Productivity

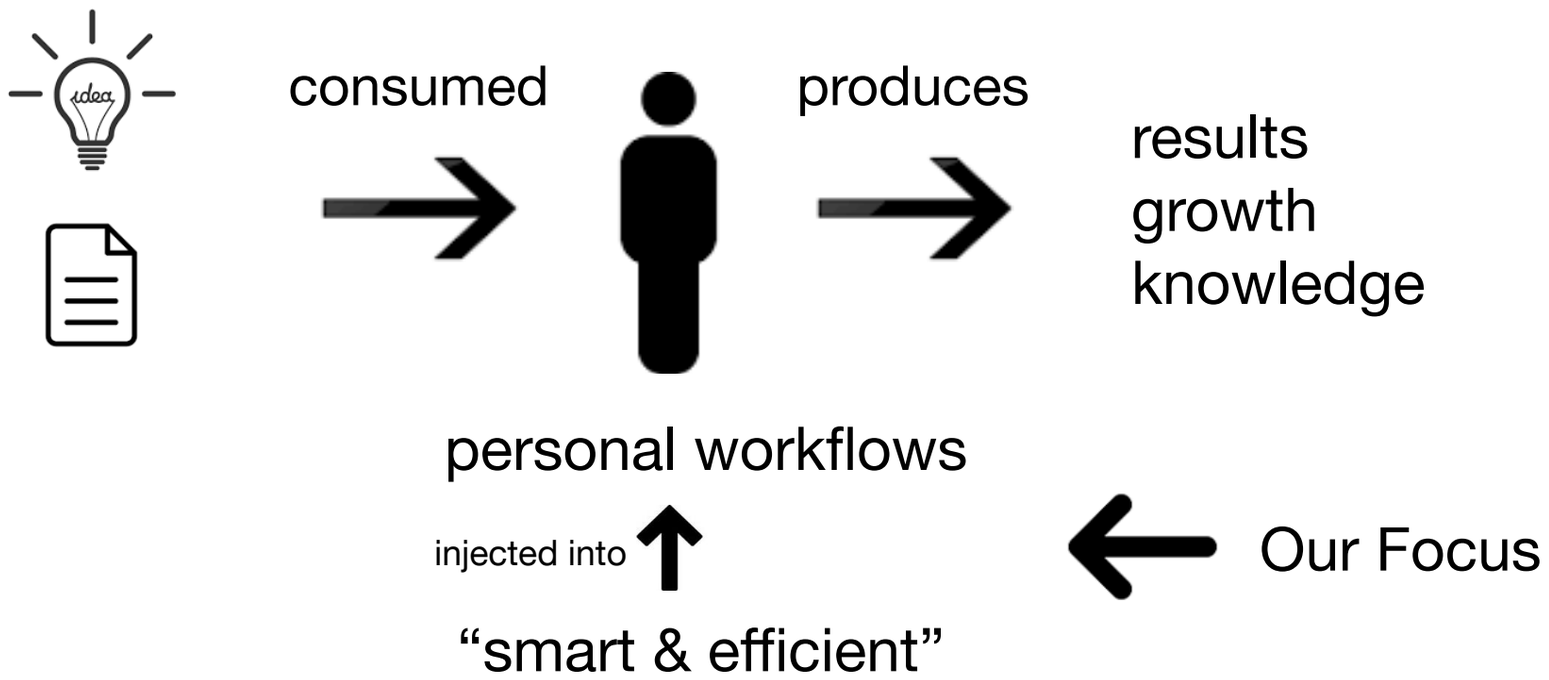
Getting More Done with Less

Big Ideas Forum - 2017-12-4

This is about getting and being organized.

Organization is the process of clearing and supporting paths for the development of things we find meaningful.

A **workflow** consists of an orchestrated and repeatable pattern of activity enabled by the systematic organization of resources into processes that transform materials, provide services, or process information.



Why is this important?
Who cares?

“Knowledge workers” — anyone engaged in acquiring new skills, learning for the sake of learning

The younger generations are living in this New World. The ability to actively manage and navigate the information available today is a critical job and life skill.

And for me personally, this was the world I grew to live in during my 30+ years as a software developer. These kinds of skills were crucial to being able to function in that detailed-oriented, ever-changing world. And all this is still actively employed in my current day-to-day.

Why is this important?

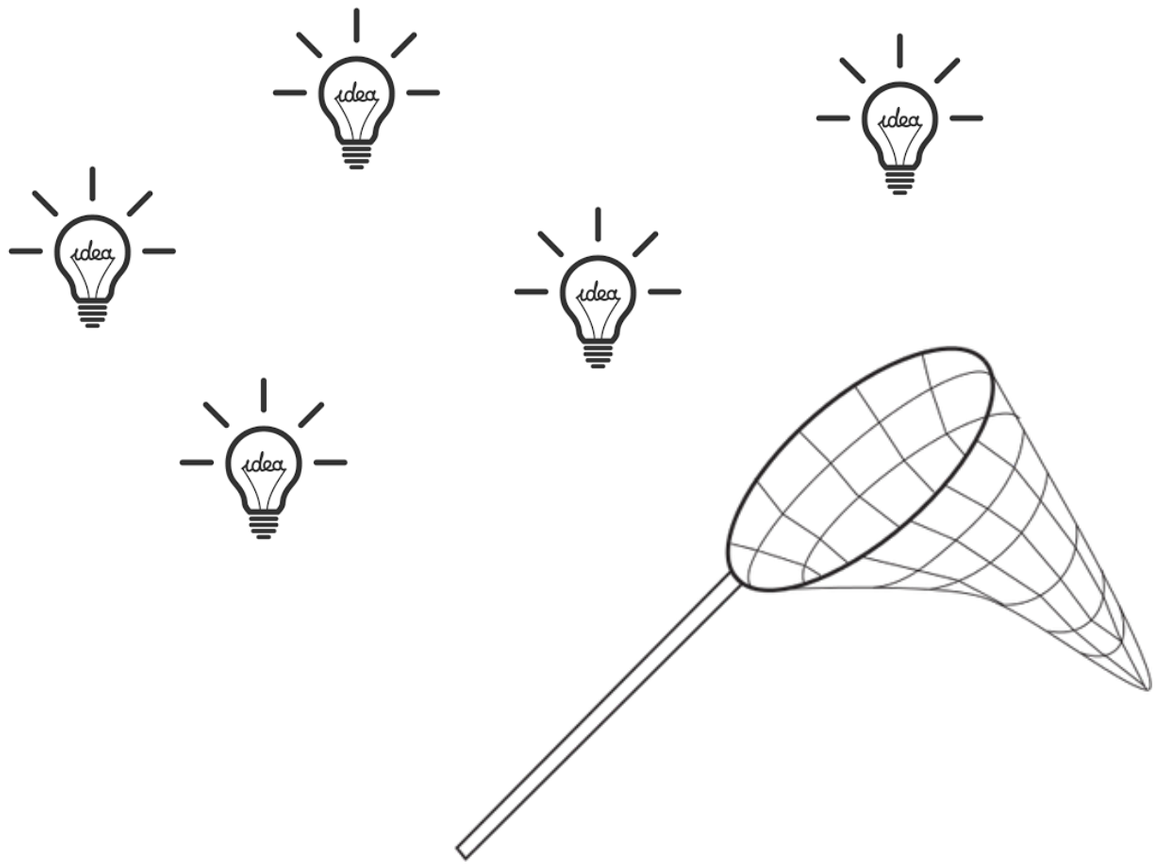
The importance of “saving state”

Interruptions and loss of focus are huge time wasters!
What can we do to help minimize those problems?

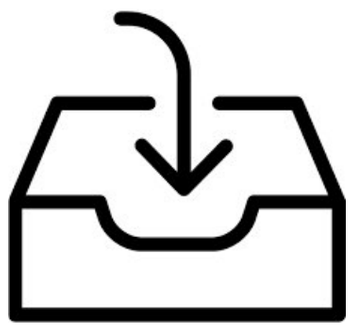
- Managing the state of incomplete projects or work sessions
- Managing distractions that are ever present
- Being able to come back to previous work and pickup where you left off
- Minimizing the need to rethink things or remember details

The Inbox

Capture those fleeting thoughts



You have “inboxes” **everywhere**…



…but manage **when** you will act on those ideas

“Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them.”

Managing the InBox

Capturing the hum of your mental engine

A **session** is some dedicated block of time in which you will focus on some task. And during that task-focused period, you will think of other things you need to do.

Using an inbox in the context of a session is not just about throwing everything that comes to mind but is not immediately applicable in a big box. Rather, it is about capturing the hum of your mental engine which is being triggered by something during the session.

The inbox is an excellent capturing mechanism for any ideas or questions, whether they would take 2 minutes or less to answer or would take days, without necessarily leading to a fundamental interruption of the session flow.

Distraction-free ==> Flow State

Minimizing distractions helps us stay in “flow”

- We do our best work when we can focus, which is a state contrary to distraction. And distracted we are, most of the time. When distracted, our tools control us. When focused, we use our tools to our advantage as they assist us in doing the work.

- To get to that focus, we need to find the flow state, to be in the moment. A good way to reach that is through play, as all kids do. This is something we have abandoned, or forgotten, but we can still access that state.

- We do it by building an environment that allows play to occur ==> Tools, Workflows, “life hacks”, …

Butterfly Nets

Devices I've used to capture ideas

Then…

Now…

Apps

Siri Alexa

The Sanctity of the “Session”

Protect those productive moments

Entering a session takes an effort. Getting to that point expends a certain amount of energy, and wasting that energy by giving in to disruptions is a suboptimal approach to work.

The inbox is a tool that helps us to respect the sanctity of the session. Defer any processing of “other thoughts” by dumping them into the inbox.

Tools and Workflows help us stay in the zone!

Three Principles

Some “Best Practices” toward creating and maintaining productive work flow.

1. Capture your state
2. Use self-describing naming conventions
3. Automate where/if possible

Three Principles

1) Capture your state

- Perhaps the most important thing is to do your work in a way that **leaves a coherent record of your actions**. ... Instead of copying out some archival material without much context, file the source properly, or at least a precise reference to it. (Pocket)

- Why should you bother to do any of this? Because when you inevitably return to your table or figure or quotation nine months down the line, **your future self** will have been saved hours spent wondering what it was you thought you were doing and where you got that result from. (Journals)

“Where am I on this project?”
“Where did I leave off before I got distracted?”

Three Principles

2) Use self-describing naming conventions

- A second principle is that a document, file or folder should always be able to tell you what it is. Beyond making your work reproducible, you will also need some method for organizing and documenting your draft papers, code, photos, field notes, datasets, output files or whatever it is you're working with.

- Anything you can do that keeps you from having to rethink something is a win! Let the previous thinking **tell you!**

- Teach your **previous self** to talk to you **current self**! (or vice versa) You will thank them! :)

Three Principles

3) Automate where/if possible

A third principle is that repetitive and error-prone processes should be automated if possible. (Software developers call this “DRY”, or Don’t Repeat Yourself.) It is makes it easier to check for and correct mistakes.

- Rather than copying and pasting code over and over to do basically the same thing to different parts of your data, write a general function that can be called whenever it’s needed.

- Instead of retyping and reformatting the bibliography for each of your papers as you send it out to a journal, use software that can manage this for you automatically.

- Employ tools that can **automate recurring mundane tasks**.

- Employ tools that can help you find things (again) that you thought would be useful when you discovered them initially.

