Processing: Getting "In" to Empty

ASSUMING THAT YOU have collected everything that has your attention, your job now is to actually get to the bottom of "in." Getting "in" to empty doesn't mean actually *doing* all the actions and projects that you've collected. It just means identifying each item and deciding what it is, what it means, and what you're going to do with it.

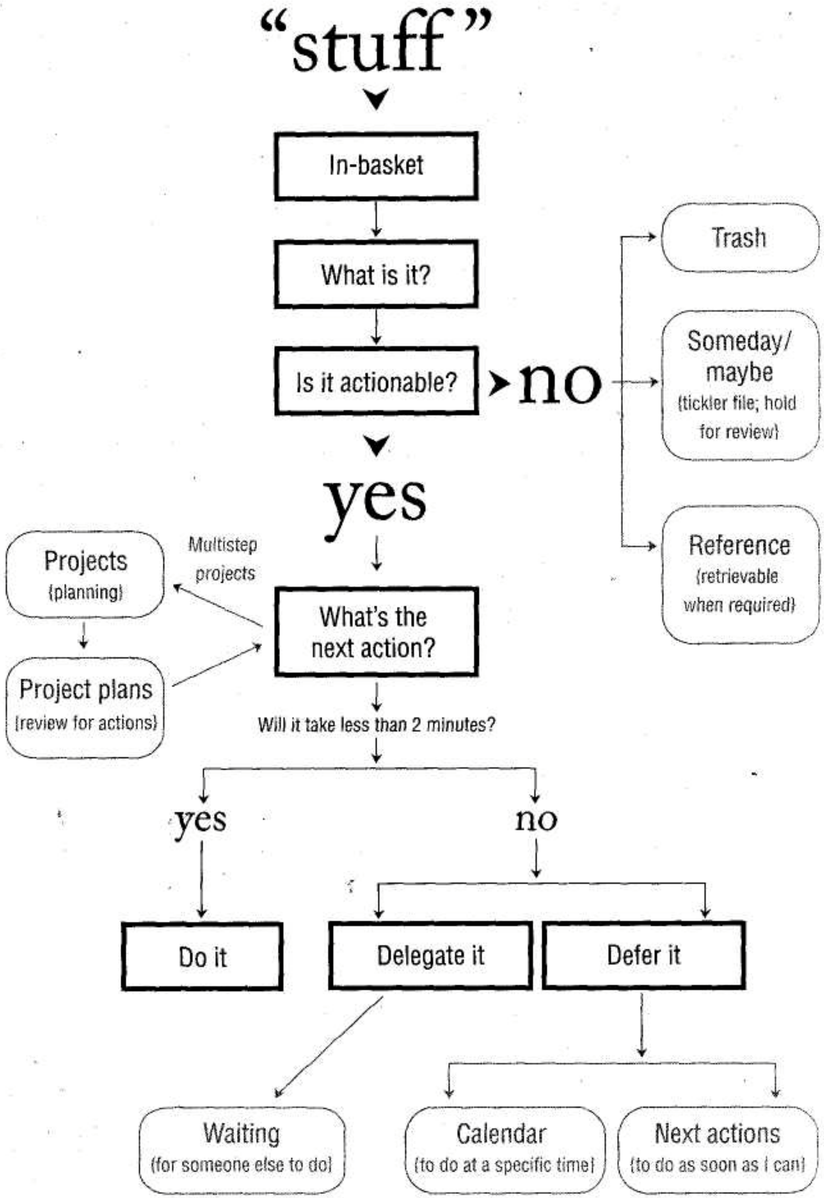
When you've finished processing "in," you will have

1 | trashed what you don't need;
2 | completed any less-than-two-minute actions;
3 | handed off to others anything that can be delegated;
4 | sorted into your own organizing system reminders of actions that require more than two minutes; and
5 | identified any larger commitments (projects) you now have, based on the input.

To get an overview of this process, you may find it useful here to refer to the Workflow Diagram on page 120. The center column illustrates all the steps involved in processing and deciding your next actions.

