

**Getting Things Done:  
Implications for Record-Keeping by Organizations**  
**Owen Ambur, December 26, 2004**

*In Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*, David Allen argues, “It’s possible for a person to have an overwhelming number of things to do and still function productively with a clear head and a positive sense of relaxed control.” (p. 3) Toward that end, the methods he offers are based on two key objectives:

- 1) capturing *all* the things that need to get done into a logical and trusted system outside of our heads and off our minds, and
- 2) disciplining ourselves to make front-end decisions about all of the “inputs” we let into our lives so that we will always have a plan for “next actions” that we can implement or renegotiate with ourselves at any moment. (p. 3-4)

Allen says a major factor in mounting stress levels is that our training and means of dealing with work has changed much less dramatically than the nature of our jobs. Previously, work was self-evident but now, he says, “there are no edges to most of our projects.” A potentially infinite amount of information, easily accessible through the Web, could be relevant to each of our tasks. (p. 5) He argues the missing piece in our new culture of knowledge work has been “a system with a coherent set of behaviors and tools that function effectively at the level at which work really happens.” (p. 9)

Allen observes we can be controlled by anything that causes us to overreact or under-react and he suggests most people pay either more or less attention to things than they deserve. (p. 11) That is only logical since the odds are 50/50 one way or the other and achieving the optimal response is a goal for which we will ever be striving, rather than an objective that can be realized at any particular point in time. Moreover, he argues most stress comes from inappropriately managed commitments we make or accept. Most of us have made many more agreements with ourselves than we realize and each of them – regardless of how important or trivial – is being tracked by our subconscious. (p. 12) In order to deal effectively with them, he says we must identify and collect all the things that are rattling around in our subconscious minds and then plan how to handle them. (p. 13)

First, he says, ***anything we consider unfinished in any way must be captured in a trusted system outside our minds***. Subsequently, after we’ve decided on all the actions we need to take, we must keep reminders of them organized in a system we regularly review. (p. 13)

Allen proffers a profound operational principle of knowledge work: “*You have to think about your stuff more than you realize but not as much as you’re afraid you might.*” Thus, he suggests most people fail to muster the energy to clarify the real meaning of issues they have allowed into their minds and to decide to do about them. Usually, he says, the reason something is “on our mind” is that we want it to be different than it currently is, and yet we haven’t:

- clarified exactly what the intended outcome is;

- decided what the very next physical action step is; and/or
- put reminders of the outcome and the action required in a system we trust. (p. 15)

While we can often fool others, Allen suggests we can't fool our own minds. While that seems to be a common sense notion, Charles Ford suggests otherwise. Ford says the most important conclusion to be drawn from research on the psychology of deceit is that we use lies to others in order to deceive ourselves.<sup>1</sup> Setting aside that point, Allen says our own mind knows whether or not we've come to the conclusions we require, and if we haven't, it won't quit working overtime. Even if we've already decided the next step to take to resolve a problem, we can't let it go unless and until we document a reminder in a place our mind *knows* we will regularly look, without fail. (p. 16) That observation rings true from personal experience, and it can easily be reconciled with Ford's point simply by making allowance for the possibility that we may have dishonestly convinced ourselves and others that we have done all that we might on any particular issue we prefer to ignore.

Allen observes that at least a portion of our mind is fairly stupid because, if it had innate intelligence, it would remind us of things we need to do *only when we can do something about them*. (p. 16) Thus, he notes that most people seem to "let their minds run ... the show, especially where the too-much-to-do syndrome is concerned." (p. 17) However, he argues it does not *have* to be that way. Instead, he says we *can* make up-front decisions about everything we accumulate in our minds and create standard operating procedure for living and working with the mass of information and plethora of demands place upon us in the new millennium. But, before we can do so, he emphasizes that we must *cultivate the habit of keeping nothing on our minds*. (p. 18)

Rather than trying to manage so much information in our minds, Allen argues *the key is to devote our limited mental capacities to managing our actions*. (p. 18) The real issue, he says, is how to make appropriate choices about what to *do* at any point in time. He acknowledges that may sound obvious but suggests many next actions remain undetermined by most people for myriad projects and commitments – even though it is impossible to manage actions we haven't identified or accepted. In training and coaching thousands of professionals, Allen has found that lack of time is not the major issue for them – even though they think it is. Instead, he says *the real problem is a lack of clarity and definition about what a project really is, along with the next-actions required*.<sup>2</sup> (p. 19)

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Ford's views, see <http://ambur.net/Lies.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Joan Ugljesa has proposed specification of an XML schema for earned value management (EVM) and the U.S. Air Force is assuming leadership toward that end under the auspices of the Open Applications Group International (OAGi). A presentation outlining Joan's proposal is available at <http://xml.gov/documents/completed/aim/index.htm> EVM is a methodology for tracking project tasks at a sufficiently granular level to enable effective management of progress against cost and scheduling objectives. OAGi's home page is at <http://www.openapplications.org/>

Allen strives to make intuitive choices based on the available options. Instead of focusing on what those options *are*, he suggests they should have already been identified and captured in a trusted fashion. Otherwise we waste time thinking about things more than once and our minds will keep working on anything that remains in an undecided state. However, he notes there is a limit to how many unresolved issues our minds can accommodate before becoming overloaded. He likens our conscious minds to a computer screen, which is a focusing tool and not a storage place.<sup>3</sup> Although we can think about only two or three things at once, he says the incomplete items are still stored in the short-term-memory space. Our mind keeps reminding us of things when we can't *do* anything about them because, by itself, it has no sense of past or future. (pp. 22 & 23) That is yet another reason that reliable records are so important, not only to give us a clear sense of the past but also to provide a basis for reasonable predictions of the future.

