strategy+business

Knowledge Review: The Productivity Promisers
by Tom Ehrenfeld

Reprint

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The Productivity Promisers

Plenty of motivational coaches pledge to boost your efficiency. These are the few who really deliver.

Has there ever been an age in which so many people were so concerned with getting more done with their "24/7"? Today there are literally thousands of gurus and guides — and Web sites, television shows, and lecture series — all devoted to helping individuals get more done with the limited time and energy at their disposal.

And yet many guides seem to promise much *more* than increased output. Some authors treat the practice of productivity improvement as a near-religious calling, one that can improve one's character, social standing, and moral fiber to boot. Indeed, since the time of Ben Franklin, popular guides have conflated enhanced personal achievement with moral betterment. In American culture in particular, the urge for improvement has given rise to a tradition of con men who prey on the upwardly mobile by selling them false promises of success. In a go-go culture unfettered by the expectation that it would take multiple generations to enter the upper class, the ability to craft and sell a simple promise of accomplishing more has created as many

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tycoons as has the ability to go out and actually make a fortune through hard work. Hence the peculiarly American line of charismatic individuals, such as Dale Carnegie and Tony Robbins, who build fortunes by inspiring the ambitious and desperate to better themselves by following some new regimen for improving productivity.

That's why it's important to focus on the productivity experts who provide an approach that is effective — that, for lack of a better word, *works*. Such individuals present, more than tips and tools, an entire system that produces tangible results. The best of their guides — whether historical or current — can help you reframe the way you see your work, enabling you to restructure, reorganize, and reprioritize the why, and then the how, of your work. This in turn can improve the output of your actions. The challenge in extracting the best, and most enduring, resources from this cluttered field is to find those experts who deliver on their promise. These writers draw on several distinct intellectual traditions that, in different ways, provide an in-depth understanding of the way people work, and that, for this rea-

son, resonate with a large following.

Consider David Allen, the most popular guru in this field today. His 2001 book *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* (his most devoted readers refer to both the book and the system as "GTD") continues to occupy a top 10 slot on Amazon's nonfiction bestseller list — a rare feat for a six-year-old title. His workshops in cities across the country and around the world are filled to capacity, as are his days of executive coaching to a select number of top-tier executives. Allen's public profile has been further bolstered by adoring media profiles in such publications as the *Atlantic Monthly* and Britain's *Guardian*. In just about every one, the author more or less confesses, "I was a skeptic, but having tried the system, I'm now a convert."

Allen's GTD system, which can be enhanced with computerized nudges and other automated tools, connects deeply with those who are savvy about technology. Many "geeks" adopt and adapt his system, testifying to its ability to clarify the explosion of choices and tasks they face in an ever more connected world. There are Web sites devoted to parsing and implementing fine

details of Allen's system, software developers writing programs to help implement his approach, and various online groups with message boards that buzz with the intensity of an *American Idol* fansite on the evening of the final vote.

The wide popularity and passionate user base speak not just to the power of Allen's system but to its underlying promise to deliver "stress-free productivity" by eliminating the mental clutter of today's multitasked world. "Teaching you how to be maximally efficient and relaxed, whenever you need or want to be, was my main purpose in writing this book," he says in the book's opener. You won't just get more things done; you will feel more complete in the process. Although Allen is not selling peace of mind per se, having it as a free prize inside surely hasn't hurt. Bundling a deeper appeal into a productivity system has a long tradition.

Every epoch produces its own version of David Allen, a guru of productivity whose success illuminates the behavior and values of the times. The appeal of each guru sheds light on two fundamental landscapes: the dominant industrial model of the day and the cultural

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mind-set of those individuals whose work is shaped by this field.

Before the Industrial Revolution there was Ben Franklin, whose work on productivity is still in print and is still popular. Then came Frederick Winslow Taylor, the inventor of scientific management, whose mechanistic approach, though reviled by many, continues to dominate the way most managers operate. Henry Ford in the 1920s and Taiichi Ohno and others at Toyota in the 1950s and '60s focused on the flow of production systems as a way of training individuals to accomplish more with less. Peter Drucker built on these models by linking productivity to the practice of effective leadership by individual managers who understood how to leverage the power of knowledge workers; in the 1980s and '90s, Stephen Covey popularized those ideas by aligning them to a moral compass. And now, just in the last five years, David Allen has combined personal planning, Buddhist precepts, and technological expertise into the national obsession with getting things done, writ large or small.