This chapter focuses on the components in the diagram's center column, the steps from "in" to next action. You'll immediately see the natural organization that results from following this process for each of your open loops. For instance, if you pick up something from "in" and realize, "I've got to call Andrea about

WORKFLOW DIAGRAM—PROCESSING



that, but I've got to do it on Monday, when she's in her office," then you'll defer that action immediately and enter it into your calendar for Monday.

I recommend that you read through this chapter and the next one, on organizing your actions, before you actually start processing what you've collected in "in." It may save you some steps. When I coach clients through this process, it invariably becomes a dance back and forth between the simple decision-making stage of *processing* the open loops and the trickier task of figuring out the best way to enter these decisions in a client's particular *organization* system.

Many of my coaching clients, for example, are eager to get set up personally on a PDA organizer that will synchronize with Microsoft Outlook, which their company is using for e-mail and scheduling. The first thing we have to do (after we've collected the in-basket) is make sure all their hardware and software are working. Then we clean up (print out and erase, usually) everything they have previously tried to organize in their Outlook task lists and put it all into "in." Then we establish some working categories such as "Calls," "Errands," "Agendas," "At Computer," and so on. As we begin to process the in-basket, the client can go immediately to his computer and type his action steps directly into the system he will ultimately depend on.

If you're not sure yet what you're going to be using as a personal reminder system, don't worry. You can begin very appropriately with the low-tech initial process of notes on pieces of paper. You can always upgrade your tools later, once you have your system in place.

Processing Guidelines

The best way to learn this model is by doing. But there are a few basic rules to follow:

- Process the top item first.
- Process one item at a time.
- Never put anything back into "in."

Top Item First

Even if the second item down is a personal note to you from the president of your country, and the top item is a piece of junk mail, you've got to process the junk mail first! That's an exaggeration to make a point, but the principle is an important one: everything gets processed equally. The verb "process" does not mean "spend time on." It just means "decide what the thing is and what action is required, and then dispatch it accordingly." You're going to get to the bottom of the basket as soon as you can anyway, and you don't want to avoid dealing with *anything* in there.

Process does not mean "spend time on."

Emergency Scanning Is Not Processing

Most people get to their in-basket or their e-mail and look for the most urgent, most fun, or most interesting stuff to deal with first. "Emergency scanning" is fine and necessary sometimes (I do it, too). Maybe you've just come back from an off-site meeting and have to be on a long conference call in fifteen minutes. So you check to make sure there are no land mines about to explode and to see if your client has e-mailed you back OK'ing the big proposal.

But that's not processing your in-basket; it's emergency scanning. When you're in processing mode, you must get into the habit of starting at one end and just cranking through items one at a time, in order. As soon as you break that rule, and process only what you *feel* like processing, and in whatever order, you'll invariably begin to leave things unprocessed. Then you will no longer have a functioning funnel, and it will back up all over your desk and office.

LIFOorFIFO?

Theoretically, you should flip your in-basket upside down and process first the first thing that came in. As long as you go from one end clear through to the other within a reasonable period of time, though, it won't make much difference. You're going to see it all in short order anyway. And if you're going to attempt to clear up a big backlog of e-mails staged in "in," you'll actually discover it's more efficient to process the last-in first because of all the discussion threads that accumulate on top of one another.

The in-basket is a processing station, not a storage bin.

One Item at a Time

You may find you have a tendency, while processing your in-basket, to pick something up, not know exactly what you want to do about it, and then let your eyes wander onto another item farther down the stack and get engaged with *it.* That item may be more attractive to your psyche because you *know* right away what to do with *it*—and you don't feel like thinking about what's in your hand. This is dangerous territory. What's in your hand is likely to land on a "hmppphhh" stack on the side of your desk because you become distracted by something easier, more important, or more interesting below it.

