

Time Management: Making Every Hour Count

Jena McGregor



Hadlock answers e-mail three times a day, and otherwise turns on her auto reply Reid Horn

CRACKBERRIES

45%

Of those with BlackBerries or similar devices check their e-mail before they get dressed

Data: YouGov/ BusinessWeek poll of 721 office workers on Aug. 4-6

Time management gurus hawking day planners aren't the only ones with ideas on how to manage your hours better. Readers offered their own workplace-tested secrets for success on our Time Management blog, in a BusinessWeek reader poll, and on the social network LinkedIn. Here are 10 tips for taking control of the clock from readers who are already doing just that.

Regina Hadlock, training specialist, Dallas

You have to train people how to work with you. I have used the auto reply tool in Outlook to let people know when I will be responding to e-mail—say, at 9:00, 2:00, and 4:00. If they have e-mailed and get the auto reply, and it's something that can't wait, the phone still works.

Shaun Parvez, vice-president, Cowen & Co., New York

To help stay organized, I take notes in two places. The first is a peel-away note pad that sits in front of my phone. The second is a fake-leather-bound account book with mint-colored pages. In this bound book, I make two types of entries: front to back, and back to front. The front-facing entries are work-related. The back-facing entries are personal. When they meet in the middle, I get a new book. This approach keeps both my professional and personal lives in one place and gives me a sense of how balanced the two are.

Scott Gingold, CEO, Powerfeedback, Easton, Pa.

When possible, don't type too much or, like me, you may need to have your wrist tendons realigned.... Will I ever lay down my wireless device? Rewriting the words of the late Charlton Heston: I'll give you my BlackBerry when you take it from my cold, dead hands.

Maria Reitan, senior principal, Carmichael Lynch Spong, Minneapolis

I write down my to-do list for the week under different client headings. I "star" the hot items that absolutely must be done and then highlight those that are hot for that specific day. By midday, if I have not worked through most of those that are highlighted, I circle the ones that I must get done by day's end. While it may seem anal, I have to say it works. I have a few co-workers that have adopted my legal-pad "bible."

Patrick Corcoran, director, finance, Pfizer (PFE), New York

Sometimes it's best not to answer all e-mail promptly. When a message contains an issue that the sender should solve, it may be best to let them figure it out.

James D. von Suskil, president, Syzygy Group, Plainfield, Ill.

I set aside an hour per day for administrivia. If it does not get done and I do not get dinged, then it probably does not matter, and I try not to do it anymore.

Laurie Sherazee, program engineer, Yulee, Fla.

When I was reporting to an office every day, I came in earlier than most or left later. It did not have to be hours on end; sometimes a half-hour before or after was all it took to finish tasks requiring complete attention.

Esha Bhatia, senior client solutions consultant, The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
Every so often I have to stop and assess the activities I'm involved in and determine where I can do B-level work and still do a great job, vs. those projects/initiatives that must be A-level.

Jennifer Skipper, video producer, Bellevue, Wash.

I write lists of "must haves" and "let gos." That way I can see what has to be done and what I can let go of. If I didn't write it down, I couldn't prioritize.

Dean Fuhrman, consultant, Westwood Hills, Kan.

If you really want to manage your time and get stuff done, have a burning life and work purpose that is a beacon for what you do. While they are useful, the lists, the shortcuts—all that stuff—pales in comparison to purpose for time management.

Getting Serious About Getting Things Done

Jena McGregor

HOW TO DO IT

When it comes to managing e-mail, projects, and time, we could all use a little help. Here are four key ideas from Allen's seminar:

1. WRITE IT DOWN

Those annoying tasks floating in your head? Allen suggests jotting down everything from "buy dog food" to "build vacation home" before processing it into a set of lists.

2. BREAK IT OUT

Too many to-do lists are composed of complex projects that say little about what should be done next. Make lists of granular steps, or "next actions," instead.

3. DO IT NOW

If a task can be done in two minutes—reading a document, say, that needs your signature—do it right away. Just don't let them get in the way of important projects.

4. FILE IT AWAY

A good filing system, both for paper and e-mails, is essential. If it isn't easy to file papers to reference later, Allen says, they'll stack up instead.

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How many of you have "fallen off the wagon?" the motivational speaker asks. Many in the audience laugh knowingly before sheepishly raising their hands.

