

The Affect of Efficiency: Personal Productivity Equipment Encounters the Multiple

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abstract

Many contemporary efforts to design and improve thinking target invention, creativity, and innovation. Others target productivity. The paper treats a well known personal productivity system 'Getting Things Done' as a technique of ideation or acquiring ideas. This personal improvement system has become popular across corporate, institutional and private domains. Personal productivity techniques marry quite prosaic techniques of managing email inboxes or filing systems with anxious concerns about the difficulty of finding ways of generating ideas or 'intuitions'. They promise a heightened capacity to think. While sceptical of claims of heightened thinking, the paper argues that 'Getting Things Done' can be seen as a form of 'modern equipment' (Rabinow, 2006) that practically re-thinks the relation between ideas and events as a problematic encounter with the multiple.

Many of the forms, techniques, practices and values of contemporary capitalism are concerned with increasing productivity through thinking more, better or faster. Cognitive capitalism (Corsani *et al.*, 2001) develops socio-technologico-corporeal-affective processes that tune, focus, refine and distribute thinking in the name of productivity, innovation and creativity (Osborne, 2003). Sometimes this means intensified cognitive work for individuals (programmers, designers, scientists, etc). Usually, it also entails re-allocation of memory, perception, or calculation to information, media and communication systems. Surprisingly little sociological or anthropological work investigates how mental effort or ideation (which I understand in a general sense here) actually occurs today for individuals. In contrast to psychological literature, "[w]hat is missing in the current [anthropological] literature," the anthropologist Linda Hogle recently wrote, "is a more nuanced view of self-improvement activities as they relate to varying models of productivity, work, and life management in different societies" (Hogle, 2005: 709).

The 'international bestseller' *Getting Things Done: How to Achieve Stress-free Productivity* (Allen, 2001) has much to say about thinking and ideas in the context of work, life, productivity, creativity and self-improvement. The personal productivity literature advocates methods of working that fill gaps between the worlds of enterprise, government, education and everyday life. As if these gaps were not forcefully collapsed

by demands for total commitment to work, personal productivity systems further enmesh work and life. *Getting Things Done: the Art of Stress-Free Productivity* (or ‘GTD’) (Allen, 2001) and *Ready for Anything: 52 Productivity Principles for Work and Life* (Allen, 2003) have become enormously popular over the last five years amongst people working in firms, universities, government, mass and new media. Several dozen articles in the last three years in UK newspapers alone review or discuss the transformative power of GTD. Many people who would not normally read project management or managerial literature, or heed self-improvement gurus, have taken up the book and become ‘GTDers’. GTD attributes to thinking, or at least certain kinds of thinking, the capacity to engender productivity. The book (and others like it such as Buzan and Buzan, 1994; De Bono, 1992) revolves around the possibility of feeling good about thinking under contemporary work conditions:

It’s possible for a person to have an overwhelming number of things to do and still function productively with a clear head and a positive sense of relaxed control. That’s a great way to live and work, at elevated levels of effectiveness and efficiency. (Allen, 2001: 3)

The “great way to live and work” promised in the personal productivity media (books, websites, seminars, software, videos, supplemented by television, newspaper and radio attention) depends on both an intense centring of thought as mental work, and a distribution of thought across a spectrum of inscription systems. As we will see, it relies on practices that isolate certain high-value thought processes by setting in place infrastructures and processes that absorb the weight of everyday events. It attributes high value to thinking, particularly to the kind of thinking that can be organised into hierarchical sets of projects and actions. The methods, techniques and prosthetics supplied in this literature do not work for everyone. As we will see, the techniques have most purchase in the lives of people whose path through cognitive capitalism already winds through information systems and network-organised structures.

I will argue that personal productivity literature and its ‘how-to-relax-and-control-your-life’ techniques are a response-in-denial to the competitive pressures of the informational economy. It promises somewhat a delusional and probably short-lived self-satisfaction to individuals keen to keep abreast of the waves created by their own careers and their own enthusiasm for more communication and more speed. Therefore, much of this paper can be read as a critique of GTD, and particularly of its rather stultified ‘Image of Thought’ (to borrow Gilles Deleuze’s term). I would suggest, however, that something more is at stake in developments such as GTD. The personal productivity self-improvement literature and its audiences inhabit situations in which inconsistent yet powerful forces intersect. Personal productivity systems, with their intense valuation of thinking and ideation, are generative of something: they are forms of equipment developed to connect events and thinking, to better cope with uncertainty and rapid changes in circumstances. At core, they are practical *encounters with the multiple*. A critical study of a productivity system could explore ambivalences and uncertainties around the value of thinking in the context of information systems and mobile work. Personal productivity systems might provoke thought about the contemporary conditions of thinking, not least because many academics, myself included, take a keen practical interest in them in their own attempts to think more, think less, think better or think differently. In presenting versions of this paper to academic audiences, and in many discussions about GTD, I have frequently seen very

ambivalent reactions, reactions that combine distrust and scepticism with interest and the hope that GTD might solve problems of too much to do, and too little time. The discussion that follows takes the risk of beginning to ‘ontologise’ this ambivalence. It argues, in a fairly preliminary way, that GTD forms part of a developing sensibility concerning thinking and things. In making this argument, I draw (fairly lightly) on both Deleuze’s critique of the dominant ‘Image of Thought’ (Deleuze, 2001) and his affirmative account of the sub-representative forces and processes that comprise the essentially obscure life of Ideas. In this respect, the paper responds to a key question posed by Paul Rabinow. GTD is an example of the ‘modern equipment’ described in (Rabinow, 2003). Much of GTD fits with the equipment as defined by Rabinow: “a taught, learned, repeated and assimilated logos” that can become “the spontaneous form of the acting subject” (*ibid.*: 10-11). Rabinow asks “how it might be possible to transfigure elements of the equipment of modern method into a form of modern meditation” (*ibid.*: 12), a form of self-constituting exercise that connects “thought to ethos” (*ibid.*: 9). Attempting to ‘transfigure’ GTD, could we see the popularity of personal productivity system as a contemporary symptom of vexation about thinking and ideas, as an event in thought (Foucault *et al.*, 2005: 22), and, tentatively, as a practical answer to the question, what is an idea today? In attempting this exploration, an analysis of GTD might heed a suggestion made by Rabinow, who, with Michel Foucault in mind, suggests how concrete situations can be taken up:

There is a lineage of major work in the twentieth-century human sciences that has succeeded in bringing philosophical learning, diagnostic rigor, and a practice of inquiry that operates in proximity to concrete situations into productive relationship. Such inquiry proceeds through mediated experience. (Rabinow, 2003: 3)

Without going very far a field, a mediated experience of personal productivity systems is open to academic researchers who function as typical knowledge or information workers in some ways. My hope is that it might be possible to ‘operate in proximity’ to the concrete techniques of self-management, motivation and ideation to develop a philosophically productive account of contemporary practices of thinking. Such an account would take into account both the material-corporeal conditions of thinking and personhood, and the historical situation of thinking as material practice in knowledge or information-based cultures.

Where is Thought Today? Inside or Outside?

The personal productivity literature addresses people who work and live in the extensive service sectors of the informational economy. Books by Bossidy (2002), and Allen (2001) and a host of variants (Ackermann *et al.*, 2005; Allen, 2003; Andrews, 2005; Covey, 1990; Fletcher, 2005) are mainly concerned to show readers how to work with information flows and other people in order to generate ideas and knowledge. The desire to produce knowledge increasingly guides policies, practices and technologies of economic and sovereign power (Mumaw and Oldfield, 2006; Noir and Croisile, 2005; Sammons, 2004; Tsoukas, 2005; Tsoukas and Shepherd, 2004; Turner, 2001a; Turner, 2001b), including academic life (Strathern, 2004). It is not surprising that the informational economy should take a particular interest in cognition and in particular in the process or labour of thinking. Informational or knowledge economies demand

practical answers to the question of why thinking is hard and why ideas are difficult to acquire.

In one way or another, all of persona productivity literature acknowledges that thinking is a contested, seemingly intangible and irregular activity. It hardly ever happens. While the elusiveness of thought has long obsessed philosophical search for foundational truths, contemporary notions of problem-solving, applied intelligence, effective thinking, experiment, creativity, intuition and invention have different motivations. They stem from the difficulties in producing high-value knowledge. At the core of these practices, lie uncertainties, sometimes half-unsaid and sometimes highly elaborated, about where thinking takes place, how to do it reliably, and especially how to value it.¹ Not far in the background, intellectual property rights pivot on making thinking legible or tangible, rather than truthful. The production of economic value relies in some way on intellectual effort or thinking. As Strathern (1999) suggests, Euro-American cultures increasingly allocate value in terms of mental effort or invention. Until an owner documents thinking as invention, algorithm or expression, property claims cannot stabilize.

David Allen's *Getting Things Done* (2001) represents one symptomatic attempt at resolution of the uncertainties about whether thinking is something that takes place inside the head, between people, in things, whether it is personal or impersonal, cognitive or non-cognitive. GTD ostensibly works at an individual scale to give a sense of inner mental space, but it implicitly has external, institutional and collective dimensions. It very much tends to individualise thought rather than render it, say, dialogical. At the same time, it strives to enmesh ideation (the process of having ideas) with feelings of efficiency and living well. When David Allen speaks of GTD as a 'great way to live' (Allen, 2001: 3), he promises a feeling of attunement attained through a more or less reproducible technology (lists, reminders, flow charts and other mnemonic systems).

Described schematically, GTD provides a 'great way to live' by granularising work and personal life into a set of projects. Each project embodies an encounter or relation to the

1 If capitalism has developed new divisions of labour around thinking over the last thirty years, this transformation in thinking needs to deliver self-evident reasons and ways of acting to those whose commitment the expansion of networked capitalism needs. It needs to legitimate acts, encourage individual development, and allow people to project themselves into a re-structured future. The personal productivity literature sets out to make thinking in business, organizational and everyday life situations more productive. It shows little concern for the content of thought, let alone a relation to truth or any value traditionally associated with thought. Boundaries between general and strategic, creative and deductive, entrepreneurial, logistic or modelling thinking sometimes blur. In itself, personal productivity is not a specialist or technical practice. There are many specialist books and indeed whole professional sub-disciplines dealing with technical thinking in design, modelling or management. Hundreds of popular how-to-think books have been published in the last few decades (see for example De Bono, 1968; 1985; 1991; 2000). Contemporary trends in cognitive makeover literature include quite technically onerous contemporary 'mind hack' books such as Hale-Evans (2006: 245) and relentlessly aerobic 'mind gym' books among which Mack and Casstevens (2001) *Mind Gym: An Athlete's Guide to Inner Excellence*, as well as books that seek to shift self-conception by revealing hitherto unknown wellsprings of thought. In addition, there are also books dedicated to thinking *less* such as exemplified by Nolen-Hoeksema (2003) *Women Who Think too Much: How to Break Free of Our Thinking and Reclaim Your Life*.

world that has a multiple character. GTD projects cut across every aspect of work and life and they re-constitute any situation as a set of actions. The GTDer externalizes many markers of these steps on paper or electronic lists, and follows rules for organising these lists. In its temporal and spatial organization, GTD seeks to provide a master filter or clear and distinct expression for all events, wherever they occur in the world or in thought. This filter relies on an algorithmic decision tree that determines the 'next action step' for any event. Finally, GTD solicits a somewhat manic commitment to total and constantly renewed review of how the system is implemented. Importantly, all the methods, techniques and tricks marshalled by GTD are aimed at clearing space for thinking to take-off. GTD tries to allow thinking to 'take flight' (metaphors of runways, flights, and flight-levels occur throughout Allen's writing), without specifying exactly what will occur in this mental airspace. So, while GTD is firmly committed to a mentalist image of thought, it practically points in a different direction: thinking relies on reorganising the world so that it does not intrude too much.

Who Thinks: Suits or Geeks?