The Master Workflow - GTD

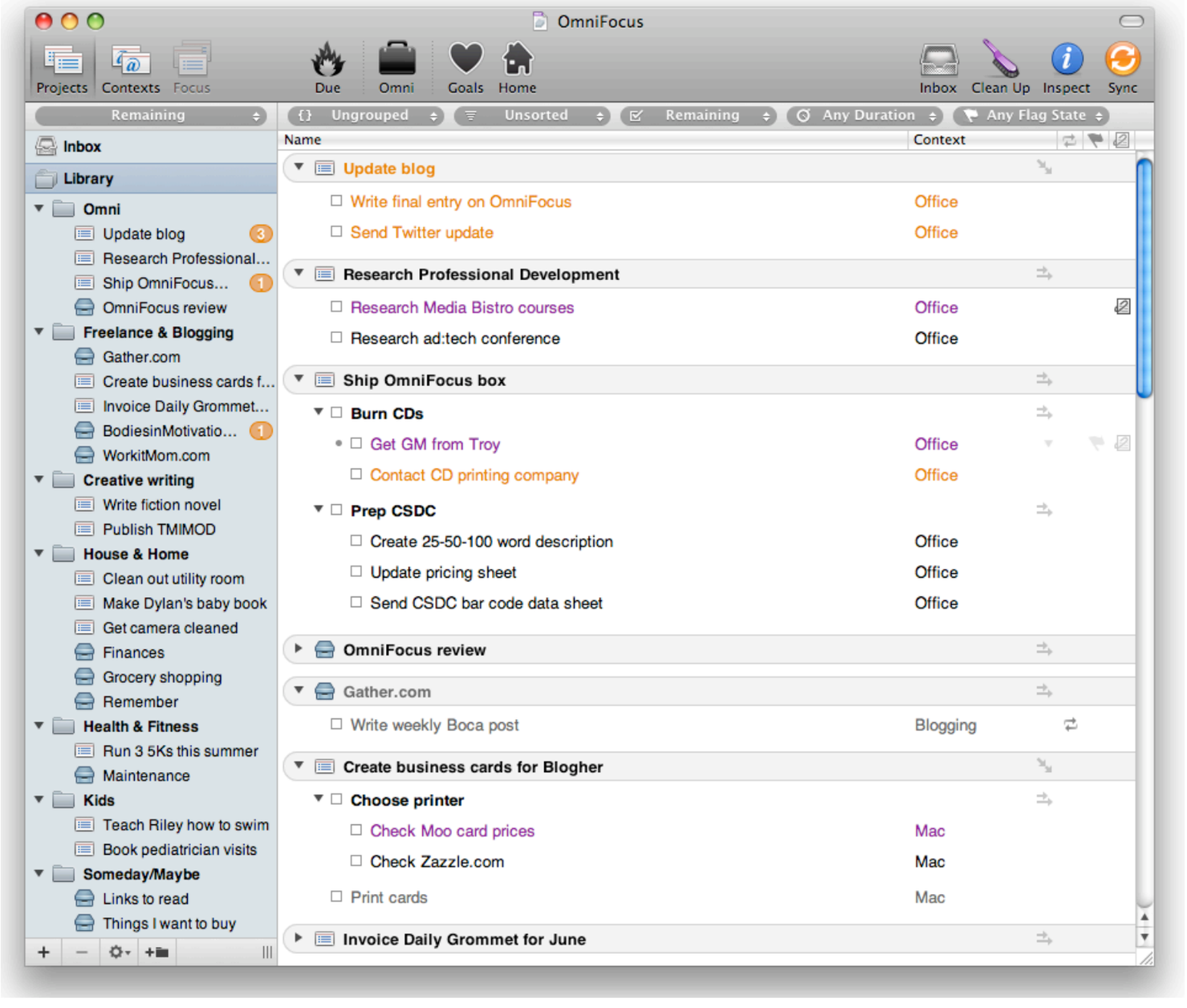
Getting Things Done

http://gettingthingsdone.com

"If you are not doing it right now, put it in a trusted system"

Aside: Personally, everything in this presentation is something I do. And my "control panel" for all these things — for my personal productivity workflows, for helping manage all the things I'm doing or want to do — is an app named "OmniFocus". All my various other "inboxes" ultimately dump into this Master Inbox in OmniFocus. And then the actions get organized from there.

But GTD isn't an app! It's a simple methodology. It can be implemented via an app (Mac or Windows) or it can just be done on paper. It's a mindset.



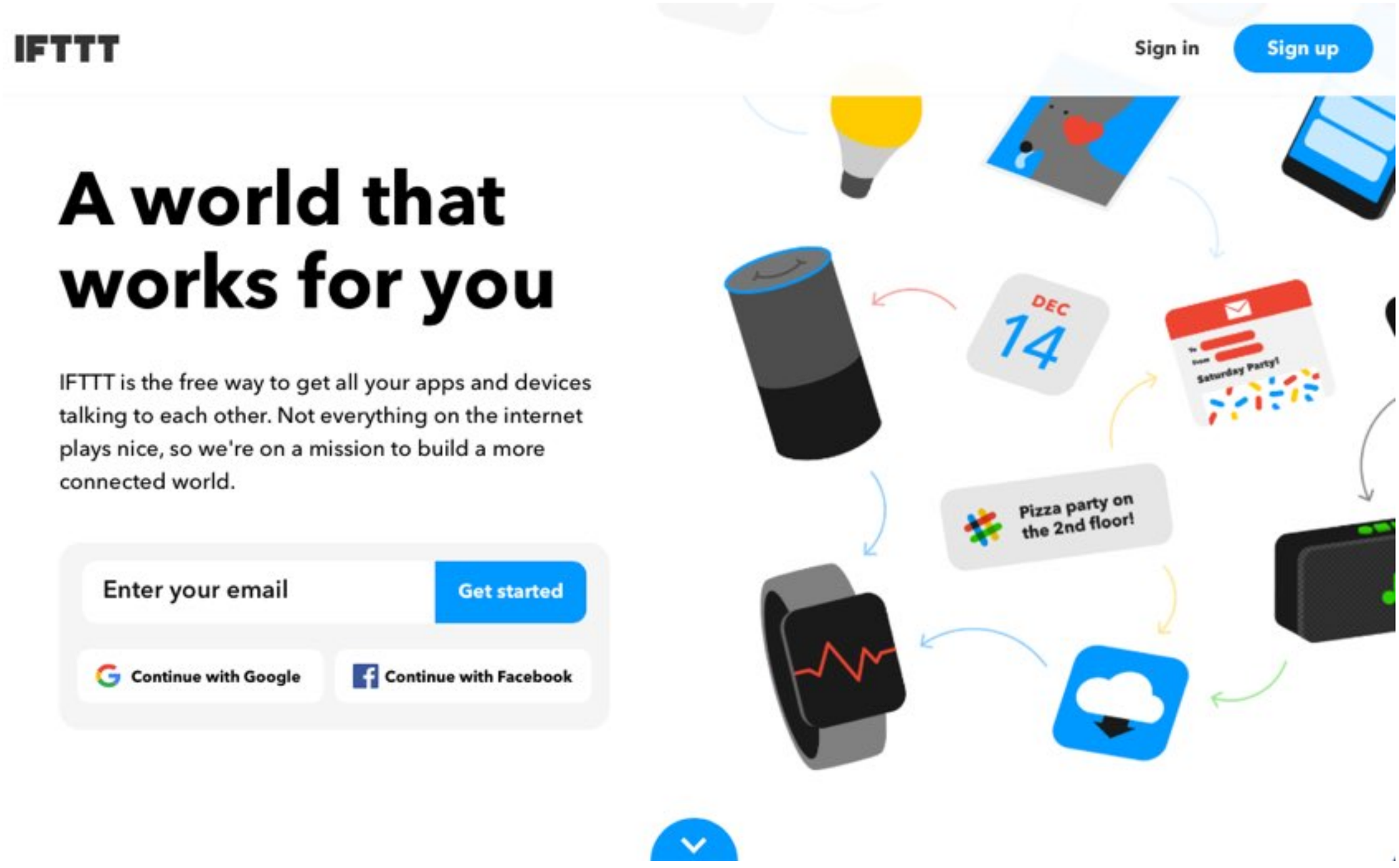
Automation

“Automate where/if possible”

We have “computers”, in our pockets and on our desks, that are programmable and configurable. Learn to use that capability to remove mundane and repetitive tasks where possible; use it to help you remember the details of whatever you are pursuing.

Free your mind for the important stuff!

IFTTT
If This Then That



ifttt.com

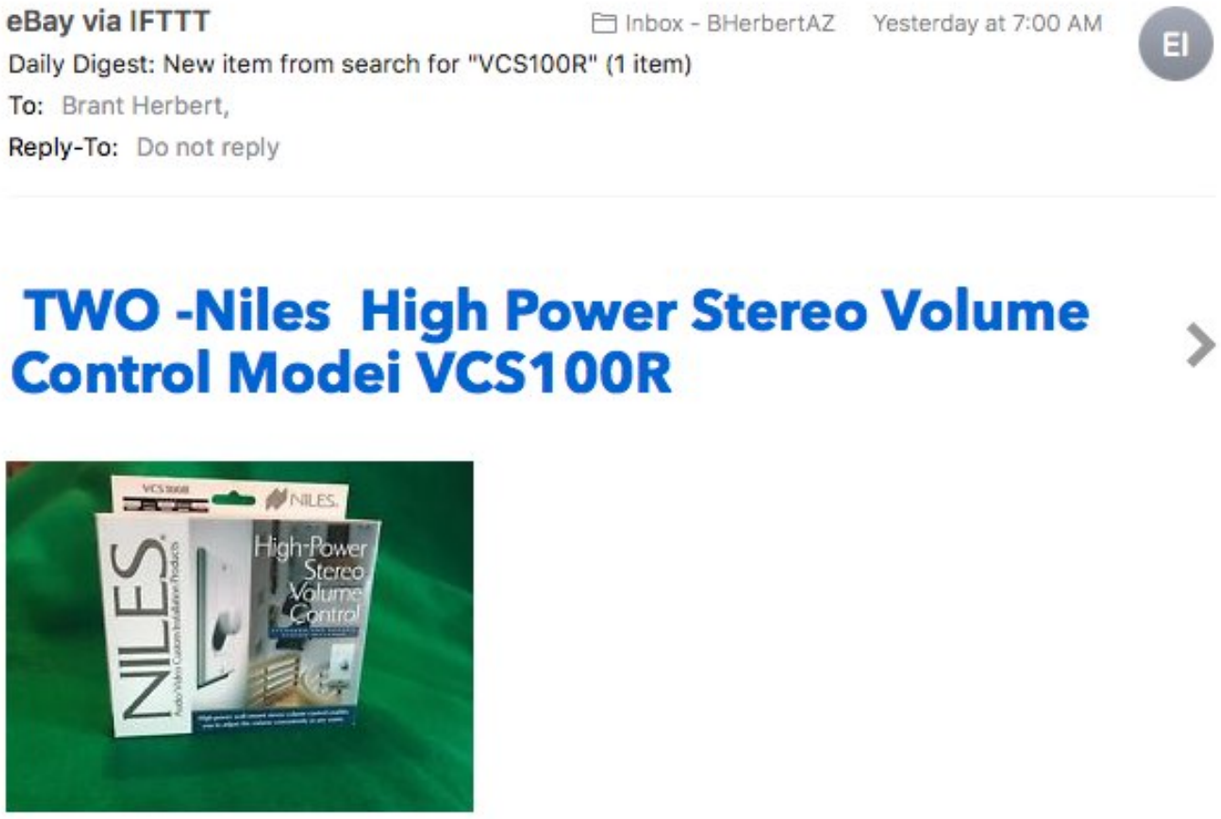
IFTTT
If This Then That

Examples of the categories of things IFTTT can do. All this is community driven. All the time people are implementing new ways to get things to talk to together. IFFTT allows you to find and customize existing solutions in new ways, to help **you** solve **your** problems

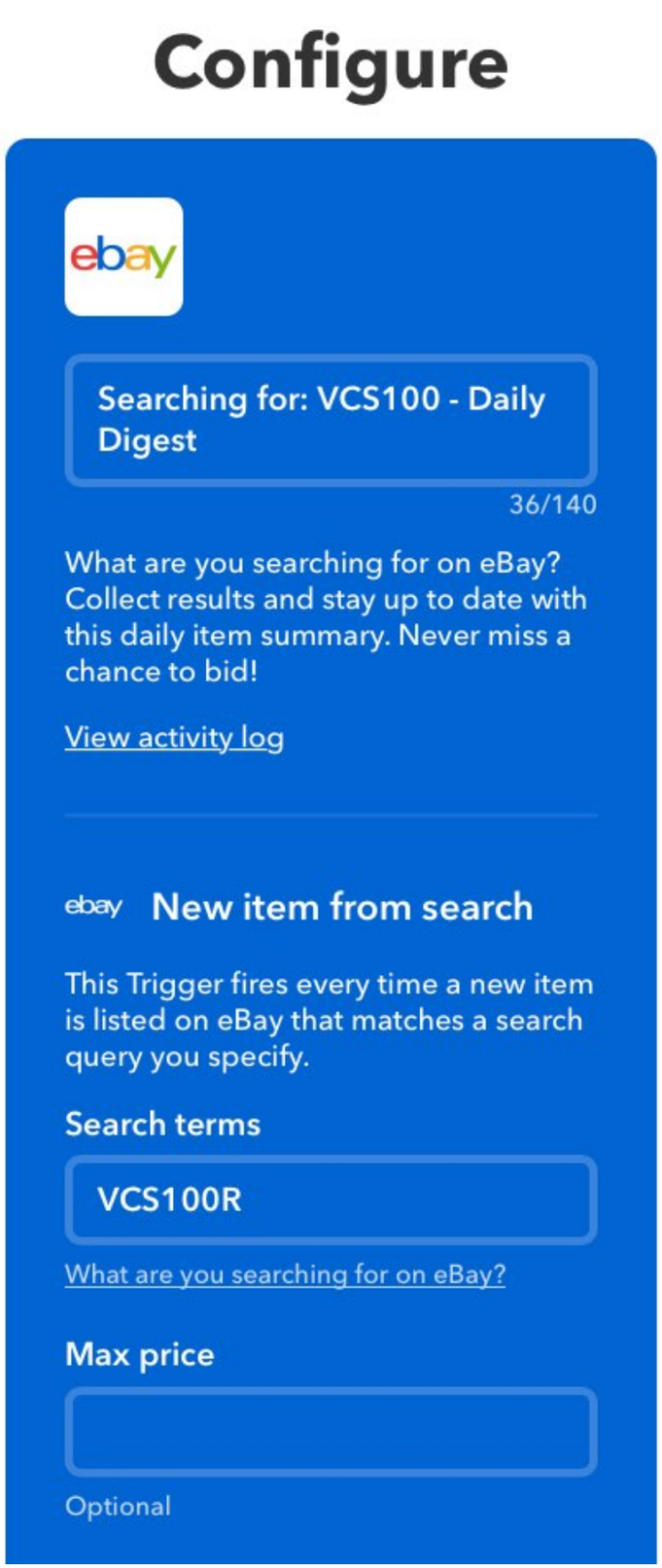
IFTTT Use Case: eBay Search Notifications

