

Getting things done

Clearing the clutter to live fuller lives

By J. Rentilly

A clean desk might be the sign of an empty mind, as some bumper stickers suggest, but that's exactly how David Allen likes it. The veteran coach and management consultant, leader of the Ojai, California-based David Allen Company and author of three bestselling books, including *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* (Viking Penguin, 2001), has blazed the trail in productivity training, time management and stress reduction, aiding clients ranging from major global corporations such as American Express to Boy Scout troops.

The mission and method, as shared in Costco member Allen's books and workshops are simple: Clear the to-do list clutter from your head so that your mind can get to work on creative action.

Allen's productivity methods, titled GTD (for Getting Things Done), are being used by tens of millions of people around the world, from Estonia to Russia to India, and are successful because, according to company spokesman James Rider, "we don't let work define us. We define our work. GTD is the bridge between the practicality of handling everyday tasks and finding the spiritual promise of relaxation, focus and control."

A recent interview with *The Connection* found that in conversation, Allen, 63, is easygoing, self-deprecating and quick to be astonished at the success of his burgeoning empire, which brings in \$8 million annually. He is the polar opposite of what one might expect from a guru of uber-productivity. Although always on point, the point is more about maximizing his humanity than about alphabetizing his CDs.

Currently prepping for March's first annual GTD Global Summit in San Francisco, Allen boasts of a clean desk and an empty mind, jokes regularly about being lazy and devotes his "free time" to playing the piano and flute, traveling with his wife, Kathryn, and gardening at home in Ojai. Talk about getting things done.

You claim to have had 35 careers before the age of 35. You've been a waiter, a magi-

cian, a moped salesman, a minister. Was it serendipity or dilettantism, curiosity or just being driftwood?

Yes [laughs], all of the above. I really didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up. I was far-ranging and dilettantish and lazy, just throw all of those together. My biggest priority was this self-awareness enlightenment game that I was playing at the time. Jobs were just things to pay the rent while I was on this other journey, and so they tended to be colorful.

I went off on lots of strange tangents and explorations. To a large degree, it was as simple as this: I've always been driven to find the simplest, most efficient way of getting things done so I don't have any more things to do. I've spent my career improving the process. I wound up helping people, helping businesses, helping myself.

How would you describe GTD to someone who is unfamiliar with it?

It's about the agreements we make with ourselves and how well we're going to honor them. We spend so much time worrying about the agreements we make with others, but it begins with making and keeping agreements with ourselves, eliminating the negativity that happens when we don't. That's what GTD is all about.

I've been sensitive enough, or curious enough, to see how much the psyche wraps itself around the



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“I want to, I need to, I really should” on all these different levels. We really need to capture and achieve all of those things. We don’t want to be walking around like Pigpen with all this psychic residue of things we need to do or should do or want to do; we just figure out how to do them. It’s really no big deal.

GTD is one of those marvelous things where you read it and go “Duh.” Everybody knows all of this stuff, basically. The profundity of it is really no big deal, but it is. I’m somehow the most well-known guy to figure all of this out and design a methodology to work it all out.

Working with Lockheed many years ago was a critical turning point for you, the opportunity you had to test this methodology in a corporate environment.

I had been working with this material in my own consulting practice for many years, but it was the opportunity—not really a planned event—to take it to another level. I got to work with managers and executives. I was invited in and I took all of my material and figured out how to, in two days, tell them the best information I knew about how to get stuff done and relieve their stress.

I put it all in an educational format. It was a bit of a watershed. I wasn’t even sure I could do it before I did it, in the same way, after 20 years of doing the seminars, I wasn’t sure I could put it all in a book so I didn’t have to go everywhere personally. Could I convey the information in a valuable way?

Getting Things Done is peppered with these beautiful and inspiring quotes from major thinkers, major texts—philosophical, spiritual, business. I’m curious about your influences and inspirations.

I was reading Zen and Alan Watts and Sufi masters in high school. That part of it started way back. I was interested in philosophy and law. I started studying philosophy, but found that it got kind of wound up in itself. So then I started studying the philosophers themselves and *why* they thought the way they thought, and that was interesting to me.