As our ideas and tasks proceed from past to present and into the future, Allen posits a five-stage method for managing personal workflow:

- 1) *collect* things that command our attention;
- 2) *process* what they mean and what to do about them;
- 3) *organize* the results, which we
- 4) *review* as options for what we choose to
- 5) *do*. (p. 24)

Allen says it is important to know what collect and how to collect it most effectively so we can process it appropriately. In order for our mind to let go of the lower-level task of trying to hang on to everything, he says, we must be confident we have captured *everything* that might represent something we need or want to do. (p. 25-26)

In order to manage our inventory of open loops appropriately, Allen says we must capture it in “containers” that hold each item in suspense until we have a few moments to decide what each is and what, if anything, to do about it. Those containers must be regularly emptied to ensure that they remain viable collection tools. (p. 26-27) Allen cites several types of tools, both low- and high-tech, that can be used to collect incomplete items. (p. 27)

- Physical in-basket

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<sup>3</sup> Computer technicians generally fail to appreciate the distinction Allen makes with respect to computer monitor screens. In particular, they fail to recognize the importance of binding the presentation of what appears on computer screens with the content displayed. The result is that the visualizations are transitory in nature, lacking the attributes outlined in ISO 15489, and thus they are untrustworthy for business, financial, and legal purposes. That's why so many of our business processes are still so burdened with paper. It is not that computers cannot be used to create, share, and use records that have the attributes outlined in ISO 15489 – integrity, reliability, usability, and authenticity. Indeed, in large measure, companies like Adobe and PureEdge have established their market positions by striving to meet those requirements. However, many computer technicians are still in a state of denial about the need to address those requirements in computer software applications, and that is a big part of the problem.

- Paper-based note-taking devices
- Electronic note-taking devices
- Voice-recording devices
- E-mail (p. 27)

Allen suggests that merely having an in-basket doesn't make it functional. He notes that most people *do* have input repositories of some kind but they are rarely well managed. In order for the collection phase to work, he proffers three requirements:

- 1) Every open loop must be in your collection system and out of your head.
- 2) You must have as few collection buckets as you can get by with.
- 3) You must empty them regularly. (p. 29)

Allen says we won't be motivated to use and empty our in-baskets with integrity if we continue trying to keep track of too many things in our heads. Indeed, he argues most people are careless in using such tools because they don't represent "discrete, whole systems anyway." As the circular logic goes, "there's an incomplete set of things in their in-basket and an incomplete set in their mind, and they're not getting any payoff from either one ..."

To overcome that self-defeating attitude, Allen says we should have as many in-baskets as we need but as few as we can get by with. (p. 29) While that advice is not particularly clear, he suggests, "An excess of collection buckets is seldom a problem on the high-tech end; the real improvement opportunity for most people is on the low-tech side, primarily in the areas of note-taking and physical in-basket collection." However, he vastly underestimates the problem with "high-tech collection buckets." In fact, the proliferation of what are commonly known as "stovepipe" information technology systems is a huge problem. Making such systems "interoperable" – which means making them operate as a *single*, secure, virtual "collection bucket" and reference system – is the single most pressing problem facing organizations. Allen makes two additional, telling observations and the problems they highlight are compounded by the proliferation of "high-tech collection buckets":

- ... if you don't empty and process the "stuff" you've collected, your buckets aren't serving any function other than the storage of amorphous material." (p. 30)
- ... [the utility of physical and E-mail in-boxes as a] safety net is lost when the piles get out of control or the inventory of e-mails gets too extensive to be viewed on one screen. (p. 31)

How many people maintain less than one screen of messages in their E-mail in-boxes? Perhaps a small minority? Also, many people – perhaps most who are "Internet savvy" – have more than one E-mail account. Excessive amounts E-mail have become a very real problem for many people, including "spam" that is mixed in with and not easily distinguished from items on which individuals feel the need to take further action. Thus, E-mail has become an inadequate "safety net" for most people. Consequently, many organizations are now aiming to implement "portal" software through which employees have a single interface (computer monitor screen display) to all sources of information to which they commonly need access.

However, regardless of what tools are used to keep track of each item, Allen notes they fall into two categories: Either they require action or they do not. If not, they may be useful information or perhaps they may require action later. A “tickler” file or calendar should be established for material that is incubating and a good filing system should be used to keep track of and provide access to reference information when it is needed. Otherwise items can and should be promptly discarded. On the other hand, if action is required, two things must be determined for each item that is actionable: 1) To what “project” or outcome have we committed ourselves? 2) What is the next action required? If it is related to a project, Allen suggests the desired outcome should be documented on a “Projects” list. (p. 34)