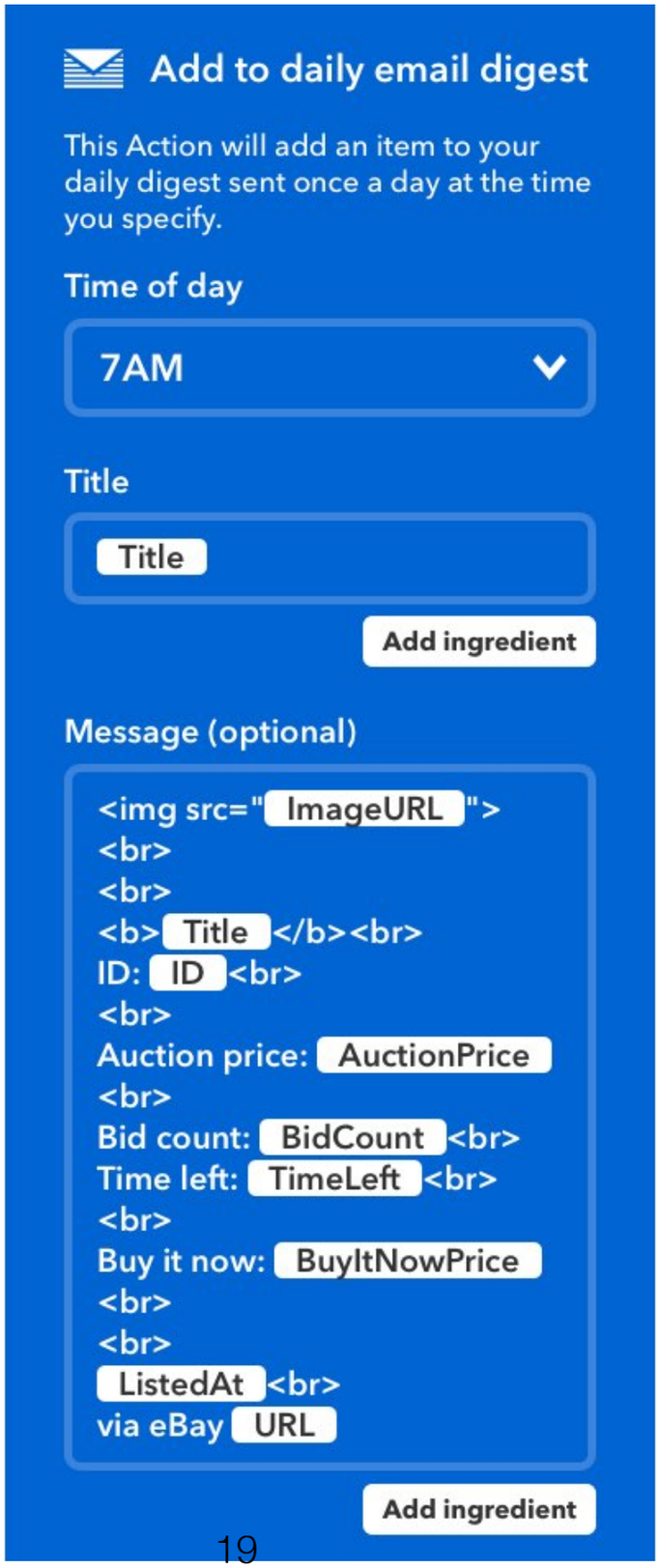
Example: *“I have an eBay search for some product. Send me an email when someone posts a new listing.”*

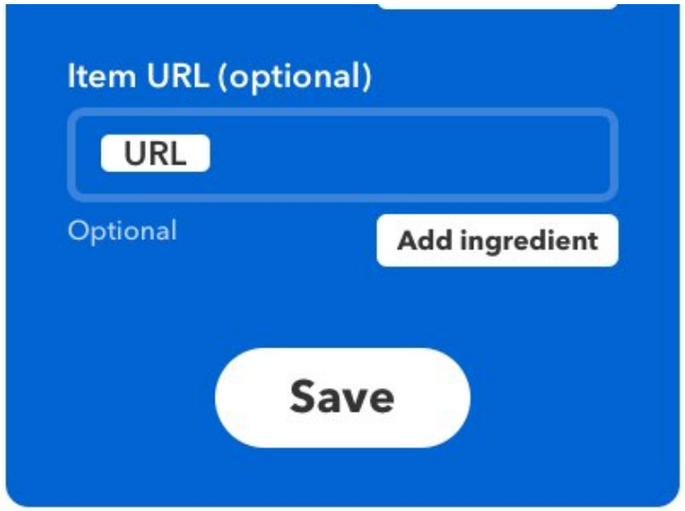
Yes, there are many ways to do this besides IFTTT. I’m just using this as an example of a general “Notify me when…”



IFTTT Use Case: eBay Search Notifications





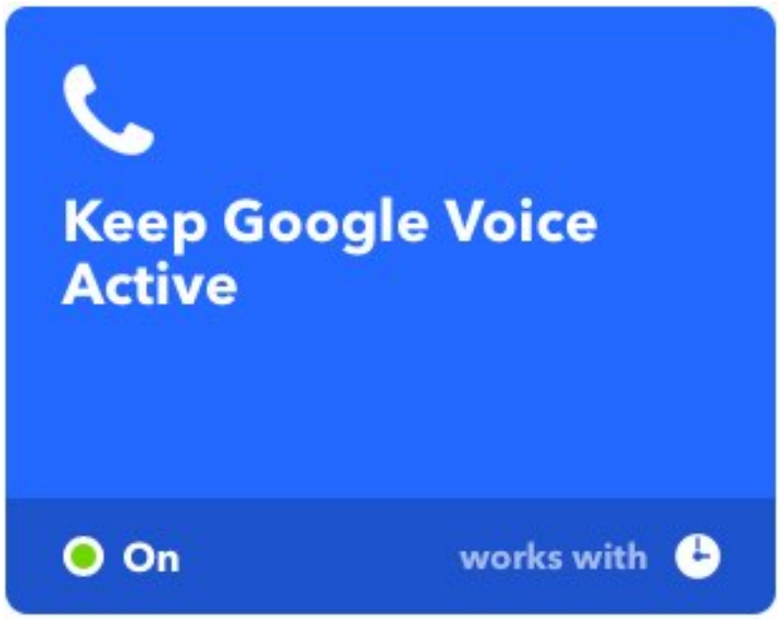


How it's done: There's a recipe that defines the default behavior. Just edit that recipe to your liking (like, giving it **your** email address) or customizing the message that gets sent.

IFTTT Use Case: Keep Google Voice # Active

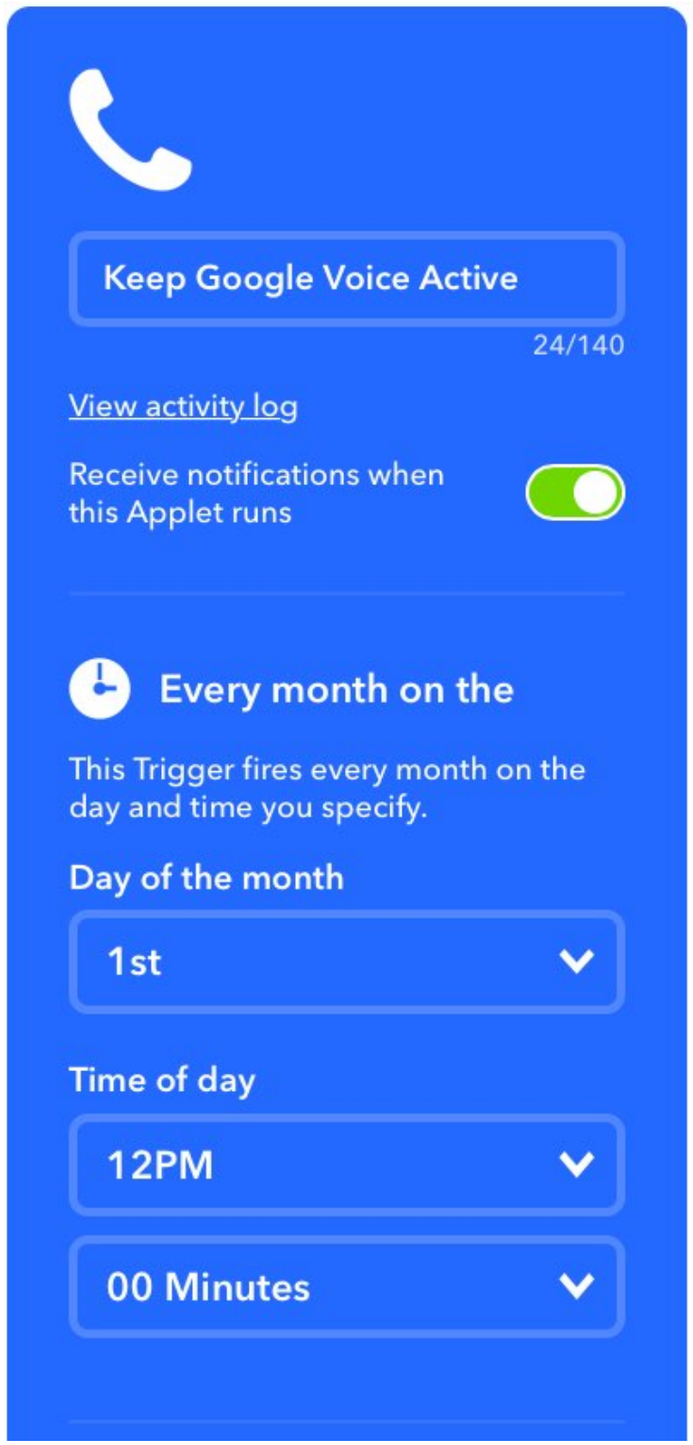
Example: *“I have a Google Voice phone number that I use on my personal ‘business cards’* (so I don’t have to give my real phone number). *Make sure my Google Voice number doesn’t get disabled if the number isn’t called in a while”* (as Google will do).

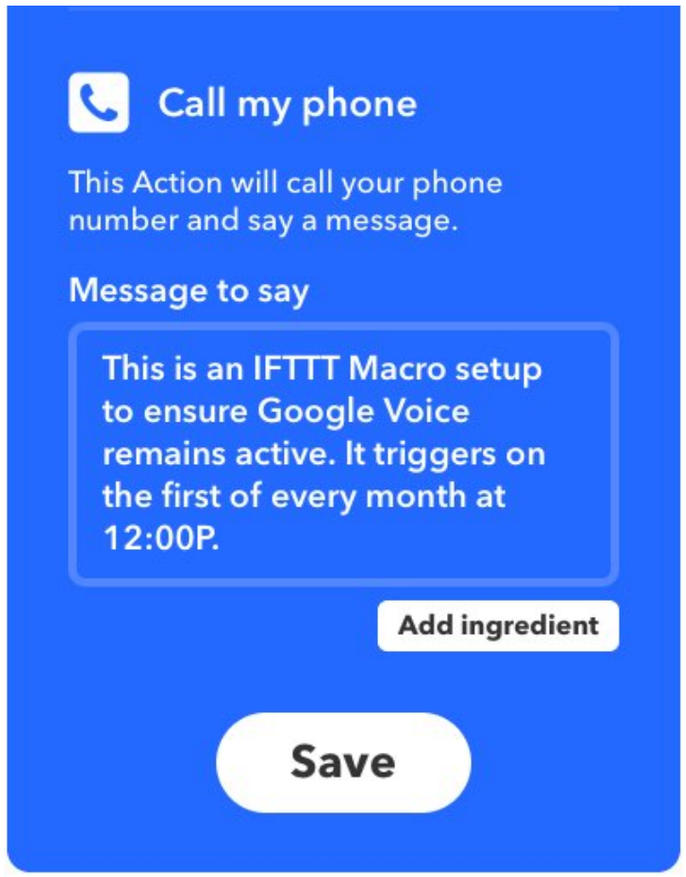
This recipe will call my Google Voice number once a month so the number doesn’t “expire”.