Most people also want to take a whole stack of things out of the in-basket at once, put it right in front of them, and try to crank through it. Although I empathize with the desire to "deal with a big chunk," I constantly remind clients to put back everything but the one item on top. The focus on just one thing forces the requisite attention and decision-making to get through all your stuff. And if you get interrupted (which is likely), you won't have umpteen parts of "in" scattered around outside the tray and out of control again.

The Multitasking Exception

There's a subtle exception to the one-item-at-a-time rule. Some personality types really *need* to shift their focus away from something for at least a minute in order to make a decision about it. When I see this going on with someone, I let him take two or sometimes three things out at once as he's processing. It's then easier and faster for him to make a choice about the action required.

Remember, multitasking is an exception—and it works only
if you hold to the discipline of working through every item in short order, and never avoid *any* decision for longer than a minute or two.

Nothing Goes Back into "In"

There's a one-way path out of "in." This is actually what was meant by the old admonition to "handle things once," though handling things just once is in fact a bad idea. If you did that, you'd never have a list, because you would finish everything as soon as you saw it. You'd also be highly ineffective and inefficient, since most things you deal with are *not* to be acted upon the first time you become aware of them. Where the advice does hold is in eliminating the bad habit of continually picking things up out of "in," not deciding what they mean or what you're going to do about them, and then just leaving them there. A better admonition would be, "The first time you pick something up from your in-basket, decide what to do about it and where it goes. Never put it back in "in."

The Key Processing Question: "What's the Next Action?"

You've got the message. You're going to deal with one item at a time. And you're going to make a firm next-action decision about each one. This may sound easy—and it is—but it requires you to do some fast, hard thinking. Much of the time the action will not be self-evident; it will need to be determined.

I am rather like a mosquito in a nudist camp; I know what I want to do, but I don't know where to begin.
—Stephen Bayne

On that first item, for example, do you need to call someone? Fill something out? Get information from the Web? Buy something at the store? Talk to your secretary? E-mail your boss? What? If there's an action, its specific nature will determine the next set of options. But what if you say, "There's really nothing to do with this"?

What If There Is No Action?

It's likely that a portion of your in-basket will require no action. There will be three types of things in this category:

- Trash
- Items to incubate
- Reference material

Trash

If you've been following my suggestions, you'll no doubt already have tossed out a big pile of stuff. It's also likely that you will have put stacks of material into "in" that include things you don't need anymore. So don't be surprised if there's still a lot more to throw away as you process your stuff.

Processing all the things in your world will make you more conscious of what you are going to do and what you should *not* be doing. One director of a foundation I worked with discovered that he had allowed way too many e-mails (thousands!) to accumulate—e-mails that in fact he wasn't ever going to respond to anyway. He told me that using my method forced him to "go on a healthy diet" about what he would allow to hang around his world as an incompletion.

It's likely that at some point you'll come up against the question of whether or not to keep something for future reference. I have two ways of dealing with that:

- When in doubt, throw it out.
- When in doubt, keep it.

Take your pick. I think either approach is fine. You just need to trust your intuition and be realistic about your space. Most people have some angst about all of this because their systems have never really been totally functional and clear-edged before. If you make a clean distinction between what's reference and supplies and what requires action, and if your reference system is simple and workable, you can easily keep as much material as you can accommodate. Since no action is required on it, it's just a matter of physical space and logistics.

Filing experts can offer you more detailed guidelines about all this, and your CPA can provide record-retention timetables that will tell you how long you should keep what kinds of documentation. My suggestion is that you make the distinction about whether something is actionable or not. Once it's clear that no action is needed, there's room for lots of options.

Incubate

There will probably be things in your in-basket about which you will say to yourself, "There's nothing to do on this *now,* but there *might be* later." Examples of this would be:

- A flier announcing a chamber of commerce breakfast with a guest speaker you might want to hear, but it's two weeks away, and you're not sure yet if you'll be at home then or out of town on a business trip.

- An agenda for a board meeting you've been invited to attend in three weeks. No action is required on it, other than your briefing yourself a day ahead of the meeting by reading the agenda.