Who becomes a GTDer? Practically, GTD requires individuals to develop a 'personal infrastructure' for processing contingencies. This infrastructure replicates at an individual level the organizational strategies of project management techniques several decades earlier. Management proper, according to Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005), dates from the early twentieth century. As operational control of large firms shifted from owners to salaried administrators, management began to develop as a profession with its own rules, educational pathways and literature.² The late 1980s productivity literature concentrated on motivating managers. Books such as the million-selling *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 1990) and its successors (e.g. Covey, 1997; 2005) focused on vision, leadership, and management of self and others through exhortation such as 'Be Proactive', 'Think Win/Win' or 'Synergize'. At that time, corporate re-structuring and 'horizontalization' were rife. In criticising egoistic corporate individualism of the 1980s, the early 1990s productivity books called for new kinds of thinking:

We need a new level, a deeper level of thinking – a paradigm based on the principles that accurately describe the territory of effective human being and interacting – to solve these deep concerns. This new level of thinking is what *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* is about. It's a principle-centred, character-based, "inside-out" approach to personal and interpersonal effectiveness. (Covey, 1990: 43)

The new deeper level of thinking posits ethical principles coupled with practice as the foundation of non-egoistic leadership. Ten years later, effective people seem more pragmatic. The fiery critique of egoistic interests has died down. Practical hands-on work, at least in GTD, replaces principles as the foundation.³

2 See Chandler and Hikino (1994) for a more extensive review of the literature on this dating.

3 In post-1990s organizational ethos, lack of hierarchical control feels good because it fosters creativity and invention. Supposedly vision rather than hierarchy leads business. Enterprises value intuition, snap judgments, holism, and certain forms of non-specialist and pre-conscious intelligence. Although the productivity literature often presents these forms of intelligence as innate or natural, people need

Getting Things Done dates from the late 1990s and contrasts with personal productivity literature of ten years earlier in several ways. It moves beyond the management cadres. The book heavily foregrounds conventional ‘great men’ such as executives, generals, chiefs-of-staff and judges, and it urges change on its readers through their example. However, judging by its sales and the online popularity, ‘little people’ read Allen’s book. It now addresses large groups of people in business, media, government, or education who encounter and inhabit the fluidities and contingencies of networked capitalism. GTD tries to take short attention spans, the limits of human intelligence and the multiple information streams and fast temporalities of networked life into account. It stresses the need to alter one’s immediate ‘outer environment’ to afford mobility within an ‘inner environment’ where thinking is thought to occur. The outer environment encompasses notebooks, diaries, software (email clients, schedulers and calendars), communication and computing devices (mobile phones and PDAs), desks, and filing cabinets. In a properly designed environment, a knowledge worker can move and acquire ideas more readily. As Allen writes:

Having a total and seamless system of organization in place gives you tremendous power because it allows your mind to let go of lower-level thinking and graduate to intuitive focusing, undistracted by matters that haven’t been dealt with appropriately. But your physical organization system must be better than your mental one in order for that to happen. (Allen, 2001: 138)

Intuitions represent the highest level of ideation or thinking in GTD. The thinking organism pushes lower-level, organizational thinking away through the off-loading or outsourcing techniques and methods that comprise GTD.

The system does not, it hardly needs saying, claim to apply to work focused on caring for other people’s needs, such as washing patients in a hospital, serving in a shop or counselling. However, it has definitely moved well beyond its original audience in North American corporations, government and military. The migration of GTD from suited management to T-shirted knowledge workers in Europe, South-east Asia and the Americas began with programmers and new media designers. In late 2004, on the highly popular blog boingboing.net, Cory Doctorow (2004) publicised this transfer:

Merlin Mann’s 43 Folders weblog is a site where he has been chronicling his efforts to adapt the lessons of the stupendous productivity book *Getting Things Done* (I’ve bought and given away 10 copies since reading it earlier this year) to a technological workflow: in other words, he’s porting suit productivity to geek lifestyle.

Like any productivity literature, GTD describes and inscribes transformations in practices and values of work. It seeks to inform individuals of the latest developments in organising their own lives and information, and to create a feeling or affect of

coaching to activate them. The literature describes at great length solutions, work-arounds, and escape routes for the bad habits created by previous inflexible management methods. Knowledge workers in networked settings, even senior managers, still need control. New control methods need to be invented to replace older rigid ones. External control is outmoded because it reeks of vertical hierarchies and bureaucratic organization. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 80) write, “the only solution is for people to control themselves [sic]”. By making external constraints internal, people control themselves. This affords great advantages and cost-savings in many different work settings. Personal productivity systems play a central role in this self-control.

efficiency. However, adapted to ‘a technological workflow’, or ‘ported’ to ‘geek lifestyles’, GTD has other resonances. It fits in a general way with the valorisation of tagging and lists that has mesmerized network economies in recent years (for instance, in the naming and promotion of Web 2.0).

As the promises of ‘a great way to live’ and ‘intuitive focusing’ suggest, personal productivity literature today cannot afford to focus on productivity alone. Otherwise, it will fail to engage people who realize, with some ambivalence, that they might not directly benefit from any increase in organizational productivity and efficiency. It must offer some other justification for productivity. It needs to give individuals ideas and arguments to counter the objections and resistances that may arise from within themselves or from others when they implement practices that in the main benefit organizations.⁴ In the value it attributes to thinking, GTD delivers an ethico-political injunction, stating what should be the case, not what is the case. For instance, Allen (2001: xiii) writes:

The power, simplicity, and effectiveness of what I'm talking about in *Getting Things Done* are best experienced as experiences, in real time, with real situations in your real world.

The literature must make productivity or efficiency desirable, exciting, valuable or commendable. Personal aspiration or the common good offer some help here (as they do in older motivational literature). References to lyrical and ancient sources of wisdom such as Buddhism abound. Quotes from Buddhism or Sun Tzu's *Art of War* vie with maxims from Leonardo da Vinci, Albert Einstein and Ralph Waldo Emerson (e.g. “the ancestor of every action is a thought”, quoted in Allen, 2003: 67). Quasi-scientific appeals to neurology and psychology also occur. For instance, Allen appeals to an article on the ‘reticular activating system’ from the May 1957 issue of *Scientific American* to provide some very rough neurophysiological footing for arguments about outcome focusing (Allen, 2001: 68).