When project support material has been organized by theme or topic, Allen suggests it is essentially the same as reference material and can be maintained in the same file system, except that it may need to be reviewed on a more consistent basis to ensure that all the necessary action steps are identified. Also, Allen recommends that support materials be stored out of sight, an admonition that portal designers would do well to keep in mind lest they overwhelm users with excessive amounts of inactionable information. (p. 38) In any event, he notes that every action that must occur at a specific time or on a specific day must be appropriately tracked, including actions that need to be done as soon as they can as well as those awaiting action by others. (p. 39) He recommends that action reminders be placed on “Next Actions” lists and that any actions requiring more than two-minutes and which cannot be delegated must be tracked. (p. 41)

Allen says anything that has no potential future action or reference value should be thrown away. (p. 42) However, it may not always be so easy to distinguish items having no value for future reference or potential action at a later date. Thus, to the degree that records already exist in an electronic system where they are out-of-sight but readily retrievable when desired, it may be preferable to err on the side of keeping everything rather than wasting the time to sort out the wheat from the chaff. In any event, Allen emphasizes the important thing is that reference information should be *easy* to find when required. Toward that end, he notes that reference systems generally take two forms: 1) topic- and area-specific storage, and 2) general-reference files. (p. 44)

Allen suggests the ***lack of a good general-reference file can be one of the biggest impediments to implementation of an efficient personal action-management system.*** If filing isn’t easy, fast, and even fun, he says documents tend to be stacked rather than filed. Moreover, ***if reference material is not clearly separated, “the line between actionable and nonactionable items will blur, visually and psychologically, and your mind will go numb*** to the whole business.” (p. 45, emphases added) Everything that may require action must be reviewed often enough to keep our minds from “taking back the job of remembering and reminding.” Allen suggests that regular weekly reviews are essential for us to be able to trust the rapid and intuitive judgment calls that he says we should make about actions to take from moment to moment. (p. 46) However, he observes that most people don’t have a complete system. As a result, the review process falls short, leaving us with a vague sense that something may be missing. On the other hand, the more complete the system, the more we’ll trust it and thus the more we’ll be motivated to maintain it. (p. 47)

With respect to the “rapid and intuitive” judgments he recommends, Allen posits four criteria for deciding what to do at any particular moment, in this order:

- 1) *Context*. A few actions can be done anywhere ... but most require a specific location ... or having some productivity tool at hand, such as a phone or a computer.
- 2) *Time Available*. When do you have to do something *else*?
- 3) *Energy Available*. How much energy do you have?
- 4) *Priority*. Given your context, time, and energy available, what action will give you the highest payoff? (p. 49)

While acknowledging the importance of long-term goals and values, Allen argues the ***traditional process of establishing priorities does not provide a practical framework for the large bulk of our daily decisions and tasks***. (p. 53, emphasis added) Based upon his experience, he argues that additional formal models are generally not needed to improve project management. Instead, he suggests the most productive way to think about projects, situations, and topics is “the way we *naturally* think and plan, though not necessarily the way we *normally* plan when we consciously try to get a project under control.” (p. 55) Routinely, he says our minds follow five steps to accomplish virtually any task:

- 1) Defining purpose and principles.
- 2) Outcome visioning
- 3) Brainstorming
- 4) Organizing
- 5) Identifying next actions (p. 56)

Allen suggests that *brainstorming* naturally occurs as part of the creative process when we commit to outcomes that have not occurred yet, and when we have generated a sufficient number of ideas and associated details, he says we can’t avoid beginning to *organize* them. (p. 57) While Klein also focuses on naturalistic decision-making, he disagrees with Allen that brainstorming is an inherent part of the process. Instead, he says we normally consider only the first alternative that occurs to us, and unless our mental imaging suggests it is unreasonable, we proceed to act upon it.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Allen himself emphasizes, “Natural planning is not necessarily normal.” (p. 58)

Be that as it may, assuming we are committed to achieving a result, Allen says we naturally focus on the next action required to make it occur. As we do so, contrary to Klein’s assertions, Allen says it is important to consider everything that might affect the outcome. (p. 59) Moreover, before we can distinguish “good ideas” from bad ones, he argues the purpose must be clear, the vision must be well defined, and all the relevant data must have been collected (brainstormed) and analyzed (organized). (p. 60)

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Klein’s views on the “singular evaluation approach,” see <http://ambur.net/rpd.htm>

Allen suggests that we commonly try to approach situations from a perspective that does not conform to the way our minds naturally operate but that doing so is difficult and “almost always engenders a lack of clarity and increased stress.” Moreover, he says, “In interactions with others, it opens the door for egos, politics, and hidden agendas to take over the discussion (generally speaking, the most verbally aggressive will run the show).” (p. 60) He does not explain how commonly used means of problem-solving can be considered to be unnatural or what might motivate us to try to use such means if easier methods are available. Nonetheless, his points are well-taken with respect to the lack of clarity, stress, egos, politics, hidden agendas, and the dominance of those who are verbally facile.