- An advertisement for the next Quicken software upgrade for your personal finances. Do you really need this next version? You don't know .. . you'd rather sleep on it for another week.

- An idea you had about something you might want to do for next year's annual sales meeting. There's nothing to do on this now, but you'd like to be reminded when the time comes to start planning for it.

- A note to yourself about taking a watercolor class, which you have zero time for right now.

What do you do with these kinds of things? There are two options that could work:

- Write them on a "Someday/Maybe" list.
- Put them on your calendar or in a "tickler" file.

The point of all of these incubation procedures is that they give you a way to get the items off your mind *right now* and let you feel confident that some reminder of the possible action will resurface at an appropriate time. I'll elaborate on these in more detail in the next chapter, on *organizing.* For now, just put a Post-it on such items, and label them "maybe" or "remind on October 17," and set them aside in a "pending" category you will be accumulating for later sorting.*

Reference

Many of the things you will uncover in "in" will need no action but may have value as potentially useful information about projects

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*One of your extra stack baskets is ideal for this purpose. Use it temporarily during this initial processing to gather things to organize later. Afterward you can use it to hold pending work-in-progress papers and physical reminders of next actions.

and topics. Ideally, you have already set up a workable filing system (as described in chapter 4) for your reference and support information. As you come across material in your in-basket and e-mail that you'd like to keep for archival or support purposes, file it.

You'll probably discover that there are lots of miscellaneous kinds of things that you want to keep but have piled up in stacks or stuffed into drawers because your reference system was too formal or just plain nonexistent. Let me remind you here that a less-than-sixty-second, fun-to-use general-reference filing system within arm's reach of where you sit is a mission-critical component of full implementation of this methodology. In the "battle zone" of real life, if it's not easy, fast, and fun to file, you'll stack instead of organizing. And then it will become much more difficult to keep things processed.

Whenever you come across something you want to keep, make a label for it, put it in a file folder, and tuck that into your filing drawer. Or put a Post-it on it instructing your secretary or assistant to do the same. In my early days of coaching I used to give my clients permission to keep a "To File" pile. No longer. I discovered that if you can't get it into your system immediately, you're probably not ever going to. If you won't do it now, you likely won't do it later, either.

And If There Is an Action . . . What *Is* It?

This is the biggie. If there's something that needs to be *done* about the item in "in," then you need to decide what exactly that next action is. "Next Actions" again, means the next physical, visible activity that would be required to move the situation toward closure.

This is both easier and more difficult than it sounds.

The next action *should* be easy to figure out, but there are often some quick analyses and several planning steps that haven't occurred yet in your mind, and these have to happen before you can determine precisely what has to happen to complete the item, even if it's a fairly simple one.

Let's look at a sample list of the things that a person might typically have his attention on.

- Clean the garage
- Do my taxes
- Conference I'm going to
- Bobby's birthday
- Press release
- Performance reviews
- Management changes

Although each of these items may seem relatively clear as a task or project, determining the next action on each one will take some thought.

- Clean the garage

. . . Well, I just have to get in there and start. No, wait a minute, there's a big refrigerator in there that I need to get rid of first. I should find out if John Patrick wants it for his camp. I should. . .

- Call John re refrigerator in garage

What about. . .

- Do my taxes

. . . but I actually cant start on them until I have my last K-l back. Can't do any thing until then. So I'm.. .

- Waiting for K-l from Acme Trust

And for the. . .

- Conference I'm going to

. . . I need to find out whether Sandra is going to prepare a press kit for us. I guess I need to. . .

• E-mail Sandra re press kits for the conference

. . . and so forth. The action steps—"Call John," "Waiting for K-l," "E-mail Sandra"—are what need to be decided about everything that is actionable in your in-basket.