Importantly, GTD offers a way for individuals to differentiate themselves. GTDers do more than their friends, partners and colleagues. Enhanced efficiency only matters if some other people appear to be less mobile. If everyone became just as productive or creative, then the value of productivity would collapse. In the many responses and comments on GTD that circulate around different groups of people on the web today, gains in personal productivity always remain greater than those of other people. But this is a zero-sum game: personal productivity only matters while the situations we inhabit

4 In the practical effort it puts into thinking as acquisition of ideas, GTD re-activates an older sense of the word ‘ideology’. For the late eighteenth century French philosopher Destutt de Tracy, ideology referred to a science of the acquisition of ideas. As Georges Canguilhem (1988: 29) writes of De Stutt: “[t]he *ideologues*, as their followers were called, proposed treating ideas as natural phenomena determined by the relation between man, a living, sensitive organism, and his natural environment.” Practically, the older sense of the word applies to contemporary personal productivity techniques. However, we know ideology has another sense. Ideology came in the nineteenth century to mean ‘any system of ideas resulting from a situation in which men were prevented from understanding their true relation to reality’. Ideologies prevent certain things from being thought. As well as acquiring ideas, personal productivity systems divert understanding from its environment in some ways.

have structural differences or gaps in them. It flattens competitive advantages, even in the productivity of thinking.

Project-thinking

Regardless of who takes it up, GTD invokes a quasi-universal image of thought as highest good. Personal productivity offers individuals a different mobility or speed of thought. In particular, it promises the individual that henceforth he or she can move more freely amongst ideas than others. It presupposes the high value of mental space. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 361) write,

in fact, in a connexionist world, mobility – the ability to move around autonomously not only in geographical space, but also between people, or in mental space, *between ideas* – is an essential quality of great men, such that the little people are characterized principally by their fixity (their inflexibility).

However, in GTD, all mental and non-mental space is gridded by projects. Within its tight framing of events as projects, GTD organises movement through project space in two dimensions. It has two “behaviour sets”, namely “vertical” and “horizontal” focus (Allen, 2001: 20-21). It mostly foregrounds ‘horizontal focus’. Horizontal focus ranges across projects, and seeks to keep many things in view. ‘Vertical focus’, although ostensibly vital to thinking, creativity and idea acquisition, gets much less attention in the book and in discussion of GTD. In *Getting Things Done*, a single chapter entitled ‘Getting Projects Underway: The Five Phases of Project Planning’ covers vertical focus. The follow-up volume *Ready for Anything* gives scattered tips and maxims for thinking vertically. Of 6.5 million references to GTD supplied by google.com (on 05-06-2006) only 250 (0.4%) refer to ‘vertical focus’. The GTD description of how to think vertically sounds familiar and somewhat generic. It describes the need to be clear about purposes, to achieve explicit outcomes, and counsels the use of brainstorming and organizing ideas. It loosely combines the literature of brainstorming (Clark, 1958), mind-mapping (Buzan and Buzan, 1994), lateral thinking (De Bono, 1967; De Bono, 1971) and a few fragments of neurophysiology and cognitive science. Somewhat surprisingly amidst all the techniques, algorithms, rules and systems of GTD, ‘vertical-focus’ thinking itself figures as something ‘natural’:

The good news is, there *is* a productive way to think about projects, situations, and topics that creates maximum value with minimal expenditure of time and effort. It happens to be the way we *naturally* plan when we consciously try to get a project under control. (Allen, 2001: 55)

Actually, natural planning cannot be very natural, unless projects themselves have been already naturalised as the primary mode of existence of events and encounters in the world. Hence, vertical focus is a pastiche of ideas from earlier management and motivational literature. The way we ‘naturally’ plan projects seems much more likely rooted in the nature of older project management literature in engineering, business and government. By calling project planning ‘natural’, GTD streamlines or bypasses many of the formal techniques and technologies of project management literature. It replaces project planning systems, often supported by special software or diagrams (e.g. spreadsheets and Gantt charts), with a sheet or paper or the outliner function in

Microsoft Word. It shifts from vertically integrated project planning and management control systems to informal brainstorming sessions.

Management methods and literature have long emphasized projects as a way of structuring relations between actors and actions in time. However, in the last decade and half, projects have taken on new salience. Projects offer a way to shift and re-structure hierarchies into flatter, temporary or ad-hoc forms of collaboration. They allow individual mobility and autonomy to be valorised, and differences to be formulated in terms of outcomes. Project work offers autonomy rather than career development and structured advancement in organizational hierarchies. In consequence, more value accrues to people who can switch projects, work with others readily and always adapt to new circumstances. As Boltanski and Chiapello comment, “since each project is the occasion for many encounters, it offers an opportunity to get oneself appreciated by others, and thus the chance of being called upon for some other project” (2005: 93). GTD could be understood as an extreme version of project-thinking. Projects shrink in scale to encompass the minutiae of life, anything that needs to be done. The vast architectures of modern projects spanning years and peopled by large hierarchical teams are miniaturised by GTD into many small, mobile, portable projects, crowding in together, vying for individual attention. Time scales down to days or weeks instead of months or years. Like other productivity methods such as extreme programming (Mackenzie, 2006), projects compress in scale as individuals seek greater guarantees of finishing them. Down-sizing project planning to the personal scale allows projects to be personalized. This personalization complements changes in organizational life as corporations move toward horizontally networked structures of production, staffed by flexible, temporary teams.

However, parcelling personal reality as a set of projects has a cost: a proliferation of projects. From a GTD perspective, we all have many projects, perhaps many more than we can know. Accepting that anything you do or want belongs to a project or a ‘maybe-project’ immediately generates a large number of projects. Most people, it turns out, have several hundred projects. In establishing horizontal focus, listing all current projects becomes an absolute priority. Allen supplies a list of approximately 250 items as triggers to help readers recognise their existing projects (2001: 114-117). They range from cleaning the garage, promising something to a partner, designing a new product or writing an article.