https://voice.google.com

IFTTT Use Case: Keep Google Voice # Active

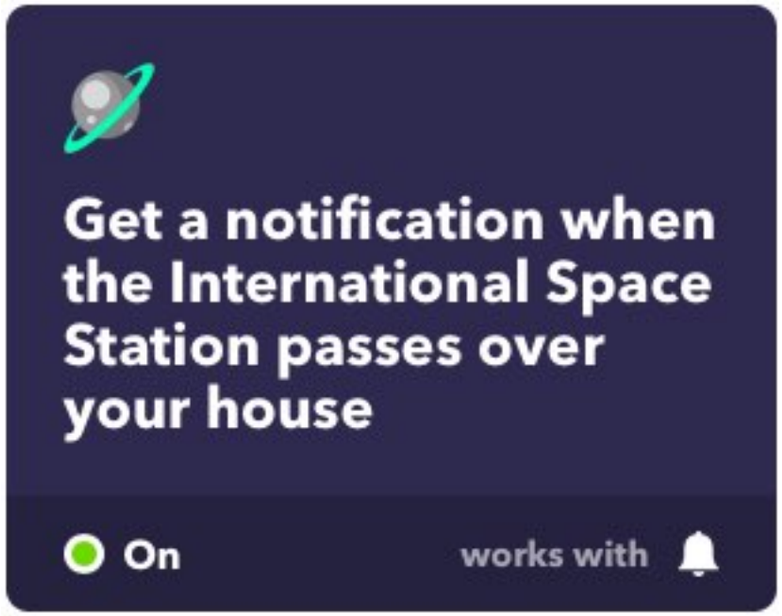


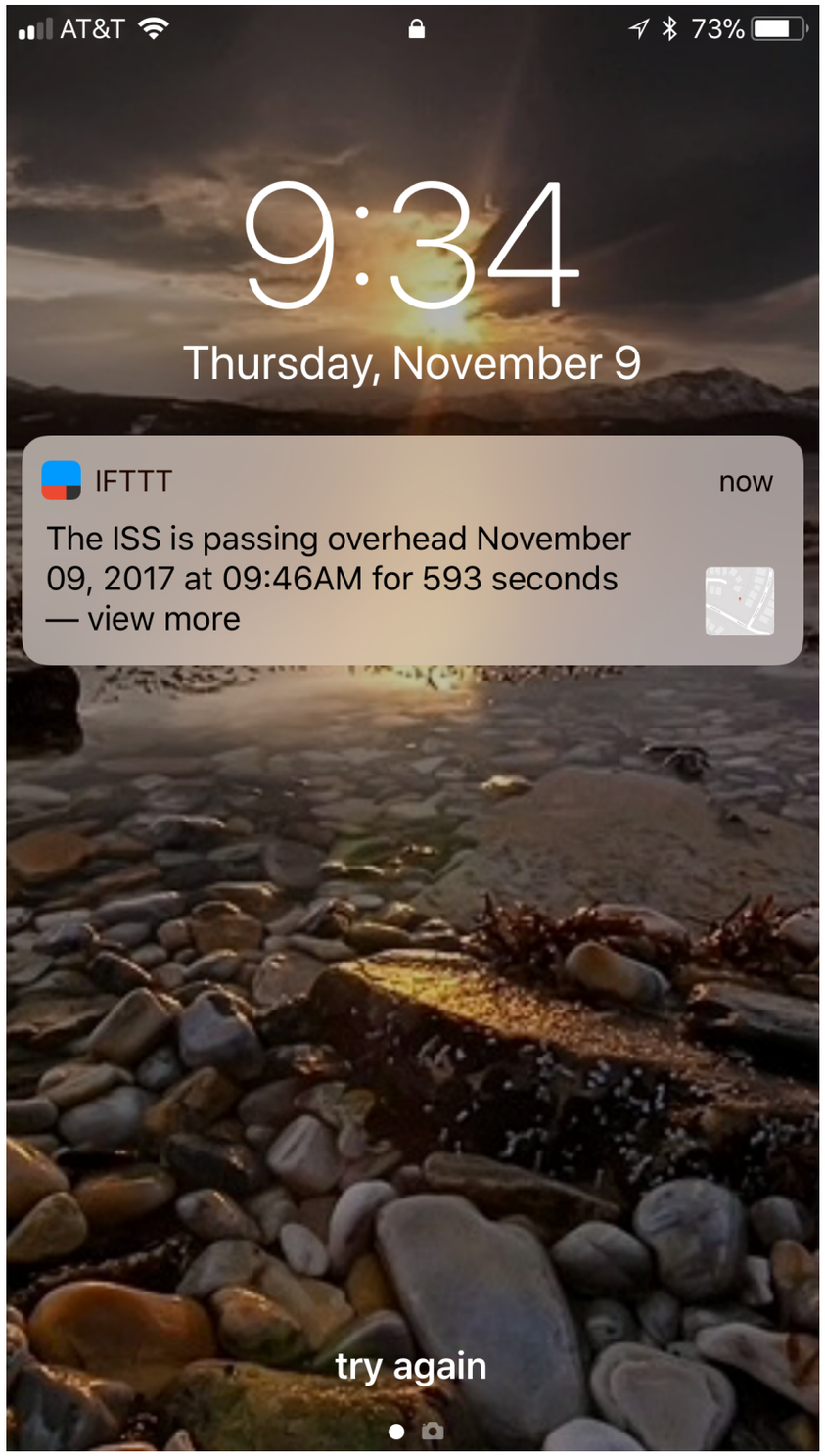


How it's done: I set the call schedule — "every month" — and give it the phone number it should call. The recipe does the rest.

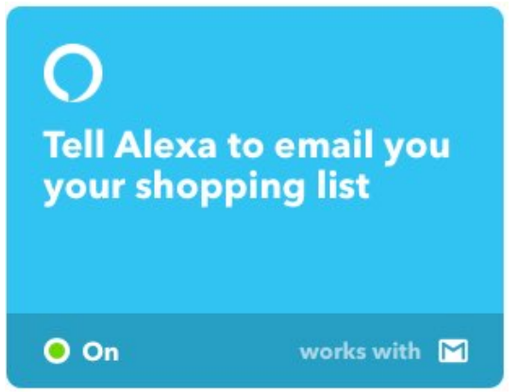
IFTTT Use Case: International Space Station Overhead?

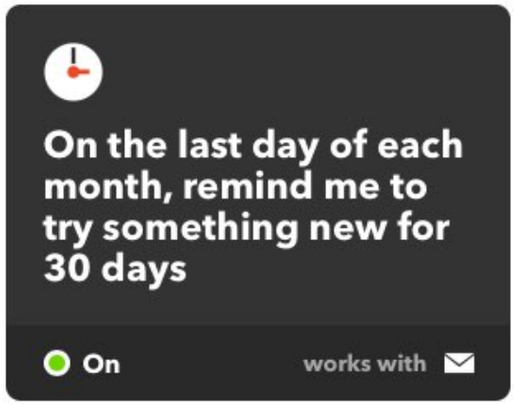
Example: *“I like to sit on my patio at night and watch the stars. I wonder if I can see the International Space Station when it passes overhead?”*

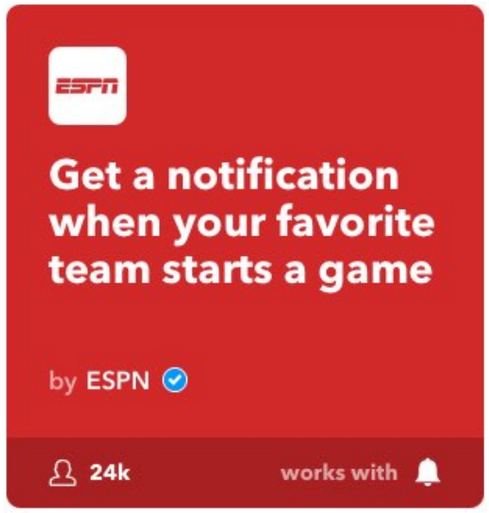




IFTTT Examples







Voice Assistive Technologies

Siri

Google

Amazon Alexa

There are other ways to get ideas into our “systems”
or to enable various kinds of automations.

Deeper Automations

Hazel

Automated Organization for Your Mac.

https://www.noodlesoft.com

Example: *“I want my Mac do to more of the mundane house-keeping tasks I’ve been doing manually”*

- MacOS has the notion of “folder actions”
- A kind of local IFTTT

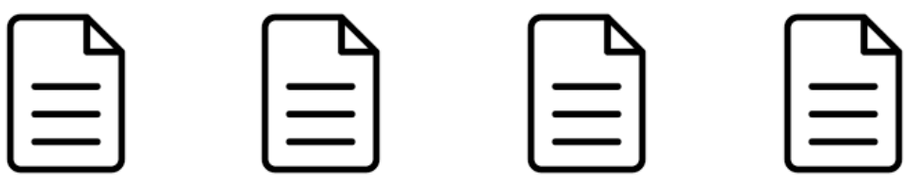
“If the contents of a folder changes, do X”

Note: there are similar apps available on Windows

Deeper Automations
Hazel Example

“When I download my monthly account statements, rename them and automatically file them”

APS **Epcor** **Chase** **AT&T**



monthly statement PDF

\Downloads

“Use self-describing naming conventions”
“Automate where/if possible”

Hazel can look inside a PDF and extract information like statement date and account info, then can use that data to rename the downloaded file. Then, Hazel can move the result into the proper folder in my digital filing system.

```
└── MyDocuments
    └── MonthlyStatements
        ├── APS
        │   └── 2017
        │       ├── 2017-09-15-APS-Statement.pdf
        │       └── 2017-10-15-APS-Statement.pdf
        ├── ATT
        ├── Chase
        └── Epcor
```

Deeper Automations

Automator

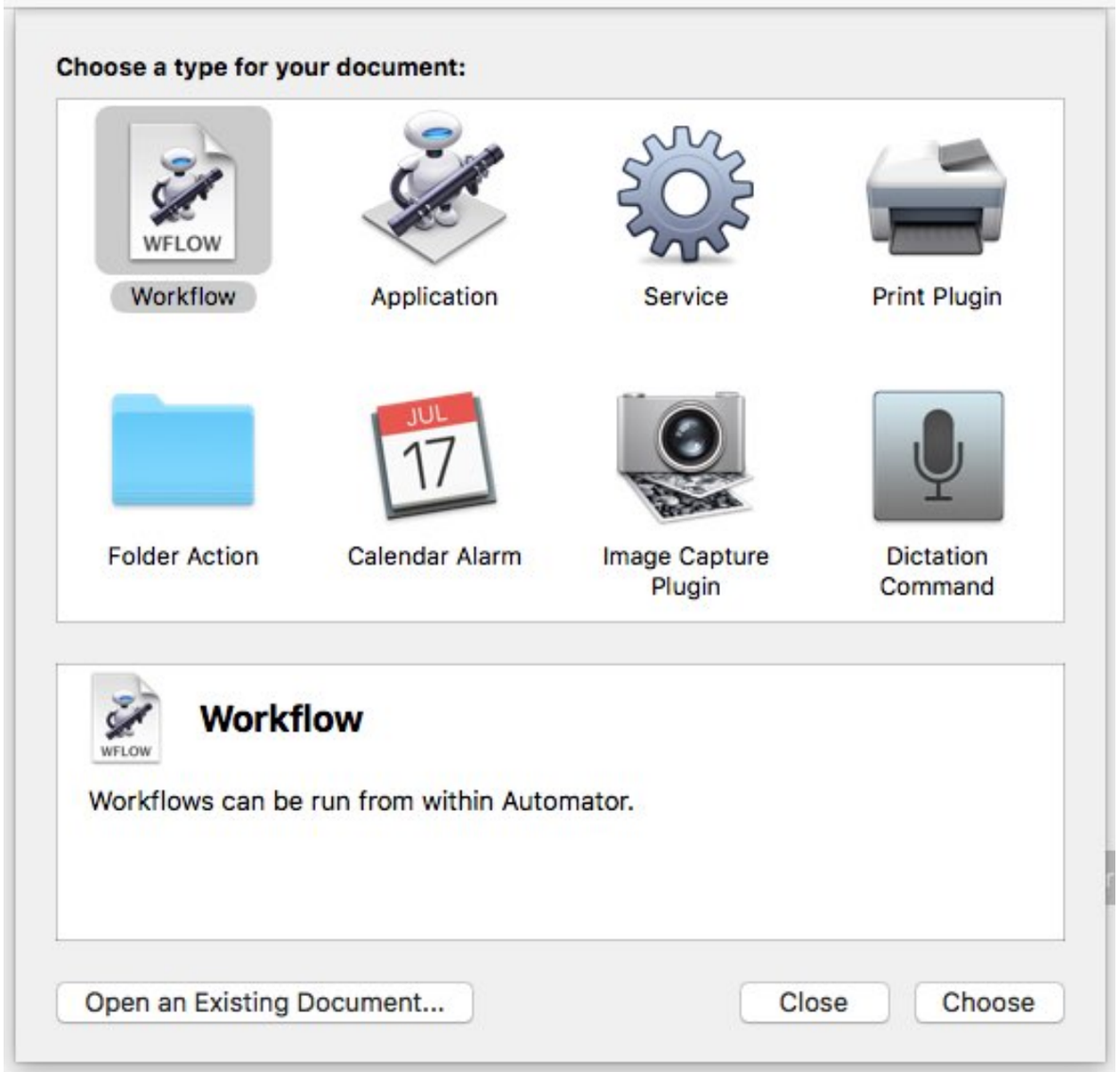
Your Personal Automation Assistant

https://macosxautomation.com/automator/index.html

Mac only

- Apps on MacOS are designed to be “scriptable”
- Users can create custom solutions to help improve their personal workflows
- Automator lets one create many types of new solutions or services

One app can talk to another app!



