

# Getting Things Done

Do you jump right into projects but then get sidetracked? Do you arrive at the office ready to tackle the day's workload but get stymied halfway through? Four skills can help you get more things done.

Most people get depressed at the small amount of useful work they manage to accomplish in a typical workday. That's because they don't realize that human work is governed by two immutable laws:

- (1) Every job takes three times as long as you thought it would, and
- (2) The finished product never looks as though it should have taken as much time as it actually did.

So what can we do? All time-management and personal organization schemes come down to helping you perform four fundamental activities: valuing, choosing, focusing, and tracking.

**Valuing**—Satisfaction comes not from the mere fact of achievement but from achieving something we *value*. Thus, figuring out what you want to achieve—goals, key result areas, critical success factors, or whatever—is the first step

to a satisfying accomplishment. As far as tools go, the simplest is still the best—the list. Put down what you currently want to achieve. For each goal, you may also list strategies for achieving it, but don't get carried away. If your plan is more than a page long, write a one-page “executive summary,” and throw the rest out.

**Choosing**—According to the first law, your lists of goals and tasks will be three times too long. Vital to getting things done is deciding which items are most important. Start with a simple framework. Sort your list into A, B, and C priorities, or rank the list against no more than two criteria, such as importance and urgency.

The exact order of items doesn't matter. You can always change it or do things out of order. The key is to get rid of the part of your list that you have no chance of getting to anyway but will nevertheless depress you when you don't.

**Focusing**—The juggler keeps many balls in the air but seldom moves any across the goal line. Getting things done requires taking the top item from your list and working on it until it's complete—or until it can't be taken any farther unless someone else does something. This degree of focus is difficult to achieve. Fortunately, a powerful tool exists to help: the Deadline. Deadlines help us ignore the unimportant

and build momentum for completion. Deadlines can be self-imposed, but the consequences for missing them must be real. Make commitments you'll be embarrassed or afraid to break, and you'll have no trouble developing focus. (This one may be difficult for a few procrastinators.)

**Tracking**—Tracking is the easiest part of getting things done, but there's a danger. Tracking is itself work and therefore subject to the laws



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of human work. That's why some people spend four hours of every eight fiddling with their PDA and the rest wondering why they never accomplish anything. Keep it simple. Three tools are required: the To Do list, the Tickler, and the Calendar. Any task you *could* work on today goes on the To Do list, which is always sorted in priority order. Any task you can't work on until someone else does something goes on the Tickler list. Any task you can't work on until some future date goes in the Calendar. Paper will work, but electrons really are easier. Periodically throw away items stuck on the bottom of your To Do list. The more you can throw away with a clear conscience, the better you'll feel and the more you'll accomplish.

Most of us aren't very good at valuing, choosing, focusing, or tracking. We let others or events set our agenda because we haven't struggled with what we value. We have a hard time letting go of the unimportant, so we don't say "no" enough. We try to do too much, so we end up doing too little. We become servants of our time-management tools rather than making them serve us. Getting things done is a discipline of developing and applying four skills. A small group of simple tools can help. **SF**

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