Confronted with a proliferation of projects, the other, more significant ‘behaviour set’ in GTD, ‘horizontal focus’, takes over. Horizontal focus attempts to maintain an overview of all the different things (‘projects’) a person may want to get done. Most of the ‘stress-free productivity’ the method promises comes from detailed implementation and intricate adjustments of horizontal focus. GTDers mainly invest themselves in horizontal focus. Any shift from vertical to horizontal focus necessarily pivots on a single construct: the project. However, this construct is intrinsically multiple. By definition, any situation that calls for multiple actions or steps is a project. Allen writes:

I define a “project” as any outcome you're committed to achieving that will take more than one action step to complete. (Allen, 2001: 136)

The simple act of defining everything in terms of projects unleashes changes that cascade throughout GTD. It delineates encounters with the world as projects, and every project is a set of action steps. Practically, an ‘action step’ means a couple of minutes of doing something. Like projects, action steps, ‘The Absolute Next Physical Thing to Do’ (2001: 130) have profound importance in GTD. Action steps constitute the elements or components in the event of getting something done. Projects enumerate finite action-steps to yield an outcome in a finite time.

Thought Starts ‘Outside the Head’?

While I think GTD’s horizontal focus techniques respond very directly to the exigencies of cognitive capitalism, they also offer interesting terrain on which to begin to explore the ambivalences I mentioned earlier. This ambivalence turns on how encounters with the multiple are figured in GTD. In practice, GTD vacillates between open and closed versions of the multiple. There is a deep difficulty around open and closed multiples in GTD’s project ontology. As Alain Badiou writes, “[e]very multiple is indeed actually haunted by an excess of power that nothing can give shape to, except for an always aleatory decision which is only given through its effects” (Badiou *et al.*, 2004: 79). While a fuller exploration of Badiou’s claim would take us far afield, we can track some of the practical difficulties in actually holding in the surging tides of multiple contingencies. In the aftermath of a GTD implementation, one’s world begins to seethe with projects, and projects themselves are intrinsically multiple, sometimes frighteningly so. In the GTD set ontology, projects subsume and categorise every encounter of mobile intelligence with ideas, information, intuitions and imperatives. Flows of information – e.g. several hundred emails every day – can swamp even the most well-organised. In some ways, GTD explicitly recognises this difficulty:

We’re allowing in huge amounts of information and communication from the outer world and generating an equally large volume of ideas and agreements with ourselves and others from our inner world. And we haven’t been well equipped to deal with this huge number of internal and external commitments. (Allen, 2001: 7)

The “large volume of ideas” and the “huge number of internal and external commitments” all belong somehow to projects. The “huge amounts of information and communication” come from encounters in the networked world ‘we’ move through. Unfortunately, information does not always arrive when or where we want it. Ideas effervesce in the wrong place, time or order. GTD advocates equipment, techniques and disciplined habits as ways of handling the inconvenient paroxysms of information, commitments and impulses.

However, this equipment must both process what streams in from outside and what wells up inside. ‘Things’ come from the subject, from others, and from the world. Such equipment will not be simple. It needs to reliably connect flows of media and events to thought processes (‘ideas’) in ways that engender a sense of individual agency. Personal productivity systems therefore offer hybrid paper, electronic, architectural and cognitive-behavioural assemblages that extract and isolate projects and actions from the streams of information, ideas and commitments. The assemblages help the GTDer sort cognition, memory and thought on paper into sets of projects, sets of next action steps

and checklists. In order to supply the “missing piece in our new culture of knowledge work” (2001: 9). Allen furnishes “a system with a coherent set of behaviours and tools that functions effectively at the level at which work really happens” (*ibid.*). Much of the contemporary personal productivity literature seeks to engage at this level – ‘the level at which work really happens’. Otherwise, it risks slipping into the different, more exhortatory genre of motivational literature.

A Feeling for Personal Totality

Any feeling of elevated levels of effectiveness comes at a cost. It opens a door to excess. We can see this excess at work in GTD. Whether software or paper-based, the support systems must form an intimately embodied component of GTD. GTD demands a complete mapping of an individual's work and personal life. It places great stock on the completeness and all-encompassing scope of an external support system based on this mapping. For GTDers, a “total and seamless system of organization” buoys up high-level or higher-value thought: “[g]ive it to a system superior to your mind, so your mental energy can move on to its bigger and best work” (Allen, 2003: 27). The desire for totality often becomes almost manic. In order to generate ‘tremendous power’ Allen attaches precise behaviours to material supports. Behaviour must become strictly reliable and predictable. Otherwise seams and gaps will appear in the system, and a kind of cognitive corrosion will ruin it. Rules and injunctions directed at sealing the system multiply. For instance, GTD provides firm rules on how to move materials, papers, ideas and information around the desk. An in-basket, for instance, must be emptied in a strict top-down or bottom up order:

You may find you have a tendency, while processing your in-basket, to pick something up, not know exactly what you want to do about it, and then let your eyes wander onto another item farther down the stack and get engaged with it. ...This is dangerous territory. (Allen, 2003: 123).

The system might come unstuck if you do not take the top item from the in-basket. What could happen? GTD derives ‘tremendous power’ from physical actions, and from gestures that strictly iterate certain boundaries and thresholds in the system. In GTD, every cognitive act worthy of the name must begin from and leave a trace in the world, not only in the head. If, as Gilles Deleuze (1988) following Henri Bergson remarks, the brain complicates the relation between perception and movement, in GTD the complications of the brain have turned themselves inside out and re-made certain parts of the world.⁵ Projects only complete (that is, achieve closure) over time if the knowledge-worker, in thinking of them, makes decisions about them. You might have an overwhelming number of things to do, and respond by forgetting them. Only the rule-governed act of set-making and set-based iteration guarantees complete forward motion and hence the sensation of movement. Decisions must be recorded and organised otherwise the boundaries of projects blur, and the sensation of totality decays. GTD compels decisions by linking thinking to physical actions. By moving through

5 “Thus, the brain does not manufacture representations, but only complicates the relationship between a received movement (excitation) and an executed movement (response). Between the two, it establishes an interval (*ecart*), whether it divides up the received movement infinitely or prolongs it in a plurality of possible reactions” (Deleuze, 1988: 24) .

regulated physical actions that bring each and every relevant thing to light, the worker will be compelled to decide something.