Ideas Capture

Where are your resources and your inspiration coming from?

How are you processing and turning that data into something useful?

Drinking from the Firehose

There is so much information available!

Some web apps that can help you manage what you read and what you do with that information.

Feedly — getting information to come to you
Pocket — filing away the useful bits so you can find it again

Feedly

Have the news come to you!

A reader for RSS - Real Simple Syndication

Two Models

- “Poll” — visit your favorite sites each day and scan for new articles
- “Push” — have your favorite sites send new articles to you directly

Features

- Feedly implements the Push model
- Is like getting custom magazines delivered to you daily
- You “subscribe” (free) to the “feed” of a website, and new content becomes available in Feedly as soon as new articles are published
- Feedly maintains “I’ve read it already” state on all articles
- Can read full articles in Feedly or quickly jump to the hosting website.
- Intuitive keyboard navigation => fast scanning and reading == better time utilization!

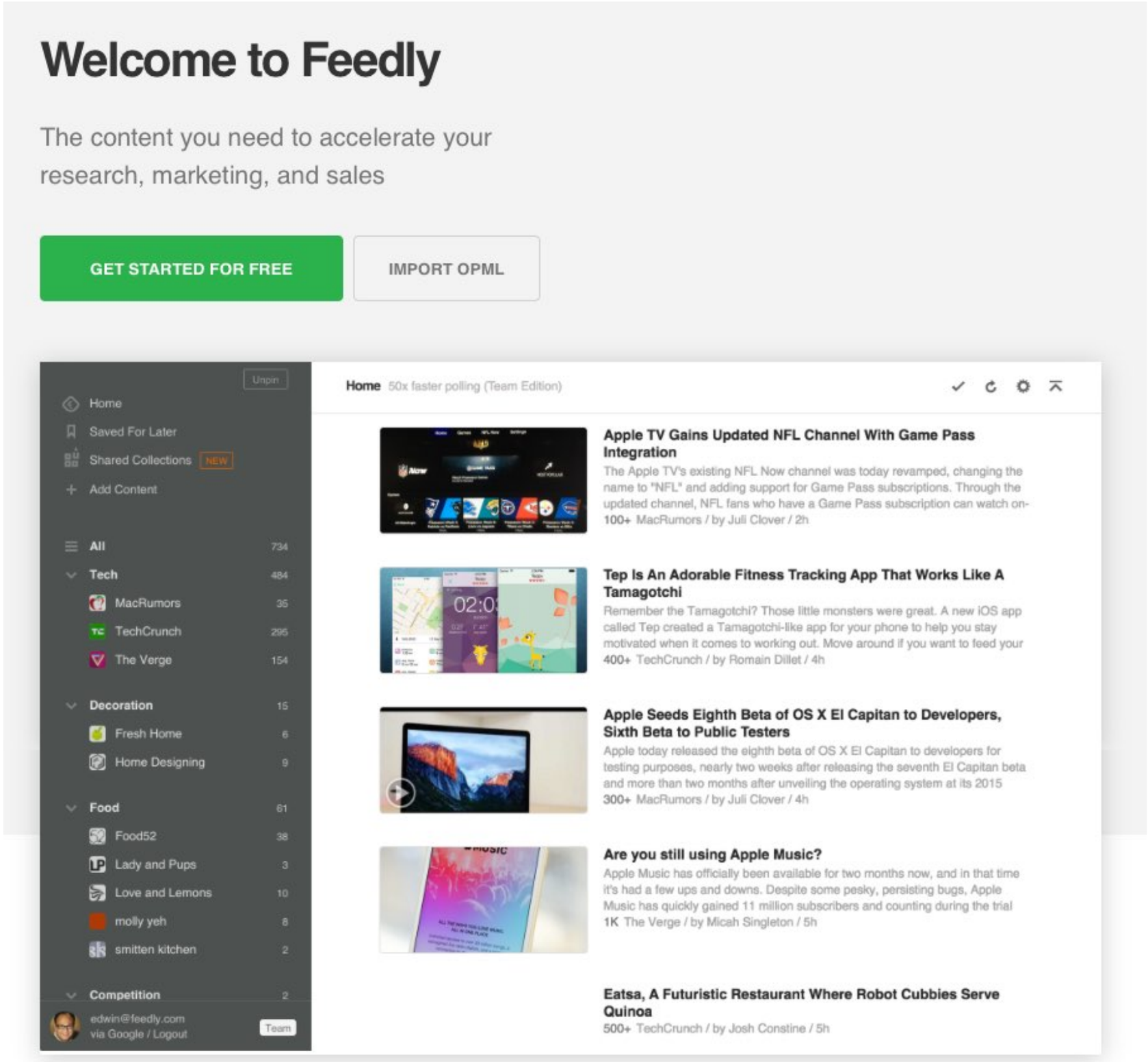
(RSS is the technology behind podcasts and music sites like iTunes)

Capture

Feedly

Subscriptions on the left.
Articles on the right

feedly.com



Feedly

What can Feedly do for you?

POWERFUL INTEGRATIONS

Put content to work

Organize

Let the web work for you by arranging the content you rely on into easy-to-read collections.

Read

Feedly offers a clean, minimalist reading experience optimized for productivity.

Search

Delve into the specific articles that interest you within your Feedly or within a specific publication.

Read Later

Save articles and easily get back to them. Tag with Feedly or use favorite web services like Evernote, Pocket, and Instapaper.

Share

Easily share articles to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, email, and more. Schedule posts with Hootsuite or Buffer.

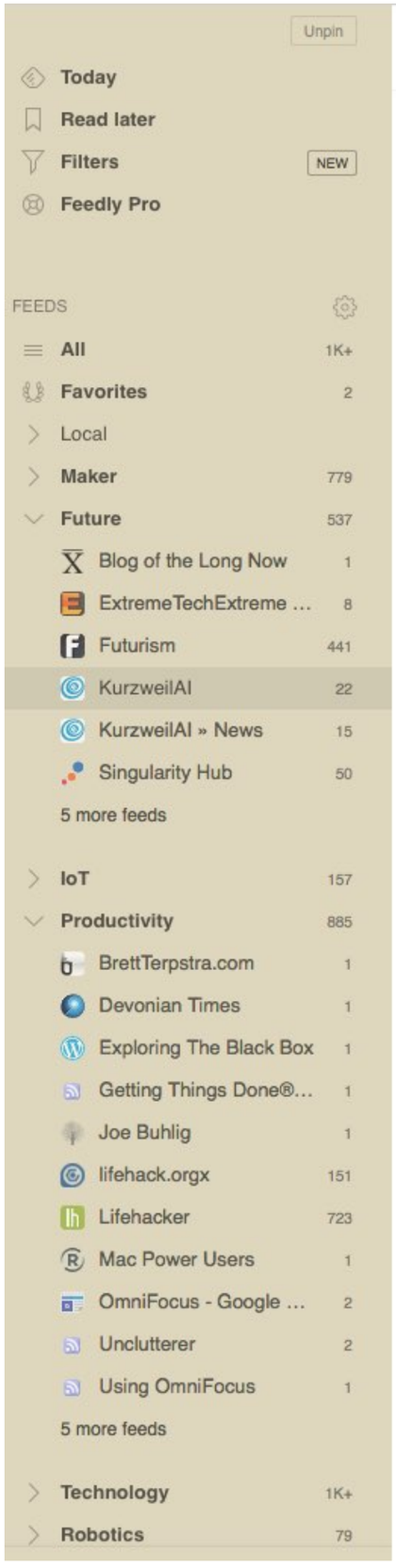
Discover

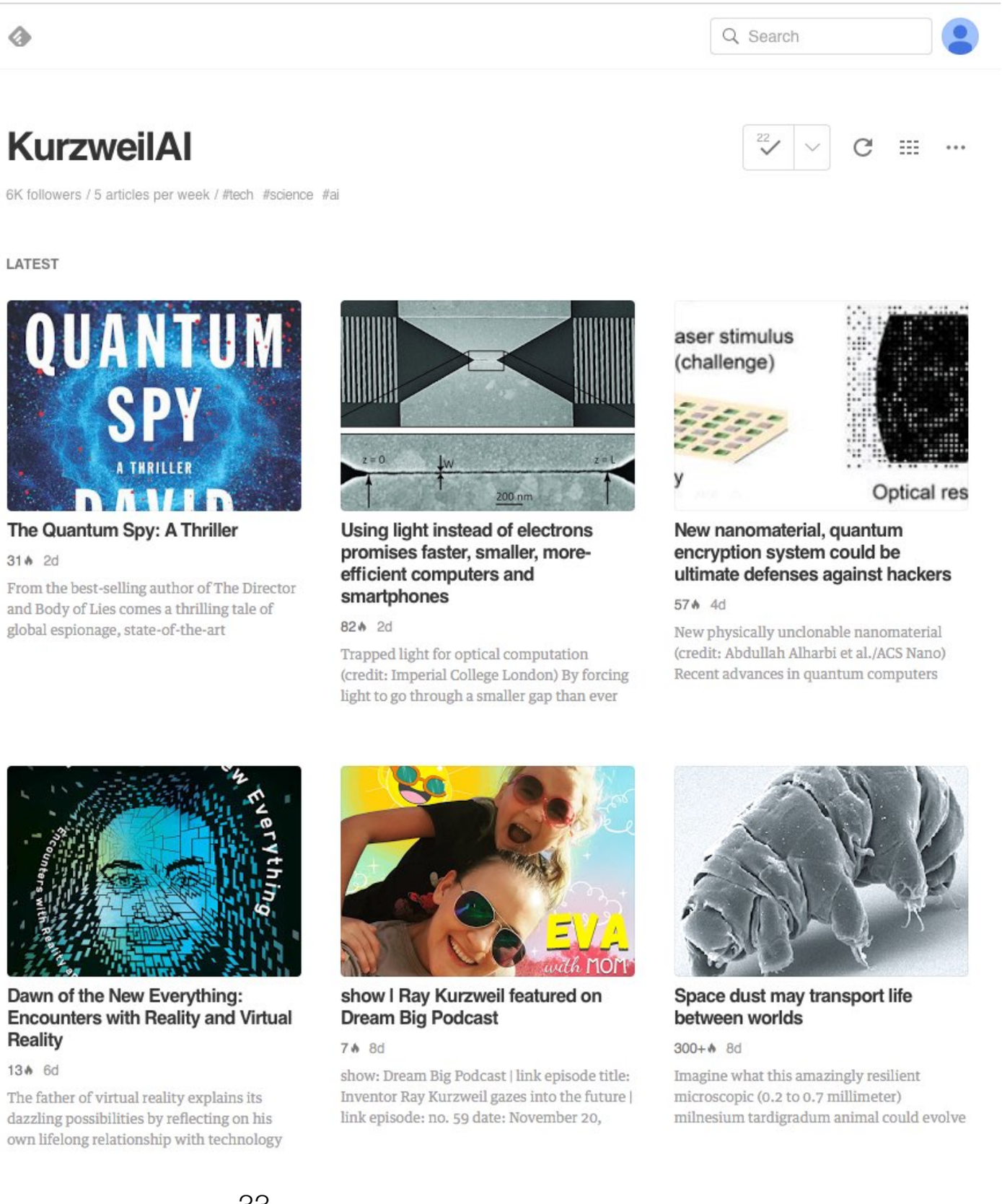
Discover fresh, authoritative voices on niche and broad topics alike. Channel the mainstream or pull from the diamonds in the rough.