Three big themes snake through all their work, and some-

one who thoroughly understands all three themes probably doesn't need a productivity guru. The first is *flow*, which entails an understanding of how one processes thoughts and materials when creating value. The second is *focused self-awareness*, which involves a conscious understanding of why — from both an immediate and a long-term perspective — one is pursuing objectives. And the third is *instilling new habits*, doing what it takes to personally adopt the new productivity practices. Unlike the "rock stars" of the management consulting field, the most popular productivity guides strike a deep chord beyond boardrooms or training retreats. Indeed, the most timeless of these gurus have thrived by marrying a system that works with the zeitgeist.

Founders of Productivity

A good starting point for understanding the promise of productivity guides comes from one of our founding fathers. "God gives all things to industry," counsels Benjamin Franklin in *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Writing to an audience of farmers and small-business owners, Franklin appealed to individual industry as an issue of frugality,

integrity, and diligence. Because the nature of work in Franklin's day was less organizationally complex than it is now, the analysis of how one organized resources or processed information played a small role; what mattered was the ability to apply one's labor with persistence and intelligence. These simple ideas are still relevant today.

Yet the expanding scope of business and complexity of work eventually demanded a more systematic and scientific approach. The study of productivity emerged as a serious discipline with the rise of mass production in the early 20th century, when Taylor and his equally influential, though lesser-known, colleague Frank Gilbreth gained fame for their "scientific principles" of management. These experts used to help companies deploy employees as standardized, interchangeable parts of a system. "In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first," Taylor sagely wrote.

Taylor's key insight — that companies can be assembled from parts, like machines, with individuals slotted into rigid roles — continues to influence many large companies today. Henry Ford built

the archetypal company on Taylor's blueprint. He brilliantly integrated humans and technology in a system in which productivity had more to do with having individual workers performing precisely what the system required to function efficiently than with tapping into the potential of these "cogs" to create new ways of operating.

Ford didn't start out seeking to create huge cost savings through mass production in which people were mechanical parts. He evolved his entire production system over time through constant tinkering and experimenting, in search of what he called "true efficiency," which he defined simply as doing work the right way. Ford called his ideal system "flow production" and defined it not by its scale but by its brilliant innovations in eliminating waste. The key productivity lesson relates to the development of efficiency as an idea tied to organizational design. Readers today can learn much about organizational efficiency from Ford's *Today and Tomorrow,* which lays out his views. But more importantly, the success of his ideas paved the way for the first modern productivity expert.

The Gardeners in the Machine
A more humane view of productivity emerged after World War II as the mass-production model gave way to knowledge work, captured powerfully by the central managerial thinker Peter Drucker. In 1967, Drucker, who had already written such critical books as *The Concept of the Corporation* and *The Practice of Management,* released one of his most enduring books: *The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done.* This book addressed what

Drucker saw as the key economic shift of the time: the transition to a postindustrial society of knowledge workers.

In earlier books, Drucker had defined the new knowledge-intensive nature of work, presented his concept of the corporation, and defined management as a complete discipline. Now he made a point of producing the first all-purpose manual for executives in the postindustrial age. "To make the knowledge worker productive is the specific economic need of an industrially developed society," he argued. Indeed, Drucker went so far as to call the "social need for executive effectiveness" (by which he meant the ability to get the right things done with the most positive impact on the organization) the most pressing obligation of companies. "The cohesion and strength of our society depend increasingly on the integration of the psychological and social needs of the knowledge worker with the goals of organization and industrial society," he wrote. "Executive effectiveness is our one best hope to make modern society productive economically and viable socially."

The Effective Executive soon became one of the most influential guides to productivity ever published. It offered both a theory of how people were working in the postindustrial era and a robust set of recommendations about how to act within this environment.

Work was more variable and increasingly subject to the business habits and actions of individuals, Drucker wrote. A person could be very smart and largely ineffective at the same time, simply because he or she wasn't focused on smart management. Drucker argued that

the most valuable workers were those who integrated their personal strengths and weaknesses into a broader impersonal system. He saw an opportunity for improvement in maximizing the potential of every worker, based on individual strengths. Companies had to hire well, but more importantly, they had to develop and inculcate a culture that taught effectiveness. "The needs of large-scale organizations have to be satisfied by common people achieving uncommon performance," he wrote.

The Effective Executive was a landmark work. Drucker wrote it after years of observing the practices of successful executives, and it was the first book to present a complete and integrated system of principles by which executives could have demonstrable impact. With characteristic intellectual ambition, he called his work the "definitive guide to getting the right things done." And, at the time, his slim guide was just that.

Interestingly, although Drucker often spoke of the increasing autonomy of knowledge workers (who would be managed by "orchestra conductors" rather than "military captains"), he clearly wrote his book

for upper management, whom he considered the levers for organizational productivity. He defined executives as those individuals whose decisions have a material effect on the firm. Drucker advised managers to emulate the following key practices of the effective executives he observed:

They know where their time goes. Effective executives record enough of their day to be aware of exactly how they spend their hours; they use this data to manage which activities they do, they delegate, or they think about.