A key diagram, reproduced in *Getting Things Done* at least 4 times on full pages with only slight variations (see Figure 1), encapsulates the compulsion to decide, organise or act. A flowchart, a quintessential 1960s organizational diagram, stands at the centre of GTD. Management techniques and productivity literature have long relied on diagrams, forms, lists and tables to organize work. These documents usually help label and program what people do as they work.

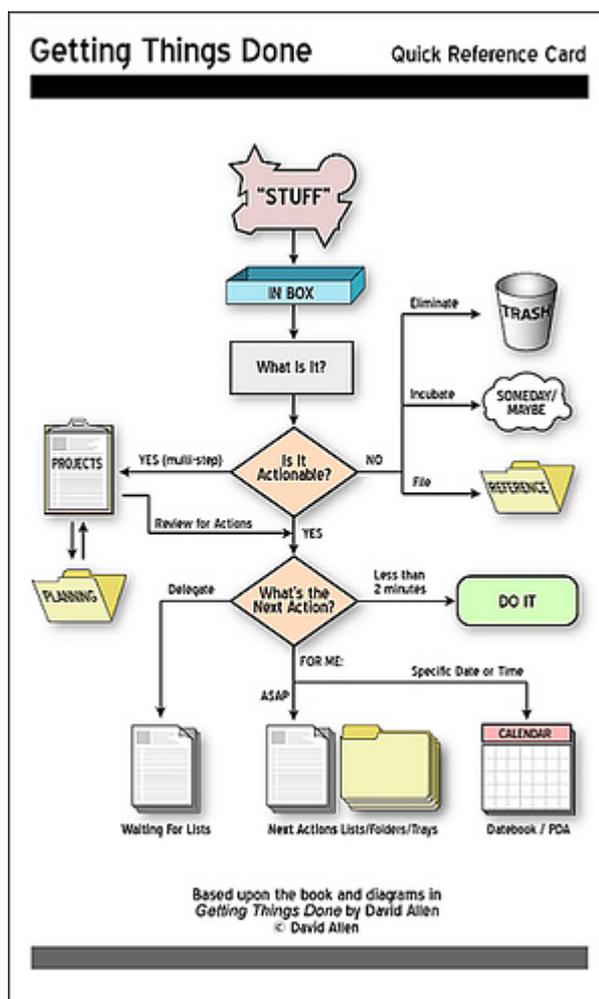


Figure 1: David Allen's flowchart [http://www.douglasjohnston.net/weblog/wp-content/uploads/gtd_quickref_rc1_01.png]

Flickr.com supplies several dozen versions of the diagram. The diagram performs several critical functions. It lays out the central operating rules and connects them to different materials of the system. It links different behaviours and material supports together in tightly sealed totality. The system has only one input point. It has no outputs since it absorbs everything that comes into it, for all time. As Allen writes,

[T]he methods I present here are based on two key objectives: (1) capturing all the things that need to get done – now, later, someday, big, little, or in between – into a logical and trusted system outside of your head and off your mind; and (2) disciplining yourself to make front-end decisions

about all the “inputs” you let into your life so that you will always have a plan for “next actions” that you can implement or renegotiate at any moment. (Allen, 2001: 3-4)

Outside the system lies chaotic ‘stuff’. Inside the system outlined on the flowchart, “stuff becomes ‘things’ that flow along the paths of the diagram. The ‘knowledge worker’ [Allen’s term] clarifies its meaning” (2001: 17) by transforming stuff into actions belonging to projects through a set of ordered behaviours prescribed by the flowchart. The boxes on the edge of the flowchart map onto physical or electronic containers and places. The inbox means intrays and email inboxes. The calendars, file systems, waiting lists, next actions lists together make up the expandable limits of the system. Allen first instructs users to re-organise their workspace so that all the containers represented by the boxes on the edge of the diagram lie within arms reach. As in the case of the inbox or intray, the system regulates the use of these components. A diary page, for instance, should not be used for non-time specific commitments. A particularly important stratum of the system runs across the bottom of Allen’s workflow diagram. In practice, the Next Action list comprises between 4-8 sub-lists that queue actions up for execution in specific ways or places: on the telephone, in the office, at the computer, at home, etc. The fact that people put thousands of photographs of these lists on flickr suggests that they invest the workflow diagram and their own versions of it with great significance. In the photostreams on flickr, for instance, people often detail how they have adapted the workflow diagram in their notebooks, software system or stack of index cards. Many blog entries discuss slight modifications of Allen’s instructions.

The ‘Affect of Efficiency’ and Others

From the perspective of the manic demand for a closed and total mapping in GTD, there is something melancholic in the thousands of images of GTD-organised workplaces on websites such as flickr.com. They usually show immaculately organised desks, notebooks, and in-trays in rooms empty of people. The feelings of effectiveness promised by GTD specifically concern thinking, decisions, intuition, creativity and, above all, the connection of ideas to actuality. It is a technique of thinking about doing and not-doing, and a set of practices to engender feelings about thinking about doing and not-doing. Rather than discussing what a worthwhile idea would be like, Allen concentrates quite candidly on “feeling good about what you are doing and not doing” (2003: 48), and promises “an unmistakable release of pressure and a surge of self-esteem” (*ibid.*: 30). It hones in on a specific feeling that we might term the ‘affect of efficiency.’⁶

The affect of efficiency certainly does not come from working with others more closely. The book and its massive secondary commentary have little to say on that score. One co-operates and makes agreements primarily with the self. The thousands of images of GTDed workplaces rarely show anyone else there. At most, getting more done streamlines interactions with others, or allows one to execute tasks more quickly. Personal productivity systems bind primarily to a fairly narrow field of labour centred on symbolic manipulation. Moreover, even the value or purpose of these symbolic

6 Term suggested by Anne Galloway, personal communication.

manipulations counts for little in themselves. GTD may accelerate the production of ordinary, banal, stupid or false solutions to problems. This may indeed burden or importune others. For instance, in the GTD system, the 'Waiting List' has particular importance. It lists all the people from whom the GTDer expects something. Regular weekly review of the Waiting List guarantees that no-one can slip out of the personal workflow. The inaction of others becomes more and more visible each week.

