UCD School of School of Computer Science and Informatics



COMP 20140 Introduction to Project Management and Leadership

Book Review: DAVID ALLEN GETTING THINGS DONE: THE ART OF STRESS FREE PRODUCTIVITY

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I was asked to review Recommended Text 1, “Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress Free Productivity” by David Allen. The book was first published in January of 2001 and has since went on to be reprinted and revised numerous times which I feel prove its popularity.

The author, David Allen, was born in Louisiana in 1945 and has went on to become an extremely successful productivity and management consultant. As a writer “Getting Things Done” is the first of three, highly acclaimed books he has penned on his field, however he has also paved a career for himself in both consultation and self-help seminars, examples from which he uses throughout the book.

At its core “Getting Things Done” is a self-help book for anyone who feels that the pressure and stress of modern day working life is becoming overwhelming, which in itself may turn many the casual reader off, but once I sat down and read the first few pages I found myself becoming quite enthralled. Allen's approach is based on two fundamental elements — *control* and*perspective*. Its conversational tone and constant examples helped me engage with the book, as I felt like instead of being lectured by Allen on how bad my management system has been to date, that he was more guiding me through re-evaluating and up-grading it. Another key idea throughout the book which resonated with me was the need to stop wasting times focusing on things that are out of your control. As stated in the lectures if you affect your “circle of influence” eventually it will grow.

The book is broken into many sections with the promise that if you adapt your lifestyle to incorporate the “tips and tricks” provided they will apparently help to destress, declutter and un-complicate your life and allow you to achieve a mental state described as a “mind like water”, which he pulls from many of the eastern martial arts ideologies. The concept states that if you throw a pebble into a still pond of water it reacts exactly according to the size of the pebble, i.e. it never over-reacts nor under-reacts, it simply reacts appropriately and then returns to a still state. David Allen states that he can help us achieve this “zone-like” state by simply reducing the stress on your mind to allow it to focus on only one thing at a time. In order to do this you must utilise his “Five Stages of Managing Workflow”, each of which he devotes a chapter to in the book.

Allen likens our brain to the RAM on a computer, with limited memory capacity, and the mind to a computer screen, which can only show two to three tasks max at a time, and that our mind simply throws up tasks we know we have yet to resolve randomly from the “RAM” onto our “Computer Screen” which cause anxiety and stress. The first stage, *Collect*, helps you clear the memory space of the RAM and basically entails you to sit down and lay out all the thoughts and problems you have and sort them into “bins”. I thought at the start of reading this chapter that I was basically being asked to write a to-do list but I was happy to discover that Allen, like myself, genuinely believes simple to-do lists do not work. After further reading I realised that Allen’s idea was actually a little more advanced and intuitive than just a list of thoughts, instead you break your life up into the minimum amount of bins you need for the collection system to work successfully. For myself I would devote a bin to each module, one to family, Gaelic, my exchange and then a bin which we’d describe as miscellaneous which could be anything from wanting to watch a film, to learning a language, to finding out the name of the song in your head. Deciding which thought or process goes in which bin is *Processing*, our second stage. You then *Organise*, stage 3, all your thoughts and projects into this collection system so that they are out of your head and so frees up your mind to focus solely on the task at hand.

Allen further explains how achieving a “mind like water” is much more difficult now than ever before as in previous generations our work was mainly pre-defined. For example, if I am a baker and a certain type of bread is running low I bake more of that type of bread, however, if you are in an office environment and you are asked to re-structure your section in order to improve productivity, the process and answer is not so straightforward or obvious. In order to do this Allen suggests we evaluate the next action available to us which will move it closer to completion and write this down beside our task/project, this is our *Review* stage. I can relate with this so much as I found before travelling to Dublin to pursue my degree in electronic engineering everything seemed so black and white. You had to lend a hand around the house, you had homework, which was fairly self-explanatory, that you had to complete overnight, and you had trainings you had to attend. University however is a lot more ambiguous and leaves a lot more of your decisions open-ended. Simple things like when to do assignments or even shopping for food for the week I find can be tough to decide on however if you sit down and plan them out beforehand, i.e. what will you cook and then how much of which ingredient do you need, well then you find you spend a lot less time in the shop or doing the assignment as you know what steps need to be taken in order to complete the task.

The final stage which is the one where you actually *Do* it. When deciding what to do Allen provides us with two questions, “Am I the right person to do this?” and “Can I do it in 2 minutes?” If the answer to both is yes you just do it and remove it from the collection system. If the first is yes but you can’t complete it in two minutes you plan a time for when you will do it, and if both are no you delegate it. It is also imperative you review your bins at least weekly.

In essence the 5 Stages seem really simple and effective and they would work for me assuming I reviewed my tasks regularly. It did however give me an idea for a slightly more efficient system that I myself could incorporate into my own daily life. My idea was to subdivide everything like Allen said however you also estimate the time it will take you to complete a task. This way every morning you say to yourself “Ok I have X amount of time today, what will I do?” For myself lectures and assignments due for that day obviously are automatically selected, but then you take a few things from the other bins that are not urgent and fill up your time. This way you can plan your day and reduce “time wasted” and gain a recognisable sense of achievement at the end of the day when you see your bins have been emptied slightly. Also personally I would use a whiteboard and not bins so the information was clearly visible and easily emptied when completed.

Allen explains how you have to devise a system that you “trust implicitly” or otherwise you will never clear your subconscious mind. I believe that this system will work for me as it is tailored to my own needs and will provide me with clear goals and achievements. This is something Allen stresses throughout the book, the need to set and reach small goals. By doing this we reinforce to our subconscious that we are accomplishing tasks and as a result it begins to trust our system. With the pressure both I and my course have placed on myself over the past few years I find myself constantly moving from one assignment/project to the next and as a result the need for a more cohesive, reward based management system would be greatly welcomed.

Allen’s book certainly opened my eyes to how inefficiently I have been spending my time and also showed me how much time I could “gain” in order to do the things I actually want to do, by simply planning everything out before jumping into a project or worrying about the amount on my plate. Even though his examples were mainly corporate related, and some of his references (i.e. PDAs) are well out dated, I could see how each situation he described could be transferred to my own college life and to my potential working life in the future. I feel that if you are willing to overlook the dated nature of the book and the fact that the majority of examples are for professionals in the workplace that this can also be a very successful guide for university students looking to maximise their potential and achieve their degree.

I also noticed a lot of correlation between the lecture material, i.e. Covey’s habits and O’Connell’s steps, and realised that nothing from any of these books are really revolutionary, however that they all focus on the ideas of “clearing the clutter” and influencing what you can instead of worrying about what you can’t.