The Action Step Needs to Be the Absolute Next Physical Thing to Do

Remember that these are physical, visible activities. Many people think they've determined the "next action" when they get it down to "set meeting." But that's *not* the next action, because it's not descriptive of physical behavior. How do you set a meeting? Well, it could be with a phone call or an e-mail, but to whom? Decide. If you don't decide now, you'll still have to decide at some other point, and what this process is designed to do is actually get you *to finish* the thinking exercise about this item. If you haven't identified the next physical action required to kick-start it, there will be a psychological gap every time you think about it even vaguely. You'll tend to resist noticing it.

Until you know what the next physical action is, there's still more thinking required before anything can happen.

When you get to a phone or to your computer, you want to have all your thinking completed so you can use the tools you have and the location you're in to more easily get things done, having already defined what there is to do.

What if you say to yourself, "Well, the next thing I need to do is decide what to do about this?" That's a tricky one. Deciding isn't really an action, because actions take time, and deciding doesn't. There's always some physical activity that can be done to facilitate your decision-making. Ninety-nine percent of the time you just need more information before you can make a decision. That additional information can come from external

Determine what you need to *do* in order to *decide.*

sources ("Call Susan to get her input on the proposal") or from internal thinking ("Draft ideas about new reorganization"). Either way, there's still a next action to be determined in order to move the project forward.

Once You Decide What the Action Step is

You have three options once you decide what the next action really is.

- *Do it* (if the action takes less than two minutes).
- *Delegate it* (if you're not the most appropriate person to do the action).
- *Defer it* into your organization system as an option for work to do later.

Do It

If the next action can be done in two minutes or less, do it when you first pick the item up. If the memo requires just a thirty-second reading and then a quick "yes"/"no"/other response on a Post-it back to the sender, do it now. If you can browse the catalog in just a minute or two to see if there might be anything of interest in it, browse away, and then toss it, route it, or reference it as required. If the next action on something is to leave a quick message on someone's voice-mail, make the call now.

Even if the item is not a "high priority" one, do it now if you're ever going to do it at all. The rationale for the two-minute rule is that that's more or less the point where it starts taking longer to store and track an item than to deal with it the first time it's in your hands—in other words, it's the efficiency cutoff. If the thing's not important enough to be done, *throw it away.* If it is, and if you're going to do it sometime, the efficiency factor should come into play.

Many people find that getting into the habit of following the two-minute rule creates a dramatic improvement in their productivity. One vice president of a large software company told me that it gave him an additional hour a day of quality discretionary time! He was one of those 300-e-mails-a-day high-tech executives, highly focused for most of the workday on three key initiatives. Many of those e-mails were from people who reported to him—and they needed his eyes on something, his comments and OKs, in order to move forward. But because they were not on a topic in his rifle sights, he would just stage the e-mails in "in," to get to "later." After several thousand of them piled up, he would have to go in to work and spend whole weekends trying to catch up. That would have been OK if he were twenty-six, when everything's an adrenaline rush anyway, but he was in his thirties and had young kids. Working all weekend was no longer acceptable behavior. When I coached him we went through all 800-plus e-mails he currently had in "in." It turned out that a lot could be dumped, quite a few needed to be filed as reference, and many others required less-than-two-minute replies that he whipped through. I checked with him a year later, and he was still current! He never let his e-mails mount up beyond a screenful anymore. He said it had changed the nature of his division because of the dramatic decrease in his own response time. His staff thought he was now made of Teflon!

The two-minute rule is magic.

That's a rather dramatic testimonial, but it's an indication of just how critical some of these simple processing behaviors can be, especially as the volume and speed of the input increase for you personally.

Two minutes is in fact just a guideline. If you have a long open window of time in which to process your in-basket, you can extend the cutoff for each item to five or ten minutes. If you've got to get to the bottom of all your input rapidly, in order to figure out how best to use your afternoon, then you may want to shorten the time to one minute, or even thirty seconds, so you can get through everything a little faster.

It's not a bad idea to time yourself for a few of these while you're becoming familiar with the process. Most clients I work with have difficulty estimating how long two minutes actually is, and they greatly *underestimate* how long certain actions are likely to take. For instance, if your action is to leave someone a message, and you get the real person instead of his or her voice-mail, the call will usually take quite a bit longer than two minutes.