That got me intrigued by these paradigms and belief systems, how the

culture and the unconscious work together to build a psyche—what we do, why we do it, why we don’t achieve what we could. It’s been a string of books and amazing people and chance encounters and inspiration. It’s all a part of where I am today.

The book was originally published seven years ago, but it feels more relevant today than ever. It’s also selling better today than it did then. Why do you think that is?

In the larger sense, the book is designed for anyone who can’t finish what they need to as soon as they think of it. All of us have more than one thing to keep track of. Why this book is becoming more and more meaningful, and why it’s now a must-have instead of a nice-to-have, is because the world is that much faster than it ever was. There’s nothing new except how frequently everything is new.

We live in such a virtual world, such a global world, so immediate and always becoming more so, that it’s increasingly difficult to stay on top of our tasks. We’ve gotten really good at absorbing more and more, but not so good at dropping off the things we do not need to carry around with us everywhere we go. It’s triage most of the time. It’s harder and harder to keep track of, manage and renegotiate all your agreements with yourself, universally speaking. I’ve sold a million copies. I have 5.999 billion to go. In the larger scope, we’ve only just begun.

You’ve worked with most of the major corporations in the world. I’m guessing this has been an amazing journey for you. Tell me about what you learn working with these big companies.

The biggest revelation is that everybody is basically the same. There is virtually no difference between any company, corporation, Boy Scout troop, American Express, Google or any individual. The best news about my whole career is it’s a mark of my laziness: I don’t have to change, really, one thing I say, whether I’m talking to one of the biggest corporations in the world or a small office in the middle of the country. Everybody’s got the same issues.

I’ll dress up the language, tailor it to who I’m working with, but the truth is, once the office door is closed, I’m dealing with people—and we all have the same issues. We’re all in this together. We all have stuff in our heads that we need to get out, and we all feel better when we do. We all have decisions to make, and we all feel better when we do. We all need to be more productive, and we feel better when we are. That’s true for chief executives, and it’s true for 11-year-old kids.

That’s the biggest aha of my career. The people who don’t have what I offer, they either say they don’t

Getting things done, your way

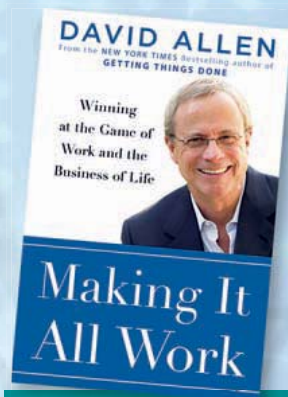
THE GETTING THINGS DONE approach sets up a systematic way of processing tasks, partially illustrated at right. The goal: Reduce effort and free up the mind for more creative pursuits.

The key is to stick with it. It may take a full day to get your inbox to zero, clear your desk and set up a filing system. But the result is worth it: a system that lets you handle emergencies when they pop up and address day-to-day tasks during a designated time.

Allen understands that everyone's comfort level regarding messes, overflowing inboxes, etc. is different. With a little effort and dedication each week, you can get things done like Allen himself.

For more information, refer to Allen's Web site at www.davidco.com.