Allen argues that training in planning and organizing is lacking in our culture. For example, he says we are taught to outline reports before writing them, but such outlines are often “done after the fact, just to please the authorities. In the business world,” he says, “they’re often headed ‘Goals’ and ‘Objectives.’ But they still have very little to do with what people are doing or what they’re inspired about. These documents are sitting in drawers and in e-mails somewhere, bearing little relationship to operational reality.” (p. 61)

In other words, strategic planning documents in which organizational goals and objectives are set forth bear no direct connection to the actions, much less the records that are created in the routine course of business processes. However, it is doubtful that any amount of training can overcome the lack of a system in which document/content/records are quite literally linked to goals and objectives. To facilitate such linkages, the first step is to specify an XML schema for strategic plans and the second is to render such plans in valid XML instance documents for ease of referencing.<sup>5</sup>

Allen says the five phases of natural planning are nothing more than advanced common sense. To understand and express clarity about the purpose of any action are primary requirements for creativity and productive collaboration. However, he says, “it’s common sense that’s not commonly practiced, simply because it’s so easy for us to create things, get caught up in the form of what we’ve created, and let our connection with our real and primary intentions slip.” (p. 63) In short, he says, “if you’re not totally clear about the purpose of what you’re doing, you have no chance of winning.” More ominously, he quotes George Santayana, “Fanaticism consists of redoubling your efforts when you have forgotten your aim.” (p. 63) In any event, he concludes, “Purpose defines success.” (p. 64)

Allen suggests that *merely taking couple minutes to write down our primary reason for taking an action sharpens our vision*. Moreover, he says it also has the paradoxical effect of opening our thought process to more expansive opportunities. (p. 65, emphasis added) In other words, creating a record of our intent not only prompts us to think and plan more clearly but it also

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<sup>5</sup> The author is proposing the specification of an XML schema as an international standard for strategic plans, so that the goals and objectives they contain can readily be linking to the records organizations create in the course of conducting business. Unless and until strategic plans are rendered in valid XML instance documents, “strategic alignment” will continue to be largely a myth. The author’s proposal is available at <http://www.xml.gov/draft/AIIMProjectProposalXSDforStrategicPlans.htm>

facilitates the brainstorming process, in a potentially perpetual cycle of continuous improvement, as prescribed by the Total Quality Management (TQM) movement.

Allen also highlights the importance of the standards and values. Although he says we seldom think about them, our standards and values are always present and influencing our actions, and he suggests a great way to think about our principles is to complete the sentence: “I would give others totally free rein to do this as long as they ...” do what? (p. 66) One good way to complete the sentence is to say: I would give anyone the freedom to take a particular action so long as he or she documents what they have done and the results they have achieved in records that are readily available to those affected by their actions.

Allen says, “When you focus on something ... that focus instantly creates ideas and thought patterns you wouldn’t have had otherwise.” (p. 67) Records of the failures and successes of the past provide opportunities for focus that may otherwise be lost in the ether. Allen references the Reticular Activating System of our minds and says it “is basically the gateway to your conscious awareness; it’s the switch that turns on your perception of ideas and data ...” Like computers, he says our brains have a search function but he suggests it is more wonderful than a computer’s. In particular, it appears to be “programmed by what we focus on and, more primarily, what we identify with.” It is the source of our paradigms and we tend to notice only stimuli that match our internal belief systems and the contexts with which we are familiar. Allen suggests a simple but profound principle emerges from understanding the way our perceptive filters work: “*you won’t see how to do it until you see yourself doing it.*” (p. 68)

Allen notes that the term *distributed cognition* has been coined by psychologists to identify the concept of getting ideas out of our heads and into *objective, reviewable formats* – otherwise known as records. He suggest, “The great thing about external brainstorming is that in addition to capturing your original ideas, it can help generate many new ones that might not have occurred to you if you didn’t have a mechanism to hold your thoughts and continually reflect them back to you.” (p. 72) Moreover, he says if we’ve done a good enough job of emptying our heads of ideas in the brainstorming stage, a natural organization begins to emerge and we will automatically notice natural relationships and structures. (p. 74)

With respect to the amount detail that must be documented, Allen says, “The simple answer is, as much as you need to get the project off your mind.” In general, he says the reason issues are on our minds is that we have not adequately defined the desired outcome and the action step(s) to achieve it, and/or we have not recorded reminders in a system we can trust. (p. 77-78)

Allen argues we can perform our work virtually everywhere if we have a clean, compact system and know how to process our records rapidly and portably. However, he says, we still need a home base with a well-worn set of tools and sufficient space for reference and support materials. In his experience, most people need at least four file drawers for reference and project-support documents. Allen finds it hard to imagine that all of the necessary informational resources could ever be totally portable, but in light of the potentials of Internet-based records management systems and wireless technologies, such a vision may not be so hard to achieve. (p. 91) Indeed, it seems likely that people will come more and more to expect to have access to information anywhere and anytime they choose.



Allen says a simple and highly functional reference system is critical to the process of organizing personal workflow. The *filing system is the first thing to be assessed* before starting to improve workflow in anyone's office. (p. 96, emphasis added) He strongly suggests maintaining a personal, at-hand filing system and he says it should take less than a minute to: 1) pick something out of the in-basket or print it from an E-mail message, 2) decide it needs no action but has some potential future value, and 3) finish storing it in a trusted system. (p. 97) Besides being fast, Allen says the system also must be fun and easy as well as current and complete.<sup>6</sup> Otherwise, he observes that we will unconsciously resist emptying our in-boxes because we know there are things there that should be filed. (p. 97-98)