Feedly

Numbers indicate unread articles

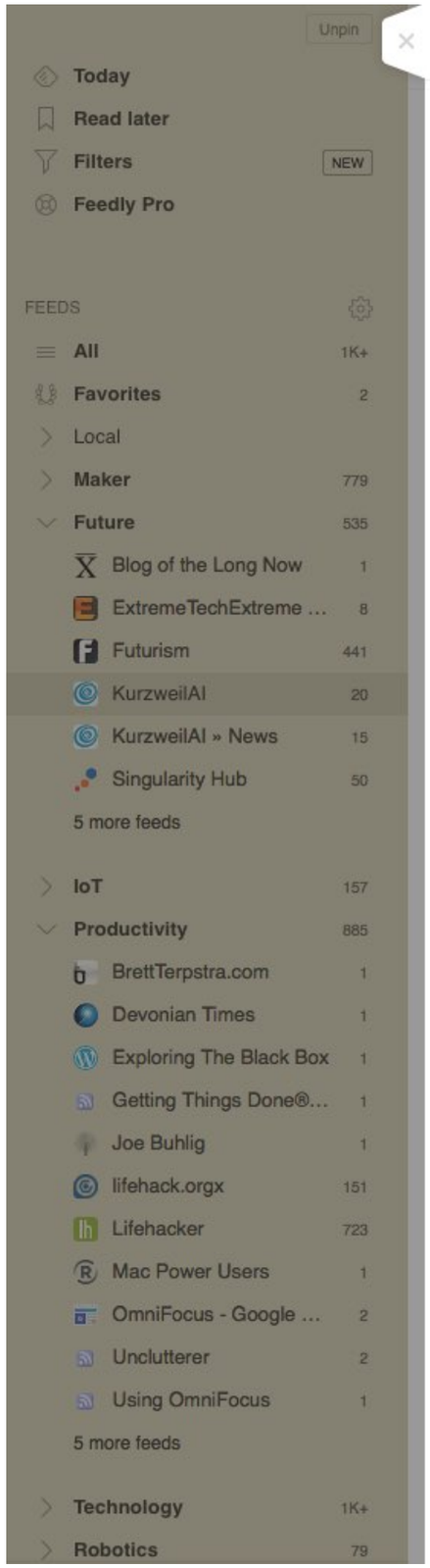
Articles showing in “card view” give quick synopsis: *Is this something I want to read?*

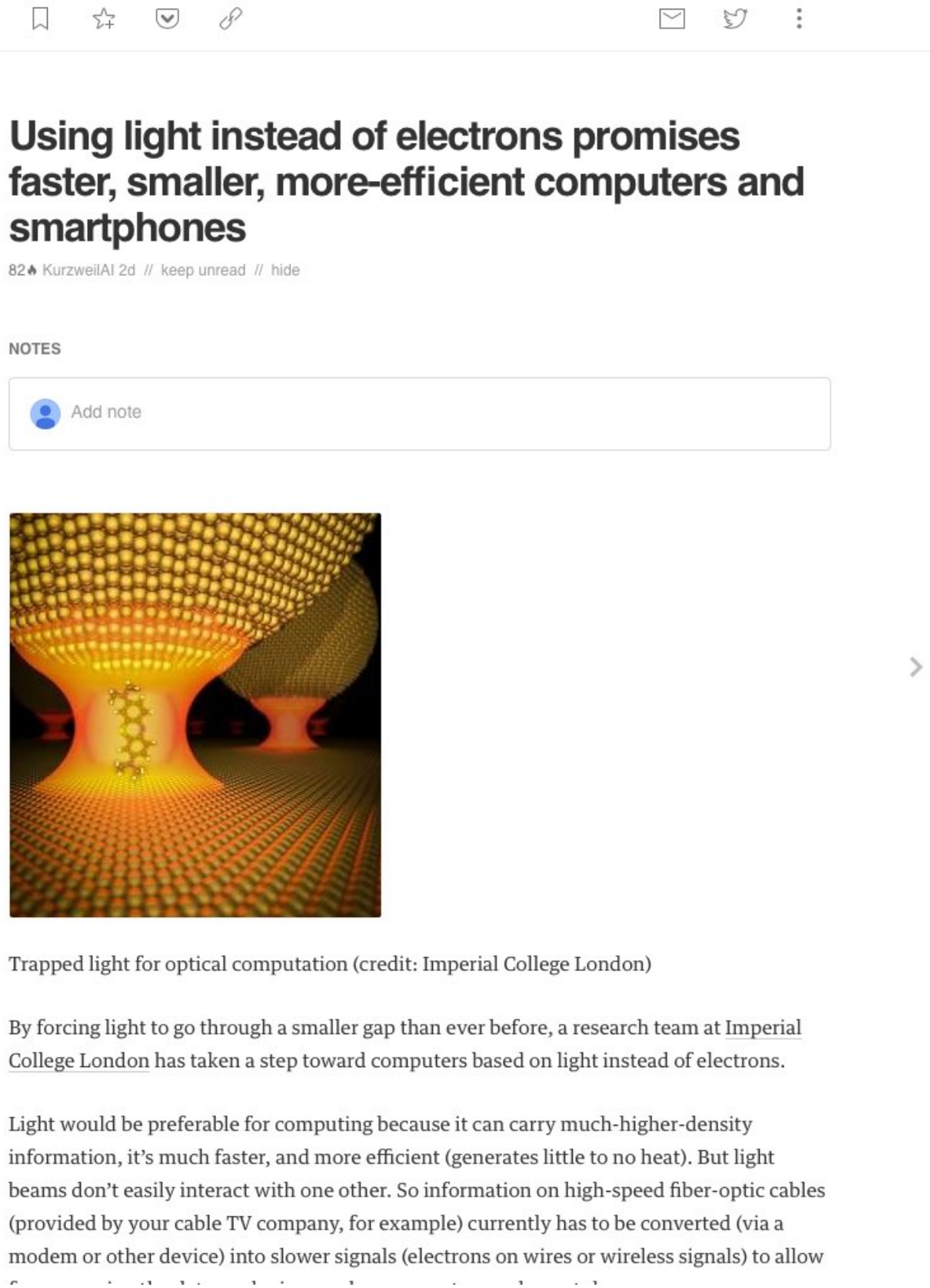




Feedly

Internal reader shows article in-full. Easy to jump to the original site to read it in original context.





Using light instead of electrons promises faster, smaller, more-efficient computers and smartphones

82 KurzweilAI 2d // keep unread // hide

NOTES

Add note

Trapped light for optical computation (credit: Imperial College London)

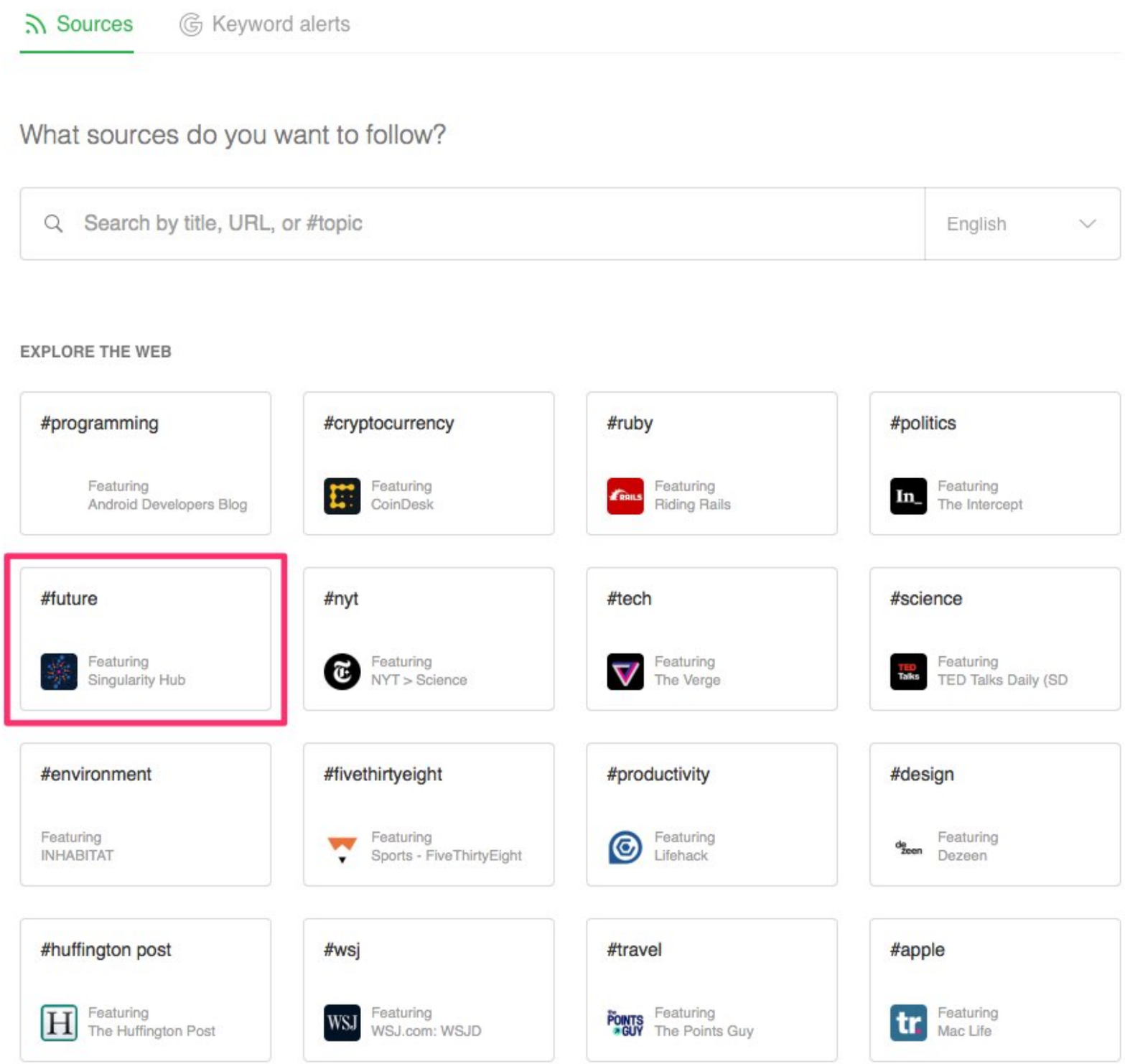
By forcing light to go through a smaller gap than ever before, a research team at Imperial College London has taken a step toward computers based on light instead of electrons.

Light would be preferable for computing because it can carry much-higher-density information, it's much faster, and more efficient (generates little to no heat). But light beams don't easily interact with one other. So information on high-speed fiber-optic cables (provided by your cable TV company, for example) currently has to be converted (via a modem or other device) into slower signals (electrons on wires or wireless signals) to allow

Feedly
Reading a “topic"

Topic-based reading finds articles sharing a common theme (topic) across all your feeds.

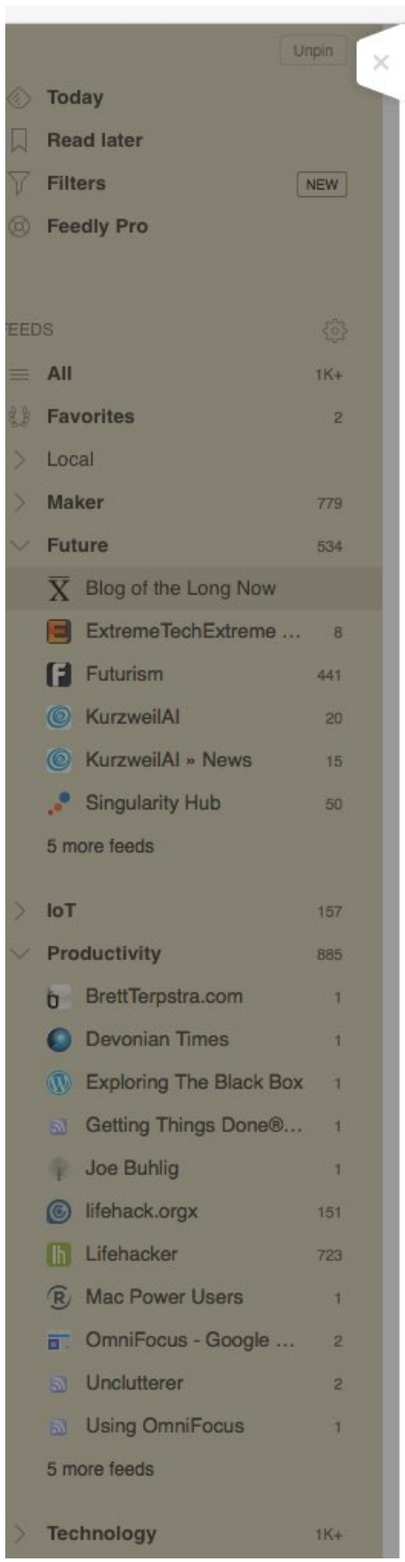
Discover new things!

