

Who Is David Allen?

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With his popular seminar lectures and cult-like following, productivity expert David Allen has become an influential force in the Information Age workplace. First embraced by IT geeks—the ultimate early adopters—Allen's Getting Things Done management system is now attracting converts at companies like Clorox and Deutsche Bank. What's all the fuss is about? The answer lies in a surprisingly simple set of practices that requires little to no financial investment.

Key Stats

- **Name:** David Allen
- **Age:** 61
- **Home Base:** Ojai, California
- **Profession:** Executive Coach, Personal Productivity Guru
- **Book Titles:** Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity (2001), and Ready for Anything: 52 Productivity Principles for Work and Life (2003)
- **Copies of Getting Things Done in Print:** 450,000

Why He Matters Now:

Since publishing his best-selling book Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity in 2001, David Allen has attracted hundreds of thousands of professionals to his personal-productivity system, which he calls simply GTD ("Getting Things Done"). According to Allen, today's workforce faces unprecedented stressors. Rather than producing the same widget over and over, managers at all levels—from the boardroom to the frontline—must now juggle multiple, and often conflicting, projects and priorities; master highly varied tasks; and successfully negotiate across departments,

from HR to IT. Meanwhile, the drumbeat of mergers and reorgs—together with constantly morphing products and services—requires constant learning and adaptation. According to Allen, GTD addresses exactly these kinds of stressors, and his fans seem to agree. With some 450,000 copies in print, *Getting Things Done* is gaining traction as a business-management classic. Entire companies, from small start-ups to biotech giant Genentech, are beginning to incorporate GTD into their corporate training.

Why He Matters to You

If you constantly feel that things are slipping through the cracks, but you're not sure what or even where the cracks are, GTD may be the solution. By placing all your nagging commitments into what Allen calls a "trusted system"—an inbox, a calendar, and a set of well-organized action lists—he says you can free up mental energy to concentrate on exactly what is in front of you.

Many of his ideas are straightforward. Record all your commitments. Review them weekly. Track projects. However, GTD departs from classic time-management systems in key ways. First, he treats every kind of task as relevant, from clothes shopping to leveraged buyouts. Nothing gets prioritized out of existence. Second, he offers detailed ways to avoid the subtle pitfalls that prevent you from turning to-do lists into productive action by adding three key steps—"processing," "organizing," and "reviewing"—each of which has its own set of rituals and rationales.

Already got life under your thumb? At the very least, his ideas make for good water cooler or meeting fodder—especially if you have any of Allen's true believers in your midst. IT workers, in particular, are avid fans and have contributed to the GTD mythos with their own blogs, wikis, online tools, and white papers.

The Strong Points

The GTD system requires minimal investment and can be very do-it-yourself. You don't have to buy special gear, attend pricey seminars, or hire a certified GTD coach (though all are definitely out there). It also works for Luddites—a pen and the back of your hand are just as acceptable as Blackberries and fancy Outlook plug-ins. In fact some back-to-basics GTD proponents have popularized the use of index cards, known as the "hipster PDA."

Adherents claim that GTD not only makes them more efficient, but that the process of recording every single commitment, large or small, allows their brains to work more creatively and generate more ideas.

The Weak Spots

Allen himself admits that his system only works inasmuch as you adhere to it faithfully. If you don't trust that you've logged all your commitments, you're in fact far more likely to ignore those that you already have captured—and the entire structure starts to crumble. Committing to a complete GTD

overhaul can be hard, especially if you go it alone, since the very pressures that you want to relieve can keep you from implementing Allen's principles.

Plus, if you've never been much of a joiner, you might not like the company you're likely to keep. Allen and his adherents exude a certain Pied Piper quality that can set some teeth on edge. His position as a minister in an organization called the [Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness](#) has some people raising red flags, but so far there is no evidence that Allen uses GTD to recruit religious followers.

The Back Story

Raised in Shreveport, Louisiana, Allen became a devotee of magic as a teenager because, he has said, it has the power to make the invisible visible and vice versa. Famously, he also made an early study of Zen Buddhism, a clear antecedent of his "relaxed control" philosophy. His next passion was martial arts. Fascinated by the way speed, focused concentration, and what he calls "flow" produces far more power than sheer muscle, he earned a black belt in karate. After studying at the University of California at Berkeley in the height of the 1960s, he spent time knocking about exploring the "personal growth" movement, though his interest was always in practical application rather than esoterica. A skilled speaker, Allen got his big break in the early 1980s when he convinced Lockheed to let him train managers and execs in a homegrown productivity system that eventually evolved into GTD. He spent the next two decades coaching executives and in 1996 founded the David Allen Company, which offers training, coaching, and management consultancy services. His 2001 book *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* won a worldwide following. Besides running his company and writing frequently about GTD, he gives seminars and keynote addresses around the globe.

How to Talk About It

Allen avoids highfalutin' language, but that doesn't mean that GTD is jargon-free. To keep up with his ideas, you'll have to master a carefully defined set of terms.

Stuff: Anything in your mind or environment that may require action, though you have not yet determined what the action is or clearly committed to doing it. Includes everything from errands to life goals.

RAM: The mind's short-term memory, which on an unconscious level constantly monitors commitments big and small. Borrowed from "random access memory," a component of most computers.

Open loop: Agreements with yourself, conscious or unconscious, that you aren't keeping, from picking up laundry to helping solve world hunger.

Distributed cognition: A psychological term for the process of freeing up your mind by getting things "out of your head" and into an objective, reviewable form (such as a list).

Trusted system: A combination of a physical inbox, a calendar, and a set of action lists. The backbone of GTD, a trusted system could use a PDA, a spiral notebook, voicemails and emails

to yourself, Outlook, the back of your hand, or all of the above—as long as it captures all of your commitments.

Project: Any desired result that requires more than one step, from buying a couch (measure the living room, consult with your partner, find a good price, etc.) to hiring and training a new staff member.

Next-action: The next thing you need to do to keep a project moving forward, whether it's to discard, file, schedule, enter into your PDA, or (if it takes less than two minutes) do immediately.

Contextual list: Instead of one long to-do list, GTD breaks tasks down by contexts, e.g. on the phone, online, household, office, errands.

Hard landscape: Items that must be completed at a specific time or on a specific day; all other items should be left off the calendar and remain in "contextual lists."

Weekly review: Critical element in which you collect, process, and organize new stuff, update your contextual lists, capture open loops, review all projects, and determine next-actions for each.

Further Reading

Learn about the David Allen Company and subscribe to his monthly newsletter at his [web site](#).

Get a brief summary of Allen's ideas and links to further reading and virtual communities on a [GTD Times](#) a blog devoted to GTD.