Allen argues we must feel equally comfortable filing a single piece of paper in its own file – even if it is merely a scribbled note – as we would about filing larger, more formal documents. However, because making and organizing files require so much work, people either don't keep files or they have drawers and cabinets overflowing with all sorts of one-of-a-kind items. Thus, he says we must do whatever necessary to establish a reference system that is quick and easy to contain everything we need to get off our mind. (p. 98) When we have done so, Allen says files should be purged at least annually. He recommends that organizations establish a Dumpster Day, when all employees get to dress casually, let their phones ring unanswered, and “get current with all their stored stuff.” (p. 102)

Allen acknowledges it can be daunting to assemble all of our papers in one filing system. Indeed, he allows that it may even seem counterintuitive, because many of those papers are not “that important,” which is why they're lying around. However, because we still think something in some of those papers *might* be important, they are consuming more psychic energy than they deserve. Insightfully, he admonishes us that we can only feel good about what we're not doing when we *know* what it is that we are *not* doing. (p. 105-106)

Once we feel we've collected everything that needs to be processed, Allen says we should collect anything else that may be lingering in our “psychic RAM”, namely, those issues that demand our attention but aren't already documented in our filing system. That's where he says a stack of plain paper comes into play. He recommends documenting each and every thought, idea, project or thing our attention on a *separate sheet of paper*. He allows that we probably won't keep those pieces of paper unless we feel that such low-tech means are the best organizational system we can muster. Hopefully, we can do better than that in most organizations, by implementing an electronic document management system that not only allows each item to be easily and discretely identified but also provides automated means of discovering and linking related items. In any event, Allen's point is that having each issue documented discretely is a requirement for efficient processing. Moreover, he says we should “go for quantity” because it is far preferable to overdo the inventory than to risk missing something. (p. 113)

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. federal agencies are required by law to maintain “current and complete” inventories of their information resources. [44 USC 3506(b)(4)] However, the meaning of that provision has been litigated and the court ruled that Congress could not possibly have meant what it said in plain language, because who could ever believe the agencies could possibly do that.

Allen posits three basic rules to follow in processing items in our in-boxes:

- 1) Process the top item first;
- 2) process one item at a time, and
- 3) never return anything the in-box. (p. 121-122)

Theoretically, he suggests we should flip our in-boxes upside down and process items on a first-in-first-out (FIFO) basis, but as long as we clear everything out within a reasonable period, he says it won't make much difference. However, with respect to E-mail, he notes it is actually more efficient to process the most recent messages first. (p. 123) In any event, he says focusing on just one thing at a time forces the necessary attention and decision-making to get through everything in our in-boxes. (p. 123)

If we draw a sharp distinction between records purely for reference versus those requiring action, and if our reference system is simple and workable, Allen says we can keep as much documentation as we want. He defers to "filing experts" for more detailed guidance and notes that record-retention timetables should be specified to tell us how long to keep each type of record. However, aside from record retention to meet legal requirements, he reemphasizes that determining whether something is actionable is a key to personal productivity. (p. 126)

Earlier in his executive coaching practice, Allen used to allow his clients to maintain a "To File" pile. However, he no longer does so because he found items that are not immediately filed usually never are. If something needs to be *done* about the item, he says we need to decide exactly what the next action is, and by "next action," he means the *next physical, visible activity* required to move the situation toward closure. (p. 128) If we haven't identified the next physical action, he says we will experience a psychological gap every time we think about the item even in passing. (p. 130)

As a rule of thumb, Allen avers, ***if the next action can be accomplished in two minutes or less, we should do it when the first time we pick it up.*** Even if it is not a "high priority," he says we should do it immediately if we ever expect to do it at all. ***His rationale for the two-minute rule is it is roughly the point at which it starts to take longer to store and track an item than to deal with it immediately.*** In other words, if the time to file is more than the time required to take the next action, it is more efficient to act than to file. (p. 131) However, in a sense Allen is posing a false choice in that regard, because actions that we take should be documented too and those records should also be available in our filing system.

Allen suggests E-mail is normally the fastest mode into the system. In addition, he notes that it provides an electronic record and can be processed when convenient for the receiver. (p. 134) In other words, E-mail allows us to act and to delegate while at the same time automatically creating a record of our actions. Unlike everything else, Allen suggests, "E-mails are best left where they are, because of their volume and the efficiency factor of dealing with them within their own minisystem." (p. 118) However, he does not adequately explain why it is preferable to leave E-mail outside the filing system in which everything else should be kept. Most major electronic document management systems are integrated with E-mail systems and make it possible to file and maintain in a well-managed fashion those E-mail messages containing

valuable information for later reference as well as those on which follow-up action may be required. The bottom line is that E-mail is best used for quick, informal messages and it is not designed to manage business-quality records in a businesslike manner. Eventually, it should become as quick and easy to file and manage such records in an electronic document management system that is more properly designed for higher-quality, higher-value records<sup>7</sup>

Allen also observes that voice-mail can be efficient and many professionals rely heavily on it. On the other hand, in addition to the fact that what is said is not always what gets heard, Allen notes that voice-mail imposes a burden upon both parties to keep track of such messages. Contrary to popular logic about interpersonal communications, Allen suggests the *least preferable* option is to talk directly about the item, since doing so impedes workflow for both parties and, like voice-mail, creates no record. (p. 134) However, another downside of personal conversation that also applies to E-mail as well as voice mail is that it may consume more time than is available to take the next action on all of the actionable items raised therein. Thus, in the context of Allen's argument, such means of communication might be considered ancillary to the "trusted system" in which next actions can either be taken or documented and filed in two minutes or less.