This isn't an AA meeting where the offenders went on a bender. It isn't a diet support group, and those with their hands in the air haven't inhaled a pint of Ben & Jerry's. Even so, the 111 business, government, and nonprofit executives (not to mention this reporter) assembled in a Washington hotel conference room are in dire need of help. Distracted by calendar alerts, burdened by back-to-back meetings, swimming in e-mail, we're all there to get the crunched-schedule monkey off our backs.

Our potential savior, sleeves rolled up and microphone clipped on, is productivity guru David Allen. He is the author of *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*, the 2001 book that has sold more than a million copies and has been translated into 30 languages. His eponymous, \$8 million time-management empire spans everything from \$595 per-person public seminars to corporate speaking engagements that can earn him \$40,000 to \$60,000 a pop. This fall, Allen will launch a co-branded line of organizing products with school-supplies maker Mead (MWV) in Staples (SPLS) stores. He's also producing an e-learning curriculum that will extend his reach even deeper inside corporations.

Widely abbreviated as GTD, Allen's method of getting things done focuses on two basic concepts. The first is that by dumping all the tasks floating around in our heads (everything from "buy toothpaste" to "write strategic plan") onto paper or into software, and then sorting them into a system of lists, we become better able to deal with the unexpected crises that disrupt our days. The second is that the complex projects that populate our to-do lists (say, "hire marketing manager") should be broken into granular "next actions" ("e-mail recruiter" and "call HR about firing current one"). Other closely followed tenets include a well-sorted filing system, a two-hour "weekly review," and that most holy of GTD grails: an empty e-mail in-box.

Simultaneously elegant in its simple suggestions and overwhelming for those even a tad obsessive-compulsive, GTD has fans in nearly every corner of the corporate globe. Google (GOOG), General Mills (GIS), and Target (TGT) have all brought Allen or his consultants in to train employees.

FROM FEDS TO SOCCER MOMS

Increasingly, Allen's popularity is extending far outside the walls of U.S.-based corporations. Arianna Huffington is a fan. Allen spent the day after the D.C. seminar training 100 managers at the FBI. And in June, he traveled to Tokyo to meet with 150 Japanese business bloggers who are GTD users.

My fellow students of time management are a broad mix, ranging from first-timers, like the Federal Reserve administrator to my right, who hasn't read Allen's book, to soccer moms with a zeal for organizing. Several are repeat attendees, such as Steven Terreri, an executive director of oncology sales for Amgen (AMGN) who is hearing Allen speak for the fourth time. He's here for a refresher course but has other goals in mind, too. "I'd like to expose some folks who work around me," he says, referring to his administrative assistant and a team manager, both of whom he brought along for the day.

For newcomers like me, the morning is a helpful introduction. Rather than create a daily to-do list—a depressing exercise that means recopying everything you didn't finish on Monday's list to Tuesday's—Allen urges us to keep running lists organized by category or place, such as calls, errands, @home, @office. I immediately take to the idea of a "waiting for" list—a reminder to keep up with answers I haven't gotten or tasks I've delegated.

I also like that Allen's system is platform-agnostic—high-tech geeks may prefer one of the many software add-ons built for GTD users. But it apparently works just as well with plain old

pen and paper, which you can, of course, store in the GTD file folders the David Allen Co. is selling in the back of the ballroom.

GRANULAR GRADATIONS?

But by lunchtime, I'm feeling overwhelmed. The concept of breaking down projects into actionable steps makes sense, but my brain can't wrap itself around just how granular I'm supposed to go. (Isn't "research hotels" an intuitively obvious action in planning a vacation?) And by afternoon, my head is swimming. After a couple of hours thinking at 20,000- and 30,000-foot levels—GTD parlance for pondering higher goals—categorizing "take car for oil change" into a topic area such as "personal administration" starts to feel like needless overthinking.

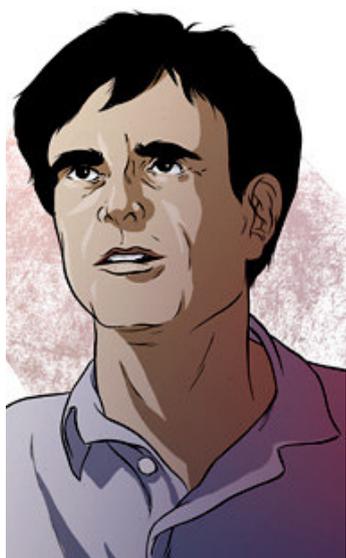
The real test, as Allen indicated, is how well I can make the ideas stick when I get home. I'm already a fan of some GTD dogmas, such as keeping running "agenda" lists for people I speak with often: my boss, my spouse, my colleague on a project. It's a simple trick for remembering what to discuss in meetings or calls. And I've been warned that it will take at least two months to make GTD practices habitual. But since I'm in the middle of moving, steps like creating a system of reference files seem impossible when I'm still surrounded by boxes. And as someone with more than 7,000 e-mails in her in-box, the concept of an empty one feels so preposterous I decide not to even bother.