Working on the self and feeling good about personal commitments counts for more than working with others. One works on feeling good about getting more things done. A self that does more than others has a better chance of 'feeling good'. That feeling hinges on action, or on seeing that you have acted. As mentioned above, the 'next action step' refers to "the next physical, visible activity that needs to be engaged in, in order to move the current reality toward completion" (2003: 3). Writing the 'next action step' in a list, doing it, and then crossing it off generate the affect of efficiency. The process has a slightly circular feel to it: an action is a discrete activity that can be written down or done in less than two–three minutes. This understanding of action lays weight on atomic displacements of some reality towards completion. It assumes that "[t]here's always some physical activity that can be done to facilitate your decision-making" (2001: 130). Personal and organizational productivity systems all seek to move reality to desired completion, but suggest different ways of doing this. GTD concentrates on building a total map of the visible, physical activities needed to make or implement a decision. Every action should be tracked somewhere in the map. The affect of efficiency depends on total commitment to collecting, ordering and reviewing:

So how will you decide what to *do* and what *not* to do, and feel good about both? The answer is, by trusting your intuition. If you have *collected, processed, organized, and reviewed* all your current commitments, you can galvanize your intuitive judgment with some intelligent and practical thinking about your work and values. (Allen, 2001: 48)

GTD anchors thinking through total commitment to the algorithmic cycle of collecting, processing, organizing and reviewing commitments as finite sets of projects. It promises that a person can alter his or her sense of urgency, of having too much to do, by switching off the cognitive noise of thinking out of order. Allen says

There is no real way to achieve the kind of relaxed control I'm promising if you keep things only in your head. (Allen, 2001: 21)

The promised change in feeling depends on substituting different practical arrangements. Thinking no longer concerns its object directly, but orients itself towards a generic schema of operations and indicators of progress embodied in sets of projects and actions. The 'relaxed feeling of control' stems from the familiarity of this system rather than the action itself. The affect of efficiency comes from learning the habits of the system itself rather than any other reality.

Hence it is not surprising that the material specificities of the equipment matter to GTD and GTDer. Allen's *Getting Things Done* supplies very specific instructions about how to label, list, sort and store information and ideas. The instructions include things to put on the desk, how to organise filing cabinet drawers, how to set up the inbox on an email program, or choosing the size of paper for note-taking. For instance, Allen suggests: "Label your file folders with an autolabeler. Typeset label change the nature of your

files and your relationship to them” (2001: 100). Much commentary on GTD fetishizes the actual pens, notebooks, in trays, and desktop arrangements. Several thousand GTD-related photographs on flickr.com show paper, notebooks, cardboard, folders and pens, as well as pictures of and from David Allen’s books. Similarly, countless photographs and blog entries describe minute details of implementation of GTD. Such detailing can be subtle, for instance it often concerns physical qualities and forms of paper. Many online reports, discussions, developments and modifications of GTD highlight the value of paper over screen. The ‘Hipster PDA’ pages on the website www.43folders.com (Mann, 2004) for instance describes how to implement the GTD using index cards and a paper clip. The D*I*Y Planner supplies very detailed printable templates at various sizes (Johnston, 2005). Finally, and not least, certain brands of notebooks (Moleskine) are omnipresent in GTDers accounts of their implementations.

Why would typeset labels or a notebook of a particular size change the knowledge workers’ relation to her projects? One answer, drawing on science and technology studies work (STS), would be that a feeling of agency, of being able to do something, only arises in the presence of the very docile, tractable materials. As John Law writes, “if there is self-reflexivity, consciousness, the formation of a dualist effect, this is because they are at one end of a gradient of materials. They’re in a place where they deal with docile and tractable materials” (Law, 1994: 158). In some ways, paper is more tractable than a screen. It is less tractable than sound, yet more durable. GTDers display ambivalence about software and electronics. On the one hand, many people have implemented the GTD workflow model in software systems. Roughly sixty different software systems implement or directly support GTD, including many plug-ins for standard Microsoft email software (Fipps, 2006). It is hard to tell how much use they enjoy, but they begin to violate a basic precept of GTD: any ‘equipment’ must be completely portable and available at all times. On the other hand, although much networked-derived information flows through it, GTD does not depend on electronic information stores and software systems. Allen himself offers only desultory advice on using electronic PDA’s and email client software. He mentions that some of his best ideas have come from playing with his PDA in airport departure lounges, but he does not endorse them enthusiastically. Information networks have so heavily amplified and automated flows of information that it seems better to re-externalize information onto a different substrate. The Hipster PDA and the Moleskine notebook offer a separate, highly disconnected yet portable alternative to the wirelessly connected PDA. People use the convenience of paper to reduce their exposure to flows of information. They also use paper to heighten the value of their own thought and render tangible their own intellectual effort. The only solution is to take up heterogeneous materials (Law, 1994: 139).

Can anything about the mode of existence of an idea today be learned from GTD? If the system of folders, in-trays, lists, reminders and decisions steer actions, ideas should begin to flow more smoothly, nimbly and in greater numbers. Is not the GTD promise to liberate thinking heavily undermined by all the lists and rules that buffer impediments and distractions, that filter out, above all, any ‘shocks’ to thought? Indeed, the hope that thought will be free from problems, distractions or difficulties runs into many small obstacles and shocks. Judging from many GTD-related postings on the web, people have constant difficulties in identifying or carrying out the next action step. The

problem of finishing or doing the next action attracts a lot of attention. Merlin Mann, a prominent geek GTD proponent, writes:

I've noticed that there are often items on my "next actions" list that hang around a lot longer than they should. I scan and rescan and sort and add and delete, but there's always a few stragglers who hang out there for a week or more. Eventually this starts to vex me, and I try to debug why things aren't getting done. (Mann, 2004: 1)

In response, he develops a hermeneutics of the 'hang around' next-action:

It is not a single, atomic activity;
It is not a physical action;
It is not really the very next action I need to take;
It is not something I've actually committed to;
It is poorly defined or just badly worded;
It is nothing I can act on now; I have no idea what this means. (Mann, 2005: 237)

Ornate work-arounds and supplementary techniques such as this festoon the postings and websites on GTD. Small modifications and variations sometimes take Allen's methods a step further, or implement them differently. Like the many software implementations of GTD, people expend great effort on intricate descriptions of how they manage to perform next actions. This effort to get things done in the right way often seems to take on a higher priority than getting things done at all. The feeling of being in control becomes more important than what is controlled.