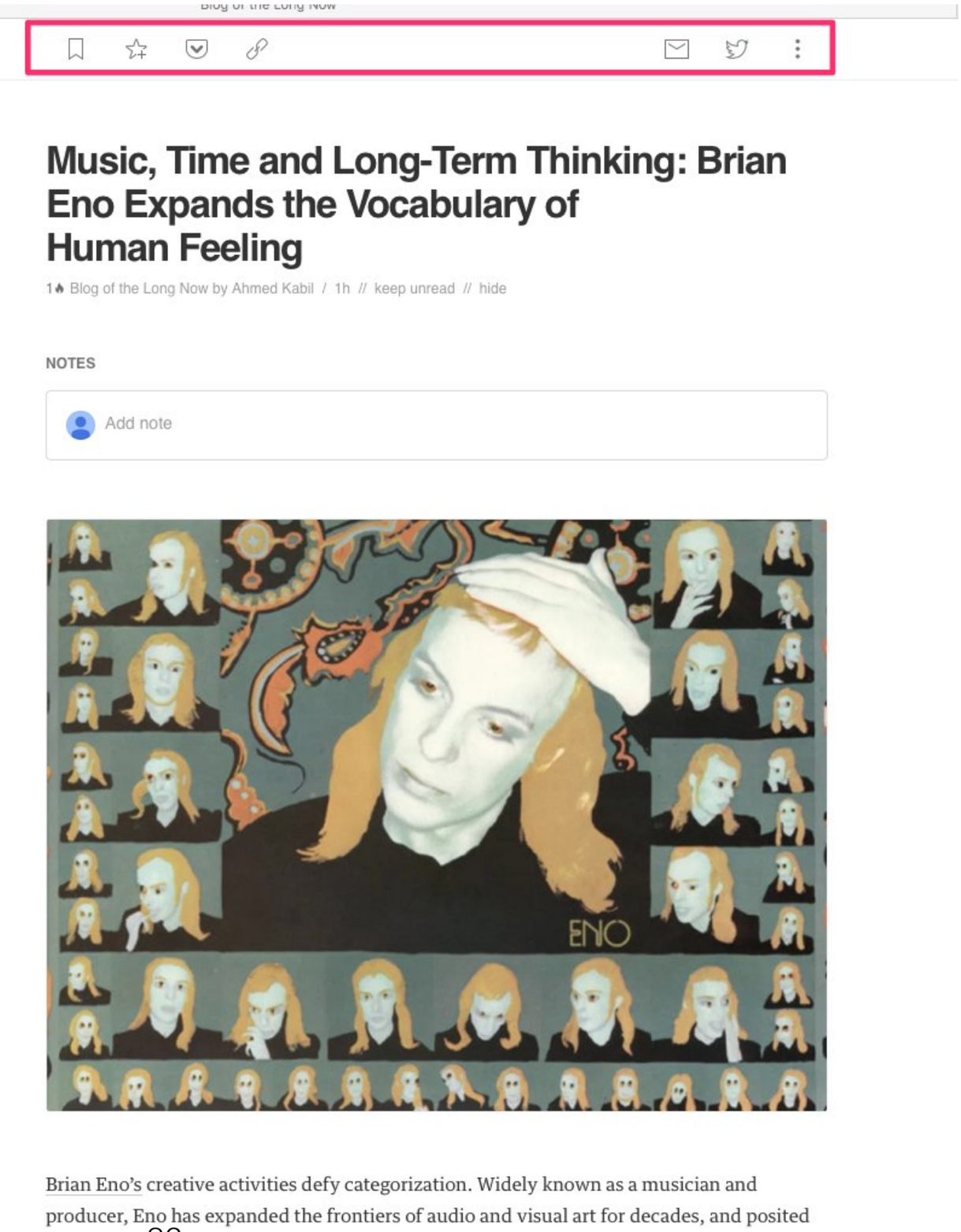


Feedly
Into the InBox

Buttons along top provide quick access to outside services.

E.g. Find an article you want to keep? Drop it into Pocket!





Pocket
An InBox for Web Resources
Bookmarks on Steroids

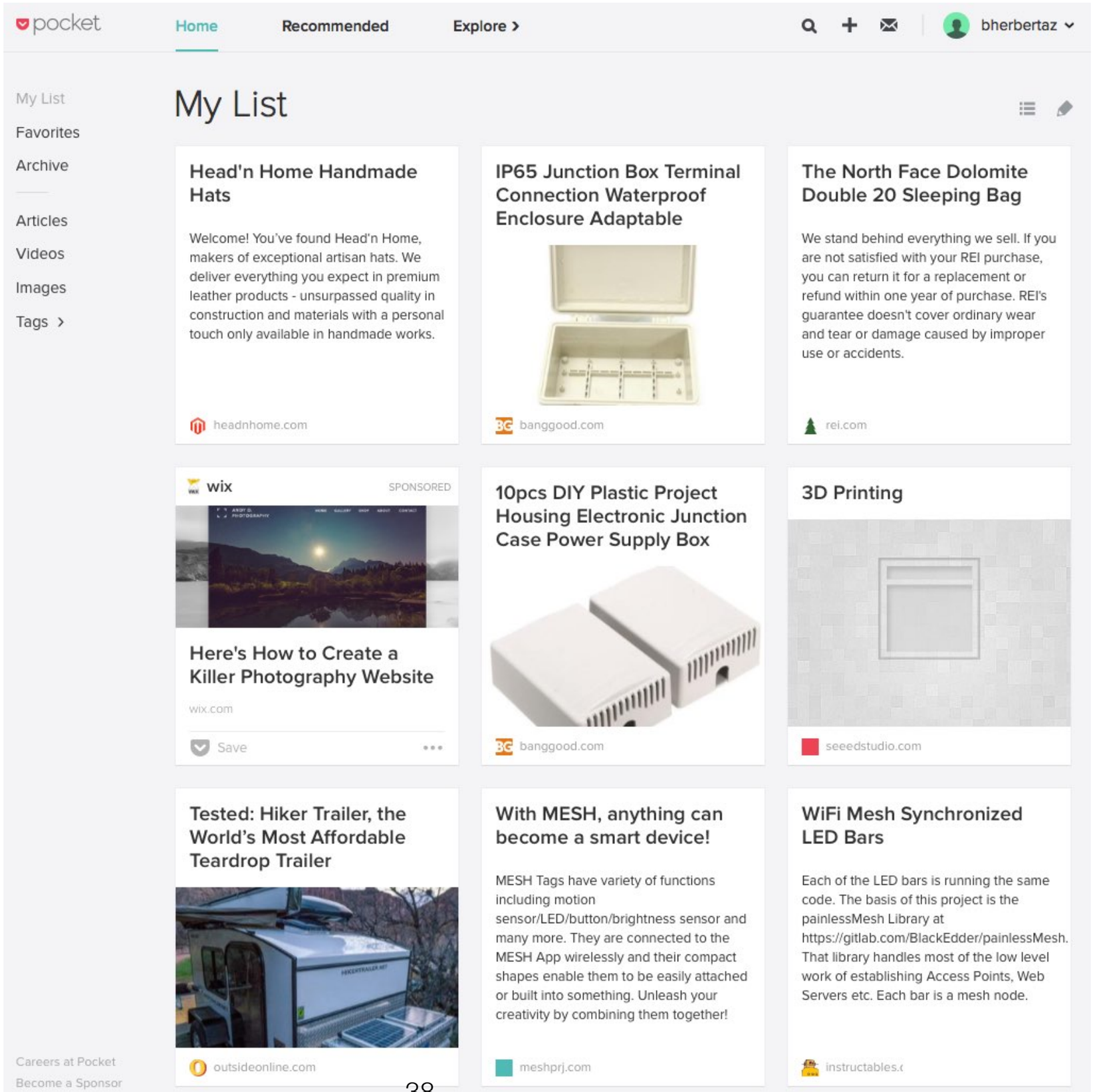
“I found a cool picture on a website last week. Where was that again?”

“Someday I want to build/learn X. Here’s an idea that will be useful later…”

getpocket.com

Pocket

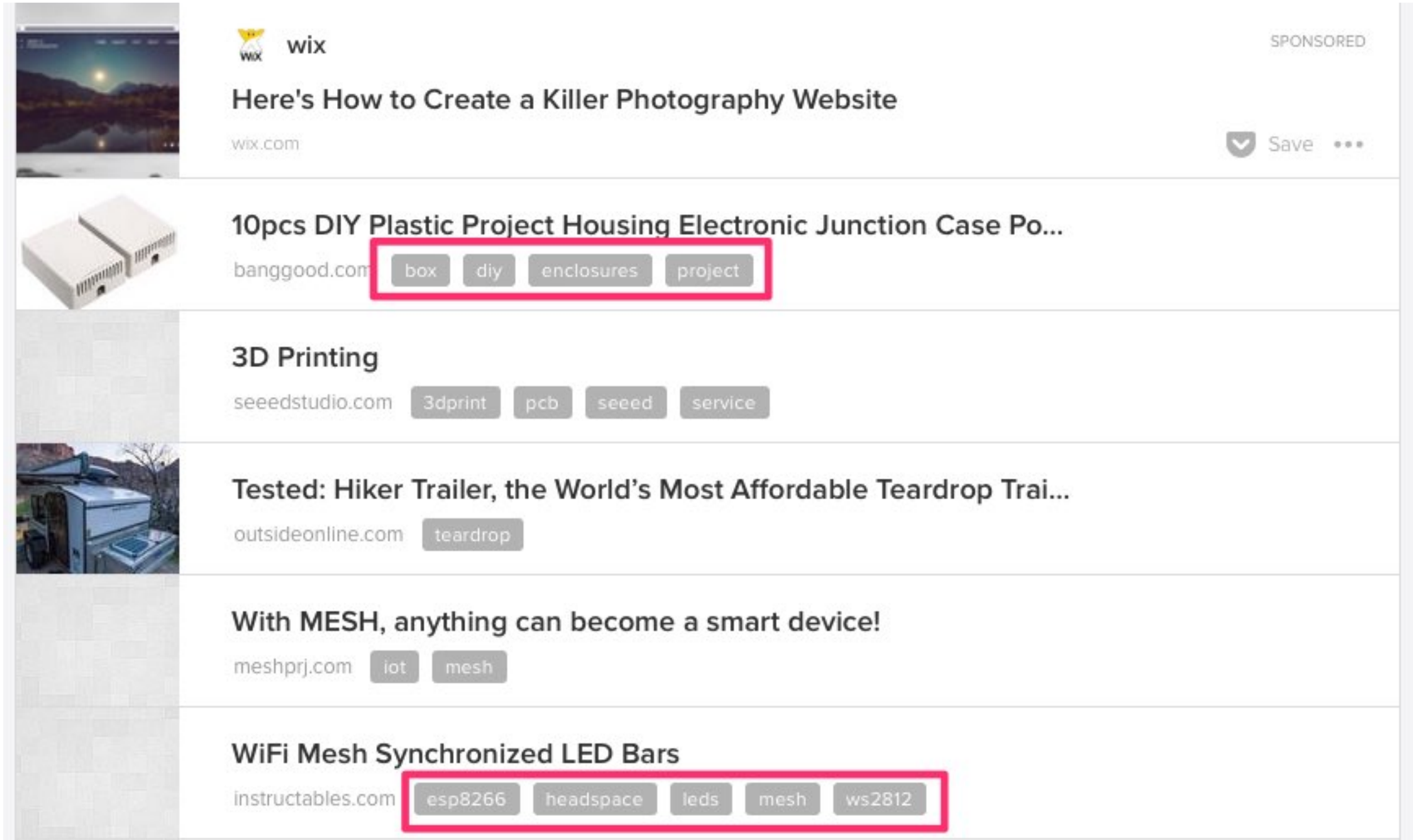
Pocket is a digital filing cabinet for web pages you want to save and organize. More powerful than just “Save Bookmark” in your browser.



Pocket

Cross-referencing using Tags

In Pocket, saved links can be cross-referenced with your own taxonomy (organizational “language”). You can do that at time of link-capture, or you can come back later and add “tags” to links from your saved list.



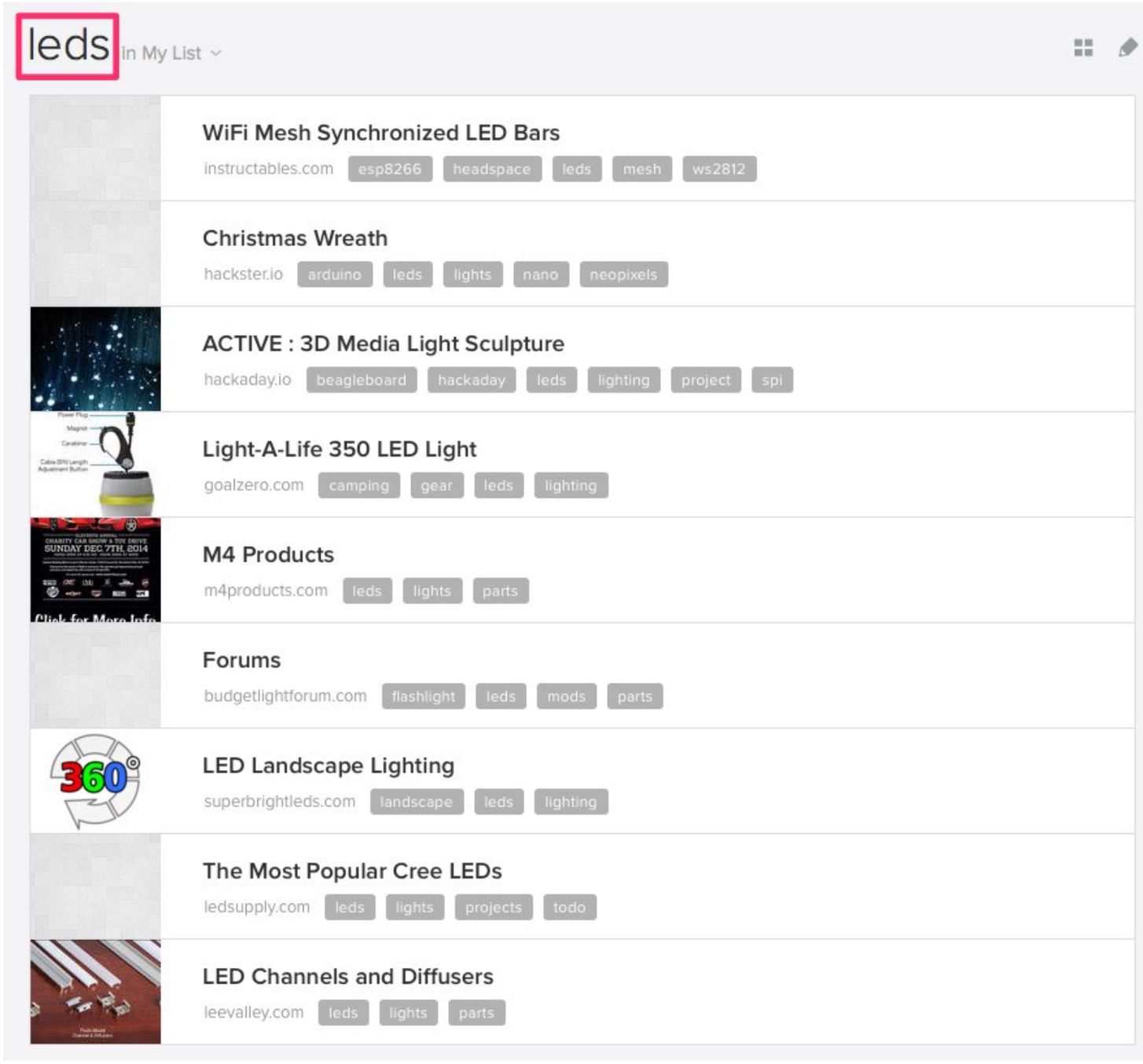
Pocket

Bookmarks tagged: leds

"How might I have filed that information?"
Search via tags used at time of capture

"Make things self-describing"

Here, I have a project involving some LED lighting. I've saved several web pages in Pocket, and those saved links all have the tag "leds". So by searching Pocket for that tag, I see all my saved pages, and when I engage with that project, all the resources I found previously — while doing something else — become available to me to review and use.



