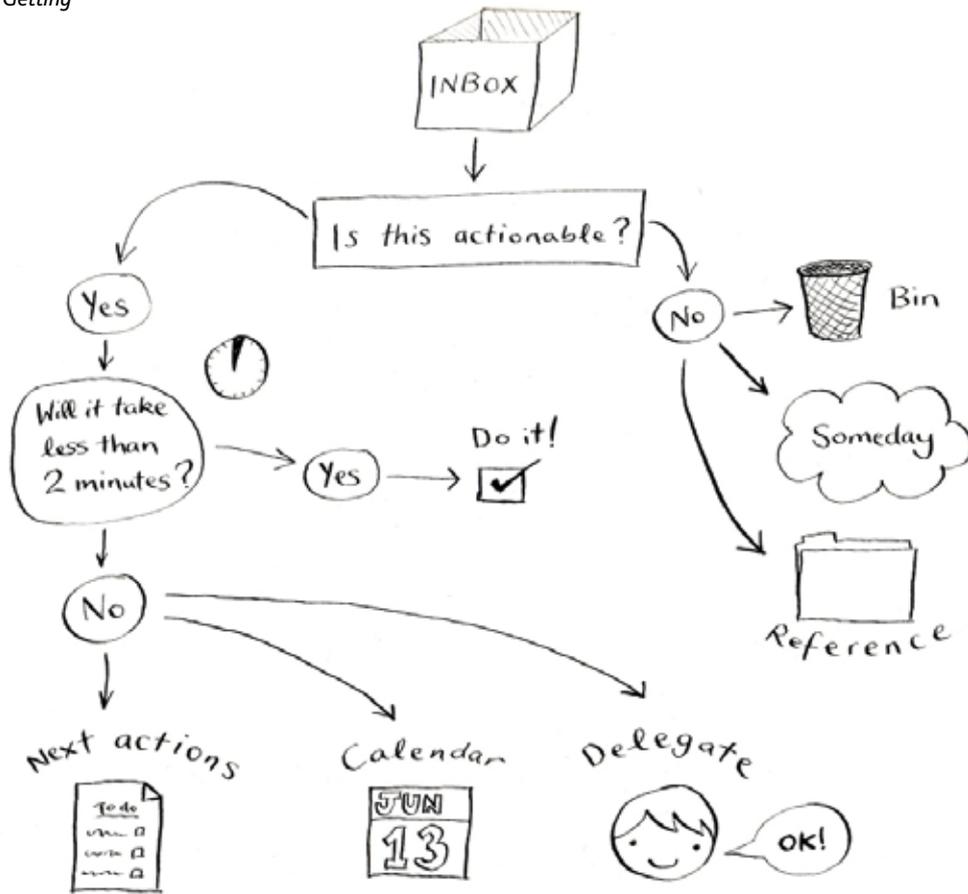
- Is it rubbish? Get rid of it.
- Is it useful information you may need in future? Store it in an appropriate place for reference.
- Does it relate to an action you or someone else needs to take? Move it to actions.
- Does it relate to a project (i.e. multiple tasks)? Move it to your project list and turn each project into discrete actions.
- Is it something non-essential that you may like to come back to some day? Store it for later.

It's important to process everything you have at this stage to leave your chosen collection system free for incoming information only.

### 3 Organise

This is the stage where you begin to focus on any actionable items (including any projects you have broken down into discrete actions from your project list). Some of these will need to be addressed soon, some will need to be scheduled to start at a point in the future, and some may be waiting for input from someone else. At this stage, if any of the actions take less than two minutes, do them

Image drawn by Mei Yau Kan, based on David Allen's *Getting Things Done*.



right away. Add anything else to an appropriate action list (e.g. next actions, scheduled actions).

This is the stage of the process where you may want to use software, as the additional functionality is a definite advantage in helping you manage your time as priorities change. See the table opposite for some of the to-do list software I have tested, and their pros and cons.

Your needs may vary, but my essential features for to-do list software is can it:

- organise by projects;
- assign context to tasks (such as Errands, Email, Phone, Office, Home);
- schedule actions to start on a date in future;
- add recurring tasks;
- and finally, is it accessible from computer and mobile.

#### 4 Review

Fundamental to the success of GTD (and any other productivity system) is frequent reviewing. How frequent will depend on personal preference as well as the nature of the work, though a common recommendation is to check your calendar and action lists every day, with a larger review once a week to go through the full GTD process and check everything is up-to-date.

It's also important to include longer-term goals in the system and check progress towards those, probably every few weeks.

#### Resources

**Allen, D.** *Getting Things Done: How to achieve stress-free productivity*. London: Piatkus, 2001.

**Hines, S.** *Productivity for Librarians: How to get more done in less time*. Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2010.

**Houghton-Jan, S.** *Being Wired or Being Tired: 10 Ways to Cope with Information Overload*.

**Ariadne, 2008.** Available at: [www.ariadne.ac.uk](http://www.ariadne.ac.uk)

**Maggio, R.** *The Art of Organizing Anything: simple principles for organizing your home, your office, and your life*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2009.