They act from the outside in. That is to say that they "gear their efforts to results rather than work." Action trumps mere motion: Effective executives consider the outcomes of their actions and understand what deeper purpose is to be achieved from their activity.

They make strength productive. Taking full stock of their personal strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of their colleagues and employees, they constantly work to realize the full promise of these assets. Such an analysis requires real self-knowledge, strength, and vision to leverage what works instead of fighting what doesn't.

They prioritize ruthlessly. "Effective executives know that they have to get many things done — and done effectively. Therefore, they concentrate — their own time and energy as well as that of the organization — on doing one thing at a time, and on doing first things first." Only by concentrating fully on what's essential, says Drucker, can an executive become "the master of time and events instead of their whipping boy."

They make effective decisions. By gathering data, inviting dissent, learning to find patterns, and reflecting on their results, effective executives can develop their prowess in this crucial function.

Each of the practices cited above has evolved into a virtual category of its own today. This essential handbook, moreover, has spawned the next generation of thinking in this field. By identifying the need to play to each person's individual strengths, Drucker essentially integrated personal development with organizational well-being: "Self-development of the executive toward effectiveness…is the only way in which organization goals and individual needs can come together," he wrote.

One person's productivity growth was personal and, to a degree, self-actualizing. Suddenly the boundaries of what could drive individuals to achieve were expanded.

Good(ness) to Great

By highlighting the individual nature of productivity improvement, Drucker opened the door for the first modern rock star of productivity, Stephen Covey, whose book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change,* debuted in 1989 and has since sold more than 15 million copies — earning the top slot in most polls of executives asked to name the most influential book they've read. The key to understanding Covey's useful program is seeing how, at the core, he links the promise of moral self-improvement with becoming a more effective executive. Being good ultimately leads to doing better.

Covey preaches the importance of developing strong internal guidelines that ultimately work from the "inside out" to emerge as powerful habits that succeed both at home and in the office. He challenges readers to choose between the Personality Ethic, which uses cos-

It is useful to see David Allen's value-neutral approach as a response to Stephen Covey's moral framework.

metic and instrumental tactics along with a positive mental attitude to win friends and influence people, and the Character Ethic, a time-tested code that draws from enduring internal values such as integrity, humility, fidelity, and temperance as a means of effecting positive change.

Aligning one's internal moral compass leads to a more powerful and productive principle-driven life, says Covey: "The Seven Habits are habits of effectiveness. Because they are based on principles, they bring the maximum long-term beneficial results possible. They become the basis of a person's character, creating an empowering center of correct maps from which an individual can effectively solve problems, maximize opportunities, and continually learn and integrate other principles in an upward spiral of growth."

The power of some of the Covey principles is compelling. He wants you to take responsibility for your life (be proactive), be purpose-driven, and use your life principles as a means of organizing and executing your most important priorities. Covey promotes a win-win approach to problem solving and emphasizes listening to and understanding others. He invites readers

to use these approaches to produce creative solutions to problems that are "synergistic."

One can see historical echoes in his writing: Some of these common-sense laws are merely time-honored principles refracted through Covey's loose moral framework. His Habit Three, for example, "Put First Things First," is Drucker's "First Things First" principle expanded. This is not to call Covey unoriginal, but to point out how the packaging of big ideas can sometimes add as much value as the content itself.

Although Covey's system is powerful and makes a great deal of sense, it is more than a comprehensive kit of tools and tactics. It's close to a religion. And considering the great economic change in the last 20 years, it's little wonder that so many individuals have found comfort from it. The huge following for Covey's writings might be traced to the massive changes in how people work. As large corporations atomized, and long-held beliefs about loyalty and work identity changed profoundly, it's not surprising that a productivity system with a moral appeal created consolation for millions of organizational managers.

Today, the book remains a pow-

erful system for helping people both make their priorities and values explicit and act on them.

Productivity without Revelation

Yet Covey's model, although still enormously successful, is no longer the productivity system with the most resonance in the economy. Today David Allen is the most talked about, analyzed, and influential figure in the field of getting things done. It's useful to see his value-neutral approach as almost a response to Covey's teachings. Allen's system eschews an internal moral makeover. It ignores big-picture issues of right and wrong and concentrates more on an Eastern concept of being here now. Allen emphasizes process, not product; quality, not quantity; and full presence over revelation.

The objectives of *Getting Things Done* are simple. GTD is about identifying *all* the things that claim your attention, categorizing them into doable chunks, and then making conscious decisions about exactly how to proceed in accomplishing both the immediate tasks and the larger, longer-term items.