The overwhelming triviality of many next-actions also dampens any shock to thought. Sample next action lists found on the web bear this out. For instance, here is a sample next action list whose relentless interest in buying, owning, marketing, and report-writing seems a long way from the 'elevated levels' of intuitive focusing promised by GTD:

Search online to find different potential Palm Pilots to buy
Phone John to arrange next marketing meeting
Look in car manual to find qualified mechanic for car
Phone Apple Reseller and buy new Apple Mac
Phone and cancel magazine subscription
Print out the financial report for the department meeting (Fletcher, 2005)

This list, if typical, suggests that GTD could stultify rather than taking anyone to "to a whole new level of creative thinking and doing" (Allen, 2003: 5). With its focus on making all projects and next actions visible, perhaps GTD arrives a bit too late. GTD fractures and collapses processes of thought in practical sensing. In perplexity, it tries to piece together a puzzle or an idea that it cannot contemplate directly.

Conclusion: Transfiguring?

Where would an 'Idea', in Deleuze's sense as a problem-setting imperative, or a differential multiplicity actualising itself across series of differences, occur in a GTD-like world? This paper has sought to place itself within the midst of GTD, and to inhabit an uncomfortable ambivalence about its equipment and practice in the interests of 'transfiguring' them into a form of meditation. It has argued that GTD harks back to

past organizational and management techniques and attempts to re-implement them an individual level. It imprints organizational routines into individual forethought. This is a significant transformation. The 'horizontal focus' of GTD personalizes infrastructures of decision and innovation. It brings organization-wide management techniques down to an individual level. In doing so, GTD hopes to free individuals to attune themselves more sensitively to relevant problems. It promises a positive sense of relaxed control.

GTD cannot offer any way to ideate, or to produce ideas, apart from the generic techniques of brainstorming or mind-mapping, collecting, sorting, and deciding. Moreover, others appear in the system only at the inputs, through the negotiation of project commitments, or perhaps in conversation, that supplies candidates for next actions. For all its flattening of control hierarchies and distribution of cognition across brain-world boundaries, ideas or concepts retain a massively subject-centred hierarchical character. They come from the subject and its representations. David Allen supplies a model of ideas based on flight patterns. Each altitude supplies a different level of perspective, ranging from life-changing ideas down to what to do right now. The 'vertical focus' behaviour moves up and down these levels. Yet thinking at the highest level, the 50,000 feet level ("ambling around your koi pool with a glass of chardonnay at sunset", Allen, 2001: 189), seems little different from thinking at the runway level. As ideas, washing a bedspread, ordering a new computer, or fixing a bug in a Perl script hardly shatter the world. Nor do the next-action criteria provide much chance of ideas being eventful, of generating errors, contradictions or paradoxes, of failing, breaking up or fragmenting in ways that communicate between heterogeneous series (Deleuze, 2001). Thoroughly useful and productive, it mires thought in relentless action. Actions swarm across a life.

Should we conclude then that personal productivity systems thwart understanding of the realities they relate to? GTD answers the actual needs of the new social groups inhabiting the networked places. Netizens, elancers, cognitarians, swarm-capitalists, hackers, produsers, and knowledge workers feel the need to cogitate faster to keep ahead (as individuals engaged in essentially outsourceable, downsizeable work, as participants in economic activities subject to local and global competition). GTD's mania for totality and its constant imperatives to decide the next action answer the uncertainties and instabilities of newer divisions of labour. If the contemporary division of labour constantly re-distributes knowing to other persons and things, particularly through software and communication networks, GTD too tries to move lower-level thinking to the outside. At an individual level, it mimics the re-distributions of work in networked workplaces. It binds the knowledge worker in tightly woven exploitation of their own mobility. Indeed, a personal productivity system could well lead to the internalization of a rationale of self-exploitation, and block the emergence of any understanding of its own cost. By building 'physical organization' systems that absorb all possible materials, GTD coaches people into a high-level feeling of freedom ('intuitive focusing') coupled with lower-level rigidity ("the Absolute Next Physical Thing To Do", 2001: 130). It practically reinforces an affective sense of an efficient Self who cannot see the impossibility of the demand for useful thought.

However, I have also suggested that something more is at stake, and this is most evident in the febrile modifications and variations of the system in practice. Even if many of

these quickly lose themselves in recursive intricacies, they point to a set-based encounter with the multiple whose ramifications extend well beyond GTD. This suggestion, that GTD can be read as problematic encounter with the multiple, stands in my mind as an ineradicable potential of what Rabinow (2006) calls 'modern equipment' to transfigure method into 'meditation'. Understood as modern equipment, as a thing that thinks about the multiple, GTD responds to a problem: the problem of how to create a space for thinking in the midst of flows of events that have become increasingly unmanageable, that crisscross any established boundaries between subject and object, and that are essentially excessive. There is too much to think about. GTD can be read as a practical expression of an Idea of inhabiting the multiple. No doubt, its set-based constructivism risks becoming entirely generic, and its acting out of thinking will fail to the extent that it diminishes events and singularities. However, we should not dismiss failures lightly. Even a collapse of thought can be quite powerful. At the heart of any attempt to think lies failure: "[t]hought is also forced to think its central collapse, its fractures, its own natural 'powerlessness' which is indistinguishable from its greatest power – in other words, from those unformulated forces, the *cogitanda*, as though from so many thefts or trespasses in thought" (Deleuze, 2001: 147).

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