

Matthew's Book Club Summary #18

By: Matthew Klippenstein

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Title: Getting Things Done

The book club started as an informal, fun way to explore and consider business ideas relevant to our work with colleagues. The format consists of one person (usually Matthew) reading a book and writing a summary for discussion during team meetings. This allows the other team members to benefit from the book's insights, without carving time in their schedule to read the full volume.

The idea was to summarize *an interesting part* of each chapter in a paragraph or two, and where applicable, note how these could be relevant to the workplace. This provides the reviewer with practise condensing a mass of data into a few pieces of key information: an underappreciated skill. The reviews are meant to be accurate but light-hearted, on the assumption that people learn more when they're having fun.

Matthew's company gave permission for these to be distributed to non-employees as long as the employer-specific content was removed, for which he is sincerely appreciative.


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About the author:

What Steven Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* was to business types in the 1990's, David Allen's *Getting Things Done* ("GTD") was in the 2000's. And just as Covey extended the *7 Habits* brand after the first volume, with limited success, Allen seems to be doing the same with the *GTD* franchise. ☺

Allen's career hit a tipping point after he designed a course for American defense firm Lockheed. He hopes to help readers bring undistracted attention to their core projects, by firstly and foremostly taming their e-mail inbox. I implemented a few ideas from the book at work in 2009, and have been pleased by the results. Online enthusiasts have created an extensive software ecosystem to integrate the ideas into Gmail, Outlook and other applications.

Part 1 – The Art of Getting Things Done

Ch	Title	Summary
1	A New Practice for a New Reality	<p>The author argues it's possible to have a million things going on... and yet work with a relaxed Zen-like calm; to be in the "zone", to borrow a sports metaphor. The key is focus.</p> <p>In his experience, people store most of their to-do's in their head, meaning they can't ever offer 100% focus to any task: they need to keep 5-10% back to remember to do the drycleaning, buy groceries, arrange a babysitter, or write that book summary. ☺</p> <p>He suggests people record all of these to-do's and set up reminders, so they can focus fully on the tasks at hand. It's analogous to how your computer runs faster when you close programs which run in the background; more RAM is freed up for the software you actually want to run.</p>
2	<p>Getting Control of Your Life:</p> <p>five stages for mastering workflow</p>	<p>The GTD method divides the work-process into five steps:</p> <p>(1) collect information – compile 100% of your "incomplete action items" (trivial or important, short- or long-term).</p> <p>The idea is to download everything in the back of your mind onto an external storage device, whether a notebook, software, index cards, file folders or other. To use a Dilbert cartoon, this serves as your "external brain pack":</p> 

Ch	Title	Summary
		<p>(2) process it –</p> <p>having transcribed all those things, determine the next step for each one. First, does it require action soon?</p> <p>if NO... trash it, or file as reference, or file as "someday"</p> <p><i>(aunt Mabel's forwarded e-mail jokes)</i> <i>(copy of aunt Mabel's current will)</i> <i>(visit aunt Mabel to get bigger inheritance)</i></p> <p>if YES and it'll take 2 minutes... do it</p> <p><i>(chase wildlife out of yard)</i></p> <p>if YES and it'll take longer... delegate it, or defer it</p> <p>→ get kids to mow the lawn, or → wait until neighbour buys lawn tractor</p> <p>(3) organize it –</p> <p>if you have to-do lists, arrange them so that things due <i>tomorrow</i> don't crowd out things due today.</p> <p>(4) review it –</p> <p>invest time each week (part of every Friday afternoon?) to review where you're at with your various items.</p> <p>(5) do –</p> <p>this section introduces an altitude metaphor to assess priorities, starting with "runway" for immediate action items and ending at 50,000 feet for life goals.</p>

Ch	Title	Summary
3	Getting Projects Creatively Under Way: the five phases of project planning	The chapter on project planning is mundane, seemingly repeating content common to other project planning resources. It does suggest delving more deeply into the “why” of a project, to make it less likely that people are working at cross-purposes.