This breaks down to five stages of personal workflow. You start by

collecting every action, goal, and project cluttering your mind with a flashing (or glowing) "do" light. Regardless of the items' relative importance or scope, the point is to write down every last thing so that your mind is clear. Then you process these commitments by deciding how to prioritize and how much time is needed. The next step is to organize these results in a manner that is manageable, leading to a review of the options, all of which leads to the fifth and crucial step of *doing*. Voila.

Through the use of such a simple process, lives are being changed and the power of productivity is being unleashed in a growing number of Fortune 500 companies and among hundreds of top-level executives who pay Allen for personal coaching. Yet *action* isn't quite the word to describe Allen's teachings. Unlike the power coaches, David Allen, it might be more accurately said, rallies the troops to *inaction.* His productivity practices stem from a simple philosophy: You can achieve exponentially more by removing everything that clutters up your concentration and focus. His promise is that by creating clear goals, organizing and prioritizing

work, and learning the discipline of working the system, you can rid yourself of the running inner monologue preventing you from keeping the promises made to yourself and to others. You gain *presence,* which in turn spurs clearer and more focused action. His system validates the truism that "less is more."

There's a power and elegance to Allen's system that explains much of its grand allure. He writes within the established tradition of productivity thinkers. But he can also speak clearly to our modern frame of mind. As Generation X has morphed into Generation Excel, harried workers everywhere seek release from the constant clutter in their lives. Whether it's the distracted, hassled, and stressed executive; the overloaded project manager; or the solo entrepreneur with six e-mail addresses, two pagers, and countless open loops of to-dos running like Muzak in an elevator, the challenge facing all of us is to slow everything down to the essential actions, accomplish them with confidence and aptitude, and move on.

Virtuous Chaos

Although Allen's GTD system is by far the most popular today, many

other resources are feeding the productivity hunger. One useful site, www.lifehacker.com, for example, offers daily tips on getting just a bit more done. Other fine resources, such as Brian Tracy's book *Time Power: A Proven System for Getting More Done in Less Time Than You Ever Thought Possible,* with associated Web sites, provide a clear presentation of insightful ways to order one's activities. These tools are certainly helpful. And yet when sussing out the key productivity resources, one might ask whether even the most useful resources contain the seeds of their own failure. When does the allure of a system distract users from the desired outcome of acting with more power and clarity, and less waste?

That's the central idea in a wonderful new book titled *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder,* by Eric Abrahamson and David H. Freedman. It argues that we must weigh the costs of learning and implementing any organizing system against the actual benefits it provides in overall output. The book was prompted by the obsessive fervor exhibited by the burgeoning industry of personal organizers, who, like the GTD zealots, often

take for granted the benefits of cleaning up one's personal space. This book challenges what has become a commonly accepted value — that all efforts to order one's things and activities are good.

Obsessive GTD acolytes sometimes unwittingly highlight this issue. An individual with a Web site devoted to GTD contritely owns up "to the fact that I have been neglecting my weekly review lately." Other groupies debate whether the popularity of "David's teachings" is watering down the so-called canonical GTD. Just about everywhere are endless discussions about the neatest ways to organize materials, adapt computer programs, create lists and files and filing systems, and use the newest handheld tools and labels (oh, the labelers), all designed to streamline the GTD system. One danger of Allenism is that following its procedures too closely could diminish workflow.

Allen certainly doesn't promote obsessiveness. In fact, in a telling gesture, last year he halted his personal blog because he believed that it was a distraction. In this regard, he reveals a key sign of what works with this new approach. The genius of GTD has to do with the way that

David Allen redefines the essence of productivity. Greater productivity is no longer defined by the metrics of pure output, such as doing things faster or with fewer defects. Nor does Allen's system reward an internal moral compass. Rather, his measure of productivity deals with *wholeness.* "Productivity is about completion. My system is based on identifying all the 'incompletes' in your life — from mundane tasks to pressing responsibilities — and isolating the simplest next step to complete them," Allen says. (Not coincidentally, this quote calls to mind a line from one of Allen's influences, Zen Buddhist Shunryu Suzuki. In *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,* Suzuki writes, "When you do something, you should burn yourself completely, like a good bonfire, leaving no trace of yourself.")

In this regard, the issue of productivity will always be a personal one. These resources provide an excellent set of ways to consider both the substance and the context of how you think about and organize your work. It's easy to see GTD as the end of a long and winding road to paramount productivity, but this system, too, will come to its natural limits. Productivity principles will always evolve, while retaining fundamental roots. And so, always be mindful that although the experts can tell you how to do things more effectively, the question of what, exactly, you should be doing must always be yours and yours alone. ✦

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