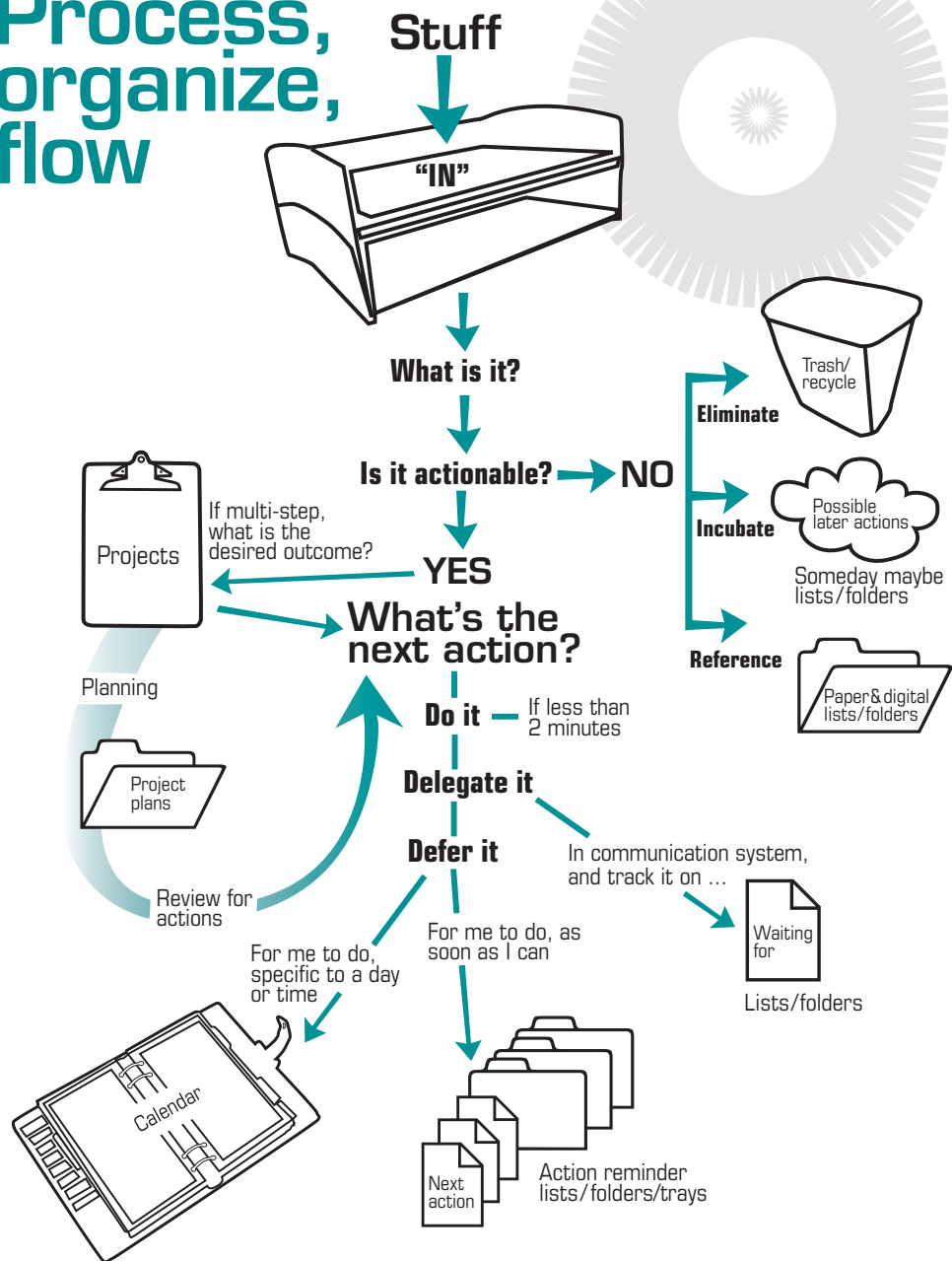
—Stephanie E. Ponder



The Costco Connection

David Allen's newest book, *Making It All Work*, releases on December 28 and will be available at most Costco locations and costco.com. *Getting Things Done* is available at costco.com.

Process, organize, flow



need it or pretend they don't need it, and both of those take up a lot of time. People have a lot of low-level stress in their lives, and they're willing and able to tolerate a lot more of it than they need to.

How is GTD different from all of the other self-help and productivity-training books and programs that exist?

The biggest difference, experientially, is that most of these other programs start with where you should be, and so people look at these books or programs at a deficit to begin with: "I'm not where I should be. Oh no." What GTD does is start with exactly where you are, lets you feel successful about that, and helps you get to the top of your game immediately. It's no good

feeling bad about where you're not. Let's start with where we are and get better from there.

What would you like readers to take from GTD?

The first sentence of *Getting Things Done*: It's possible to surf on top of this game. It's not that hard. It's not free. In other words, you can't just be on top because you want to; you have to work for it. But it's not like learning a new language or a new technology. You can learn these new behaviors. They're not hard to learn. Try it out. You'll like it. [G]

J. Rentilly is a Los Angeles-based journalist who writes about film, music and literature.