With respect to our trusted next-actions tracking system, Allen says we shouldn't necessarily try to establish our personal organizational system in its entirety at once as a theoretical exercise apart from the way we actually do our work. Instead, he suggests it should evolve as we process our work items and test whether we have placed everything in the best places for *ourselves*. (p. 138) In addition to our own action items, our lists should include a complete inventory of everything others are supposed to be doing on issues about which we care. However, it seems that we ought to be able to do better than reinventing such system individually for each and everyone of us. Instead, there ought to be certain principles and features that can be built into generic filing system that meets the common needs of all of us. To the degree that the common filing system shared by all members of an organization does not meet the personal needs of any individual, such as for specialized filing classifications, the system should be easily extensible and configurable to address such requirements.

Allen notes that certain kinds of input can serve as their own reminders of required actions, particularly some paper-based materials and some E-mail messages. (p. 150) He says whether to keep reminders in a list or to use the original documents will depend primarily on logistics. However, one way or another, the reminders should be maintained in "visibly discrete categories based upon the next action required." He has found that keeping all documents of one type in a single tray has been the largest factor diminishing the effectiveness of many workflow systems, when different kinds of actions may be required on each document. (p. 151)

He says removing everything from our in-baskets, particularly E-mail, makes a large contribution to the clarity and control of our day-to-day work. Unfortunately, he observes that

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<sup>7</sup> The basic functions of document and records management software applications are outlined in ANSI/AIIM TR48-2004, Framework for the Integration of Electronic Document Management Systems and Electronic Records Management Systems, which is available at <http://www.aiim.org/standards.asp?ID=24484>

many people use E-mail for storing reference information as well as items on which they have not yet determined the next action – a practice, he says that “rapidly numbs the mind.” (p. 153)

More specifically, he argues, “*one of the biggest problems with most people’s personal management systems is that they blend a few actionable things with a large amount of data and material that has value but no action attached.*” Having good, consistent structures with which to manage the nonactionable items in our work and lives is as important as managing our action and project reminders. When the nonactionable items aren’t properly managed, they clog up the whole process.” (p. 163, emphasis added) While the apparent implication is that different filing systems should be used for actionable versus purely reference material, another, perhaps more efficient option would be to use the very same records management system while simply using different “profiles” for each type of document.

A document profile is a form containing fields in which metadata about each document is entered and stored for querying later. It is the electronic equivalent of the index cards that used to reside in card catalogues in libraries. The document profile for actionable items should include a metadata field identifying the projected date or deadline by which the next action should be taken. The profile for reference documents may not include such a field; however, it may be appropriate to establish a date on which the continuing relevance of reference materials should be reassessed. At some point, most reference materials may become obsolete or subject to replacement by updated information.

As the size of computer hard disks has grown, Allen himself has kept much more E-mail in his archives, and he says, “The more the merrier ... since increasing the volume of pure reference material adds no psychic weight.” However, a good filing system is essential because he says we should feel comfortable storing even a single piece of paper that we may wish to reference later. (p. 164) As a general rule, he suggests a single general-reference system should be used, with the exception of very small number of discrete topics. (p. 165)

Compared to maintaining a simple listing, he notes the advantage of using file folders as a tickler system is that they store the actual documentation not only of the necessary actions but also background and related information required to more fully understand the desired results. (p. 174) However, Allen has posed a false choice that need not be made in the information age – because if the “file folders” and the documents themselves are electronic, all electronic document/records management systems automatically create a listing while at the same time holding the documents themselves, thereby affording the best of both “alternatives” Allen cites.

He suggests, “The real trick to ensuring the trustworthiness of the whole organization system lies in regularly refreshing your psyche and your system from a more elevated perspective.” He says that can’t and won’t occur if our lists fall too far behind reality. Moreover, he says, “You won’t be able to fool yourself about this: if your system is out of date, your brain will be forced to fully engage again at the lower level of remembering.” (p. 184) Again, though, he has posed a false choice if, as is more and more the case, our business itself is *conducted* by electronic means. In that case, the electronic records in the system *are* reality and the only question is how well we are managing them. Unfortunately, in many organizations, the answer is that electronic records are very poorly managed, if at all. Indeed, many people, including many records management

officials, cling to the mythology that electronic records are not records at all. In some instances, such beliefs are blatantly self-serving and perhaps even fraudulent. However, in many others, the sense of denial seems to be merely yet another bit of evidence in support of the notion that human nature abhors accountability.