Part 2 – Practising Stress-Free Productivity

Ch	Title	Summary
4	Getting Started: setting up the time, space, and tools	<p>In this chapter, the author lists the tools he feels necessary to practise stress-free productivity. Predictably, pens and paper make the cut. More surprisingly, he includes file folders and the automatic labeller (“<i>a surprisingly critical tool in our work</i>”).</p> <p>The file folders comprise your general-reference system (remember the “external brain pack” from above?) and the labeller gives each folder a professional polish.</p>
5	Collection: corralling your “stuff”	Specific suggestions on what to do when you’ve finally committed to organizing your workspace. ☺
6	Processing: getting “in” to empty	<p>Insights from this section include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - do not, do not, do not use your e-mail inbox as a place to store to-do items! Put to-do’s into separate “action item” folders. Your inbox should be a signal whether any new tasks have flown in. - if there’s no action associated with an email, file it as trash, reference, or “someday” as per the earlier section. - he recommends keeping a next-actions folder as well as a waiting-for folder, so you can distinguish between cases where you need to act, or are depending on others. <p><i>I don’t follow any of these rules rigorously – perhaps that’s why I’m not yet a high-powered executive ☺ – but in the past year, it’s been rare for my inbox to hold more than one screen’s worth of e-mails, at end-of-day. And that’s pretty cool.</i></p>

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7	Organizing: setting up the right buckets	<p>The following file structure or “directory tree” is recommended, for people’s work material (electronic or paper).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - project list <i>the various things you’re working on right now</i> - project support mat’l <i>repository of info for each project</i> - calendar - next-actions list <i>what you have to do, to advance your projects</i> - waiting-for list <i>what others have to do for you, to advance your projects</i> - reference material <i>e.g. from past projects, or other work groups</i> - “someday” list <i>check this periodically, one day the time could be right</i> <p><i>I’ve found the next-actions and waiting-for lists extraordinarily valuable. No more stress about remembering to ask X on date Y, about project Z!</i></p>
8	Reviewing: keeping your system functional	<p>Entropy will destroy all systems which aren’t maintained. So just as Stephen Covey’s seventh habit was “sharpening the saw”, David Allen emphasizes the importance of maintaining your new system for workplace productivity. ☺</p>
9	Doing: making the best action choices	<p>Basically, this chapter addresses the importance of not working in react-mode the whole time – of leaving some time for long-term thinking. Ideally, every week.</p> <p><i>I recommend booking an hour or two every month (maybe Friday afternoons) to do the stuff mentioned in the above two sections. This may not be possible for every professionals, or every week, but again I’ve found it helpful. In general terms, you want to make sure you’re working on the right stuff: being busy isn’t the same thing as being productive.</i></p>
10	Getting Projects Under Control	<p>Interestingly, he recommends against using project planning software, except for the biggest projects. Instead, he uses the “outline” feature in Word!</p>

Part 3 – The Power of the Key Principles

Ch	Title	Summary
11	The Power of the Collection Habit	He proposes that for people who use their inbox as a to-do list, each email effectively becomes a promise-to-self to follow up on an item. As such, overflowing inboxes are inherently depressing, because they represent a tidal wave of soon-to-be-broken, or at least delayed, promises. An interesting bit of psychoanalysis.
12	The Power of the Next-Action Decision	<p>The idea here is that people often get stuck on their projects, because they focus on the event, but not the very-next-action. You might not follow up on a project like “visit rich aunt Mabel” because there are many subsets of tasks. Identifying the next action associated with each project helps propel it forward, because those tend to be bite-sized chunks of activities.</p> <p>“Check airfares on Expedia.ca” or “phone aunt Mabel” might be examples of next actions which can be easily completed and keep a project rolling.</p>
13	The Power of Outcome Focusing	<p>A nice anecdote from this concluding chapter comes from one of the author’s friends, according to whom there are only two problems in life:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) knowing what you want and not knowing how to get it, and 2) not knowing what you want. <p>He’s hopeful that <i>Getting Things Done</i> can help people and organizations with (1).</p>