**Osman, H.** *How to design the ultimate home office [e-book]*, 2011. Available at: [www.thecouchmanager.com](http://www.thecouchmanager.com)

**Lifehacker blog:** <http://lifehacker.com/>

**Pomodoro technique:** [www.pomodrotechnique.com](http://www.pomodrotechnique.com)

**43 Folders:** [www.43folders.com/howto](http://www.43folders.com/howto)

#### 5 Do

Finally, it's time to actually get down to those tasks that take longer than two minutes. So how do we know what to do next? We can utilise our actions list and assess the situation dependent on:

- Context (where are we and what do we have access to?)
- Time available
- Priority
- Energy

As these four factors change throughout the course of a day, it's important that we can manipulate our task list to re-evaluate what is the best use of our time. Being able to group tasks based on these factors makes it easier to identify tasks we can work on.

#### General productivity tips

I've tried a number of different tips and techniques to improve productivity; some of which I have found incredibly useful, others less so. Again it's a case of finding what suits you though so here are some things to try.

#### Know what not to do

Knowing what not to do is as important as knowing what to do. Are there certain tasks that drain your energy? Is it something that would be better to delegate, simplify or even get rid of altogether? Be sensible and realistic about your capabilities, skills and commitments.

Software	Purpose	Pros	Cons	URL
<b>Omnifocus</b>	<i>Task management</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Support for full GTD system</li> <li>– Customisable views and filters</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Need to purchase software (not web-based)</li> <li>– Only available for Apple products</li> </ul>	<a href="http://www.omnigroup.com/products/omnifocus/">www.omnigroup.com/products/omnifocus/</a>
<b>Nirvana HQ</b>	<i>Task management</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Web-based</li> <li>– Support for GTD system</li> <li>– Support for emailing tasks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Currently in beta (implementing freemium payment model in future)</li> </ul>	<a href="https://www.nirvanahq.com/">https://www.nirvanahq.com/</a>
<b>Remember the Milk</b>	<i>Task management</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Simple approach to GTD</li> <li>– Large user base</li> <li>– Accessible from a number of other tools (open API)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Annual fee for 'Pro' account (needed to use mobile apps)</li> </ul>	<a href="http://www.rememberthemilk.com/">www.rememberthemilk.com/</a>
<b>Toodledo</b>	<i>Task management</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Support for GTD</li> <li>– Customisable</li> <li>– Accessible from a number of other tools (open API)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Annual fee for 'Pro' account (free option limited support for GTD)</li> </ul>	<a href="http://www.toodledo.com/">www.toodledo.com/</a>
<b>Wunderlust</b>	<i>Task management</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Works across many platforms (and web)</li> <li>– Free</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Only for simple list features</li> </ul>	<a href="http://www.6wunderkinder.com/wunderlust/">www.6wunderkinder.com/wunderlust/</a>
<b>Evernote</b>	<i>Storing notes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Can store text, image and audio notes</li> <li>– Works across many platforms (and web)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Some features require a subscription</li> <li>– Some users have reported data loss (so backup regularly!)</li> </ul>	<a href="https://evernote.com/">https://evernote.com/</a>
<b>IFTTT</b>	<i>Automatic linking system between web services</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Method to automatically link different sources of information e.g. send emails tagged with a particular term to Evernote (useful for collecting stage of GTD)</li> <li>– Reduces repetitive tasks (e.g forwarding emails)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Only works with systems currently included in IFTTT (49 at time of writing)</li> <li>– Can complicate system</li> <li>– Requires planning (though some feel very much worth it)</li> </ul>	<a href="http://ifttt.com">http://ifttt.com</a>

## Getting started

Getting going on a task can often be the trickiest part. Try adopting a 15-minute rule (or whatever time period you feel comfortable with). I find that just making myself work on something for a few minutes can be enough to actually get me into the task and become motivated to work on it for longer. If not, move on to something else after 15 minutes. At least you will have started it ready to revisit later.

## Staying on task

Another productivity issue is getting distracted when working on a task; either by hitting a hurdle (e.g. needing to check a fact) or due to interruptions. If you need to focus on a task, turn off any potential distractions (e.g. email alerts, phone etc.) and keep a piece of paper (or blank plain text document) to jot down any thoughts/issues as they arise. By recording them you should be able to focus and address them later. I used the full screen distraction-free writing mode in Microsoft Word to draft this article, and found it useful for keeping me on task.

## Motivation

If you're struggling to stay motivated, you might also want to try using a reward mechanism e.g. work on writing report for 30 minutes, then reward yourself

with five minutes break (or a chocolate!). An extension to this is the Pomodoro technique (see Resources) which involves working for set periods of time with specific breaks.

## Email management

Email seems to be a major time-sink for many of us. You could:

- Turn off email alerts;
- Only check email at set periods of the day;
- Consider whether email is the best method of communication (sometimes a phone call or face-to-face discussion is better);
- Manage your email inbox so that it only ever contains incoming messages – anything for reference should be stored and any actions should be added to your to-do list.

## What next?

Hopefully this article has given you some ideas to try for yourself. It's a very individual journey so try new techniques out and review what is working and what isn't – don't be afraid to ditch or change things that aren't working. Much productivity software has free versions or free trials for a specified amount of time, so utilise those to see which suits your workflow best. **[T]**