Allen observes: “... **people are actually more comfortable dealing with surprises and crises than they are taking control of processing, organizing, reviewing, and assessing that part of their work that is not as self-evident.** It’s easy to get sucked into ‘busy’ and ‘urgent’ mode, especially when you have a lot of unprocessed and relatively out-of-control work on your desk, in you e-mail, and on your mind. In fact, much of our life and work just shows up in the moment, and it usually becomes the priority when it does.” (p. 197, emphasis added) Allen’s assertions in this regard are consistent with Klein’s with respect to naturalistic decision-making. To the degree their observations are true, they are reasons we as human beings may prefer not to have systems that automatically document and maintain records to remind us of that which is truly important rather than merely imminent. Insightfully, Allen suggests:

**Many people use the inevitability of an almost infinite stream of immediately evident things to do as a way to avoid the responsibilities of defining their work and managing their total inventory.** It’s easy to get seduced into not-quite-so-critical stuff that is right at hand, especially if your in-basket and your personal organization are out of control. Too often “managing by wandering around” is an excuse for getting away from amorphous pile of stuff. This is where the need for knowledge – work athletics really shows up. Most people did not grow up in a world where defining the edges of work and managing huge numbers of open loops were required. But **when you’ve developed the skill and habits of processing input rapidly into a rigorously defined system, it becomes much easier to trust your judgment calls about the dance of what to do, what to stop doing, and what to do instead.** (p. 198-199, emphases added)

Allen says he is constantly amazed at the power of clearly understand of reality, based upon observation of simple truths. (p. 201-202) Moreover, he argues a sense of control in the implementation of current projects and actions is essential in order to maintain our sense of self-trust. He has found that trying to manage from the top-down is often frustrating and, from a practical perspective, he recommends a bottom-up approach instead. He has coached people from both directions, and with respect to enduring benefits, his experience demonstrates that “getting someone in control of the details of his or her current physical world, and then elevating the focus from there, has never missed.” (p. 203)

Allen suggests the greatest opportunity for improvement in planning does not lie in elaborate and complex project organizing but, rather, simply in capturing and more fully using the our creative thoughts. (p. 211) However, he says, “**The major reason for the lack of this kind of effective value-added thinking is the dearth of systems for managing the potentially infinite amount of detail that could show up** as a result.” That’s why he favors the bottom-up approach. **If we feel out of control of our commitments,** he says **we will resist focused planning and engage in unconscious pushback, but if we have systems and habits ready to leverage our ideas, our productivity can expand exponentially.** (p. 212, emphases added)

Any sense of control we may have will be illusory if it is not based upon documentary evidence, not only of our intents but also our actions and the results they beget. Among the most insightful and important points Allen makes is the following:

***If you aren't writing anything down it's extremely difficult to stay focused on anything for more than a few minutes ... But when you utilize physical tools to keep your thinking anchored, you can stay engaged constructively for hours... Keep good writing tools around all the time so you never have any unconscious resistance to thinking due to not having anything to capture it with.*** (p. 216, emphases added)

In terms similar to those previously expressed by Michael Schrage, Allen says, "Whenever two or more people are gathered for a meeting, someone should start writing somewhere where the other(s) can see. Even if you erase your thoughts after a few minutes, just the act of writing them down facilitates a constructive thinking process like nothing else." (p. 217)

In his book entitled *Shared Minds: The New Technologies of Collaboration*, Schrage wrote: "By far the most important tangible product of computer-augmented meetings is the printout. The ability to actually manufacture a document is key ... In fact, if a session isn't going to generate a document ... then perhaps the meeting should not be computer augmented. Indeed, if [a meeting] can't generate a document worth distributing, perhaps it's not a meeting worth holding." (p. 206) All of us have sat through many meetings that were not worth holding, and the fact that so many meetings produce no documentary record suggests that perhaps productivity may not be a primary objective. If not, perhaps it is not surprising that participants may not be anxious to document the (lack of) results. Perhaps the point might be driven home by pondering this question: What is the definition of a *party*? ... Answer: A meeting for which no records are kept.

While Allen's focus is on personal, rather than group productivity, he says we should create a folder for each topic as soon as we have something to put in it. His point is even more applicable to topics that arise in communications with others than in our moments of solitary contemplation. In either case, he notes we are liable to miss opportunities to sharpen our focus on each project sufficiently early if our filing system is either too formal or too disorganized. (p. 218) And that will lead to additional, needless effort later, thereby contributing to our sense of being overwhelmed and discouraged.

However, Allen argues that, in and of itself, having more to do than can possibly be done does not cause us to have negative feelings. (p. 226) Instead, he proffers, each item in our in-box constitutes an agreement we've made with ourselves and negative feelings are a consequence of breaking those agreements. He says our discomfort is a symptom of "disintegrated *self-trust*" – a loss of confidence in ourselves. Ironically, such loss of confidence may become a self-defeating psychological barrier against the creation of records because, subconsciously, we may fear being exposed as failures, when in fact such records could help us succeed, by enabling us to redirect our psychic energy more productively. (p. 227)

Of course, too, if all of our commitments are adequately documented, the degree to which we may be over committed will be more apparent, in which case Allen notes, "One way to handle an incompleteness ... is to just say no!" (p. 227) Moreover, he adds, "when you really take the

responsibility to capture and track what's on your mind, you'll think twice about making commitments internally that you don't really need or want to make." (p. 228) Not being willing to take the time to document a commitment may be a pretty good indicator it should not have been made at all.

Allen also allows that we are free to change our minds. With respect to commitments we have made, he notes that renegotiating an agreement is not equivalent to breaking one. He observes that we automatically renegotiate agreements with ourselves when we consider them at any moment and either act on them or decide to defer action to another time. However, he points out – and this is a key point with respect to the need to document not only our agreements with others but also our commitments to ourselves – it is impossible to renegotiate agreements with ourselves if we can't remember we made them! (p. 230) Not only does the failure to record our commitments contribute to over commitment and, thus, lead to "dropped balls" but it has an even more insidious effect on our psychic energy.