In the end, the real questions I find myself facing are whether GTD will make me less stressed and more productive (I believe it will) or actually save me time (I'm a little skeptical). GTD doesn't, after all, make procrastination go away. In fact, Allen's instruction to go ahead and do anything that takes less than two minutes, rather than putting it on a list, has me feeling happily efficient. Meanwhile, what I should have been doing is, um, writing this story.

I call up Allen to see if there are any GTD secrets for stopping that pesky habit of postponing. Like any good self-improvement guru, he does make me feel better: "As long as you're going to procrastinate, you might as well clean up the living room." But even he recognizes that there are limits to a system: "All it can do is let you know that you're procrastinating."

'You Can't Make More Time'

Randy Pauschs



Randy Pausch Illustrtion by Matthew Woodson; Photographic Reference by Pam Panchak/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Randy Pausch was truly passionate about the benefits of time management. He was asked to write this article for BusinessWeek not long before his death on July 25 at age 47, and he was excited to have the opportunity. In fact, it led to one of the last e-mails I got from him, which was full of exclamation points and closed with the word "AWESOME!" In the end, he didn't have the energy to finish it. Thus, a few of us who were his friends have put the piece together using the phrases we heard from him many times. — Jessica Hodgins, Carnegie Mellon University professor and colleague

So you've decided to take the time to read this article. Every moment of our lives requires this kind of decision, which is the fundamental time-management question: Should I do X, or should I do Y?

All his life, Randy Pausch knew time was a gift. He was always logical about time, sometimes to the point of exasperating his friends with comments about the size of their in-boxes. But his reverence for hours, minutes—even seconds—served him well.

He would stand before a room full of students and tell them time was their most precious commodity. They all knew they had finite money, but they lived as if they had infinite time. "You can always make more money later," Randy would say. "But you can't make more time." Time, like money, he explained, must be explicitly managed.

He had all sorts of practical advice for work. Stand while on the phone. (You'll be more eager to finish up.) Avoid copying five people on an e-mail when you want something done. (Each will assume that one of the other four is going to step up to the plate.) Minimize interruptions. (Turn off the "new e-mail" popup alert or shut down e-mail during your good working hours.)

Other tips were reminders of the big picture. Do the "ugliest" thing first—everything else will come more easily after that. Make time for the important things, not just for critical things; it is all too easy to spend time fighting fires rather than doing the necessary deep thinking. And recognize that the best reason to save time in your work is to increase time with your family.

SO LITTLE OF IT LEFT

Toward the end of his life, Randy became something of a poster boy for the limits of time. Last September he gave a "last lecture" at Carnegie Mellon. He talked about the joys of life and how much he appreciated it, even with so little of his own left. It was a talk for his students and colleagues, but because it was recorded, he hoped it could be a message to his three kids, too.

Footage of the talk unexpectedly spread online, and he heard from thousands of people. (As a result, another lecture of his, on time management, was widely watched online, too.) Many wanted to know if his views on time changed as he got closer to the end of his life. But there were no great epiphanies. "Everything now is more so," he told people.

He lived longer than doctors predicted, and he mapped out that "extra" time with fervor. He went on a few romantic trips with his wife, Jai. He made a point of doing memorable activities with his children, such as swimming with dolphins and visiting Disney World (DIS). He was trying to give his kids—ages 2, 3, and 6—vivid memories of their time together.

Even before the last stages of his illness, people asked him how to best prioritize their time. His answer was simple: "If I don't do X, will it matter? And if I have to pick either X or Y, which one is more important? At the end of my life, which of these things will I be glad I did?" Time is all we have. And, like Randy, we may find one day we have less than we think.

Randy Pausch's time-management lecture is viewable at www.thelastlecture.com. The Last Lecture, by Randy Pausch with Jeffrey Zaslow, is published by Hyperion.

Fonte: Business Week, p. 66-71. August 25 – September 1. 2008