Smart Folders

Many apps have the notion of “Smart” collections (of whatever items they are managing)

E.g. your Mail app might have “Smart Folders”. A Smart Folder is a “virtual folder” whose content shows whatever email messages (stored in **other** folders) match some criteria, or “rules”. The rules can be quite complicated, and can be programmed to return things like:

“Show me all emails from Pete that I haven’t read that pertain to Project X that also CC:’d Sally”

Smart Folders are an automation “hack”. They assist in what might be a routine, manual process, and make the information more meaningful.

Journal Apps
Maintaining Project State

Write it down!

- Managing the state of incomplete projects or work sessions

- Being able to come back to previous work and pickup where you left off

- Minimizing the need to rethink things or remember details

Breadcrumbs

The notion of capturing enough information along the way to allow yourself to re-establish a **lost context** when switching to a new task.

Very often a project will be interrupted before it is completed (that's likely the norm). And when that happens, any "context" we have established, in our head, will get dumped to make room for "reloading" the context of the next project we undertake. And that "context switch" is costly, so anything we can do to make it easier to pickup again on this project — the one we are moving away from — can be time well spent.

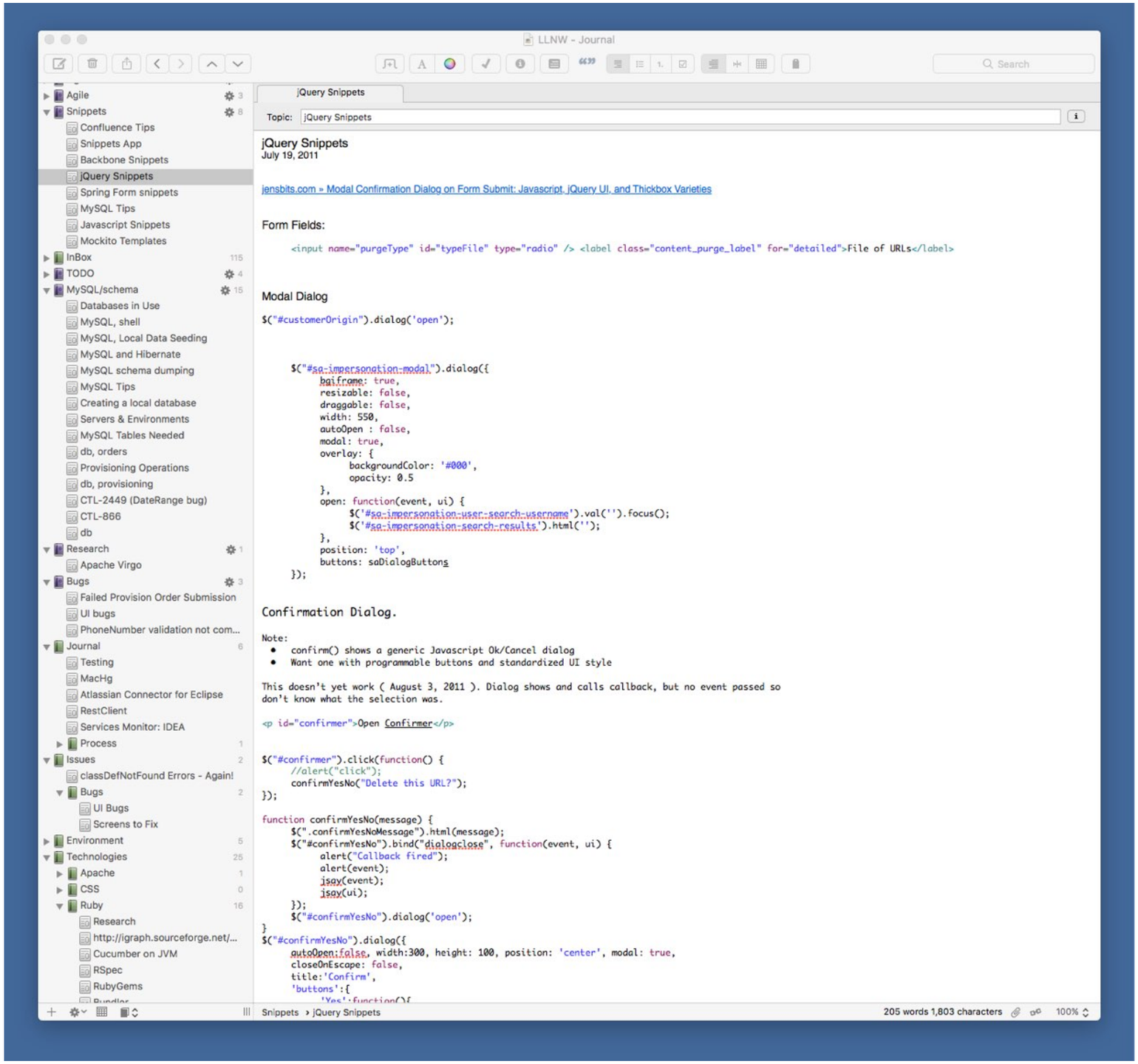
"Bread-crumbing" creates a kind of "cheatsheet", or recipe, captured while working on this project, to help you to get your future head back to your current state again when you come back to the project later.

For me, project breadcrumbs exist in my journal entries.

An engineering journal

In both my personal and work lives I've employed a "journaling app" as the place where scraps of ideas and notes and pictures and any other kinds of "supplement information" related to projects I'm working on gets dumped. It's where I capture the state of projects, where I flesh out the details of projects, of my research, of "what worked" and what didn't. It's a searchable database that is a crucial component to my ability to remember details on a multitude of projects. It helps on all fronts to:

1) **capture my state** — I capture both the initial reason for why a project exists, and it's evolution toward a solution.
2) **not repeat myself** — I can look up (quickly search for) something I did in the past and not be forced into thinking through the details a second time.



Capture my thoughts, things I've tried,
"breadcrumbs" into the state of unfinished projects, …

http://marinersoftware.com/products/macjournal/

Other Apps Used

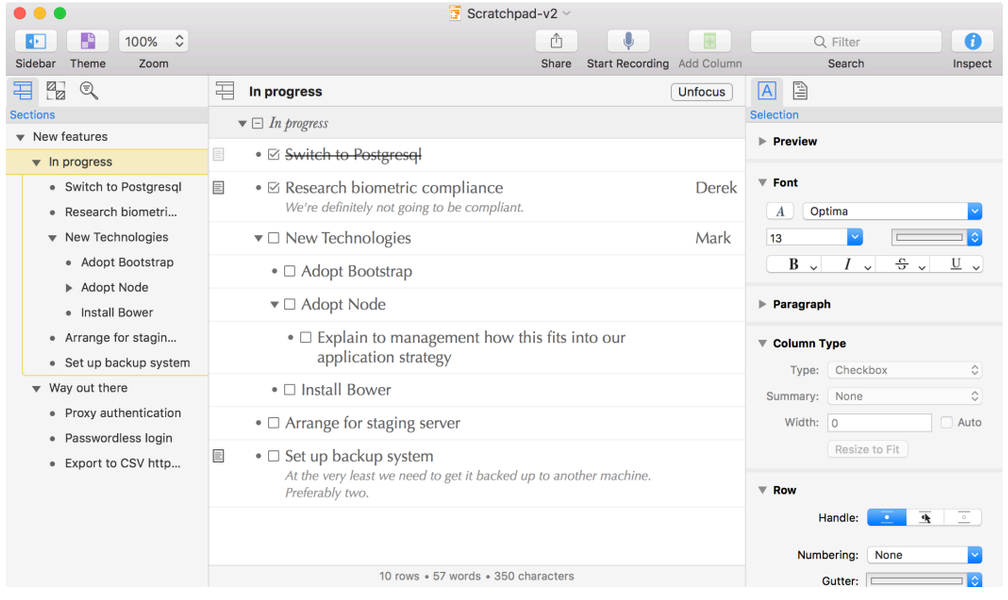
Other thinking and organizing tools I use

OmniOutliner

https://www.omnigroup.com/omnioutliner

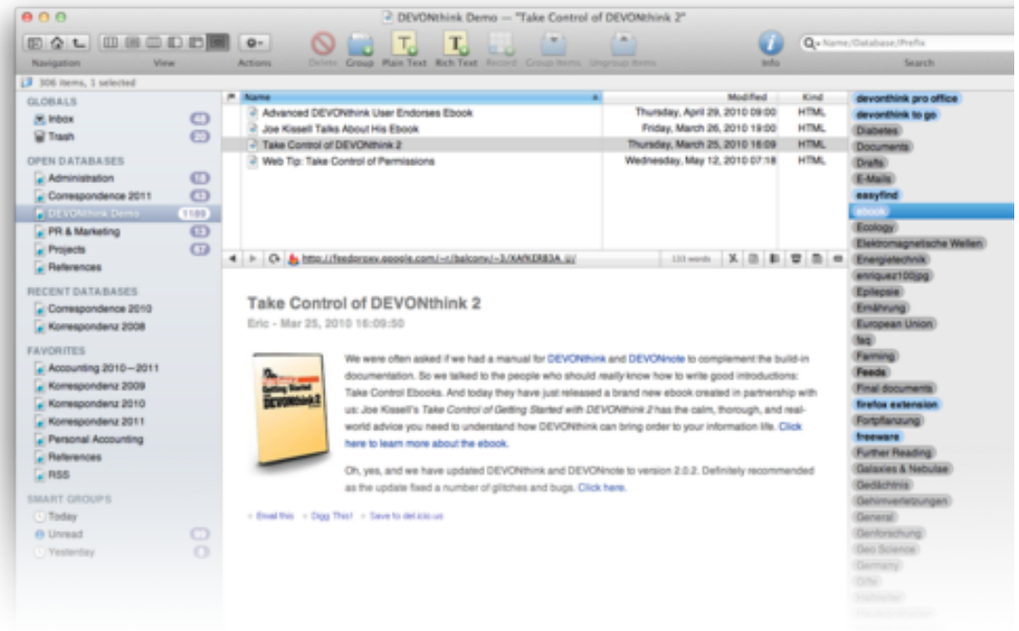
Edit the structure, not the look!

I think in outlines. In breakdowns.

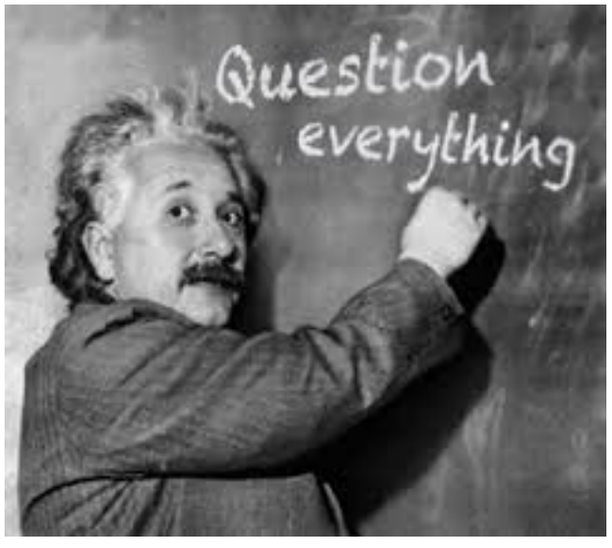


DEVONthink

Digital filing cabinet
with AI technology.
I have gone “paperless”



http://www.devontechnologies.com/products/devonthink/devonthink-pro-office.html


Question
everything