Allen says if we think we should do something and only hold the thought in our short-term memories, our mind will tend to think we should be doing it *all the time*. Then, when we've assigned ourselves a second task and kept both only in our head, we create "instant and automatic stress and failure" – because we can't do them both at once. (p. 231) Little wonder that we may constantly feel overwhelmed and worn out.

Instead of keeping thoughts in our head, Allen suggests we should use our minds to "think *about* things, rather than think *of* them." In other words, we should be *adding* value as we think about projects and people, rather than simply reminding ourselves they exist. (p. 233) However, Allen says we have little chance of managing and reordering our tasks efficiently without having "bulletproof collection systems." (p. 235) Moreover, he argues, "What's ironic is that *it would likely require only about ten seconds of thinking to figure out what the next action would be for almost everything on your list. But it's ten seconds of thinking that most people haven't done about most things on their list.*" (p. 238, emphasis added)

Thus, besides enabling us to file any record in two minutes or less, Allen's argument suggests *the records management system in which our action items are documented should enable identification of next steps on each task within 10 seconds.* In turn, that suggests the system should give us a list of possible next steps from which to pick, so that we don't have to waste time determining what they might be, much less typing them out. Once we have documented a likely next step on any task, we should never have to do so again. Instead, we should simply be able to "reuse" each action step that may be well-suited to other tasks as well. In the context of an electronic records management system, the pick list of possible next actions would appear as a lookup/validation table on the document profile. Selecting one of those values should take significantly less than 10 seconds.

In any event, Allen says, "*Defining what real doing looks like, on the most basic level, and organizing placeholder reminders that we can trust, are master keys to productivity enhancement...* Without a next action, there remains a potentially infinite gap between current reality and what you need to do." (p. 239, emphasis added) Moreover, he observes, "It appears that *the nervous system can't tell the difference between a well-imagined thought and reality.*

(p. 240, emphasis added) That's yet another reason records are so important. ***Not only does maintaining issues and action steps place unmanageable burdens on our minds, but that burden is impossibly compounded by having to sort out fact from fantasy without the aid of reliable records.***

Thus, we should not be surprised, as Allen observes, that many discussions result only in a vague sense of what has been decided and what is to be done, much less who will do it. He suggests forcing focus on the required next action amounts to "radical common sense – radical because it often compels discussion at deeper levels than people are comfortable with." Moreover, he asserts the "dark side" of collaborative cultures is their "allergy ... to holding anyone responsible ..." (p. 245) To the extent that such "allergy" exists, it is clearly cause for us as individuals to avoid the creation, maintenance, and access to records documenting our personal responsibilities.

Allen say, "Too many meetings end with a vague feeling among the players that something ought to happen, and the hope that it's not their personal job to make it so." (p. 245-246) Schrage expounded on the topic of meetings and teams in his book entitled *No More Teams! Mastering the Dynamics of Creative Collaboration*. While Schrage acknowledges that individual genius is not enough, particularly when paradigm shifts are required, he argues that meetings are not necessarily a requirement for collaboration (p. 40) and that collaboration can be based upon the "patterns and symbols people create." (p. 34) In other words, collaboration can be based upon the records. Moreover, ***if the topic is important or complex and requires acceptance of responsibility for follow up actions, basing collaboration upon anything other than reliable records is risky and highly prone to failure.***

In summary, Allen argues:

- Less than ten seconds should be required to determine the next action on each item in our in-box, and we should make such determinations the first time we pick up each item in our in-box.
- If we can complete the next action in two minutes or less, we should do so immediately.
- If not, we should file each item in a separate folder and it should take less than one minute to do so.
- Likewise it should take less than a minute to discard items on which we intend to take no action and which contain no information that may be valuable for later reference.
- Action items should be reviewed on a weekly basis.
- Reference materials should be reviewed and discarded annually.

While Allen does not expressly address automated tools to assist with these tasks, each of these points might be taken as a design requirement for an electronic records management system. Such a system could automatically notify users of items in their in-box, enforce the rules for processing them, and provide reminders of review and disposition deadlines. It could also perform semantic analyses and highlight potential relationships between items, tasks, and reference materials, and it could provide means of rating and ranking priorities for action tasks. The question is whether any of us really want to be that efficient and particularly whether we



want computers telling us what to do and when to do it. Allen's experience appears to indicate that such rigor does not come naturally and may be uncomfortable to us.

However, on a more optimistic note, Allen concludes by suggesting that focusing on the next action overcomes the victim mentality by presupposing the possibility of change stemming from actions we can take to generate the results we desire.<sup>8</sup> (p. 247) It would be nice to think that such a relatively simple change of habit could come to predominate in our professional, if not also our personal lives. Were it to do so, a virtuous cycle may result, in which we become increasingly more effective at obtaining the results we desire as a byproduct of creating and managing the good and reliable records required to achieve such results.

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<sup>8</sup> In *The Oz Principle: Getting Results Through Individual and Organizational Accountability*, Roger Connors, Tom Smith and Craig Hickman say the American character is in crisis. In large measure, they suggest the crisis is due to the *cult of victimization*, which has been defined as: "an odd combination of ducking responsibility and telling everyone else what to do." For more on their views of victimization, see <http://ambur.net/oz.htm>