You'll be surprised how many two-minute actions you can perform even on your most critical projects.

There's nothing you really need to track about your two-minute actions—you just do them. If, however, you take an action and don't finish the project with that one action, you'll need to clarify what's *next* on it, and manage that according to the same criteria. For instance, if you act to replace the cartridge in your favorite pen and discover that you're out of cartridge refills, you'll want to decide on the next action about getting them ("Buy refills at the store") and *do, delegate,* or *defer* it appropriately.

Adhere to the two-minute rule and see how much you get done in the process of clearing out your "in" stacks. Many people are amazed by how many two-minute actions are possible, often on some of their most critical current projects.

Let me make one more observation regarding the two-minute rule, this time as it relates to your comfort with typing e-mails. If you're in a large-volume e-mail environment, you'll greatly improve your productivity by increasing your typing speed and using the shortcut keyboard commands for your operating system and your common e-mail software. Too many sophisticated professionals are seriously hamstrung because they still hunt and peck and try to use their mouse too much. More work could be dispatched faster by combining the two-minute rule with improved computer skills. I've found that many executives aren't resisting technology, they're just resisting their keyboards!

Delegate It

If the next action is going to take longer than two minutes, ask yourself, "Am I the best person to be doing it?" If not, hand it off to the appropriate party, in a systematic format.

Delegation is not always downstream. You may decide, "This has got to get over to Customer Service," or "My boss needs to put his eyes on this next," or "I need my partner's point of view on this."

A "systematic format" could be any of the following:

- Send the appropriate party an e-mail.
- Write a note or an overnote on paper and route the item "out" to that person.
- Leave him or her a voice-mail.
- Add it as an agenda item on a list for your next real-time conversation with that person.
- Talk to him or her directly, either face-to-face or by phone.

Although any of these options can work, I would recommend them in the above order, top to bottom. E-mail is usually the fastest mode into the system; it provides an electronic record; and the receiver gets to deal with it at his or her convenience. Written notes are next because they too can get into the system immediately, and the recipient then has a physical particle to use as an organizational reminder. If you're passing on paper-based material as part of the handoff, a written communication is obviously the way to go; as with e-mail, the person you hand it off to can then deal with it on his or her own schedule. Voice-mail can be efficient, and many professionals live by it; the downside is that tracking becomes an additional requirement for both you and the recipient, and what you say is not always what gets heard. Next would be saving the communication on an agenda list or in a folder for your next regular meeting with the person. Sometimes this is necessary because of the sensitive or detailed nature of the topic, but it then must wait to get moving until that meeting occurs. The least preferable option would be to interrupt what both you and the person are doing to talk about the item. This is immediate, but it hampers workflow for both of you and has the same downside as voice-mail: no written record.

Tracking the Handoff If you do delegate an action to someone else, and if you care at all whether something happens as a result, you'll need to track it. As I will walk you through in the next chapter, about *organizing,* you'll see that a significant category to manage is "Waiting For."

As you develop your own customized system, what you eventually hand off and then track could look like a list in a planner, a file folder holding separate papers for each item, and/or a list categorized as "Waiting For" in your software. For now, if you don't have a trusted system set up already, just put a note on a piece of paper—"W/F: reply from Bob"—and put that into a "Pending" stack of notes in a separate pile or tray that may result from your processing.

What If the Ball Is Already in Someone Else's Court? In the example cited above about waiting for the last K-l to come in so you can do your taxes, the next action is currently on someone else's plate. In such situations you will also want to track the action as a delegated item, or as a "Waiting For." On the paper that says "Do my taxes," write something like "Waiting for K-l from Acme Trust" and put that into your "Pending" stack.

It's important that you record the date on everything you hand off to others. This, of all the categories in your personal system, is the most crucial one to keep tabs on. The few times you will actually want to refer to that information ("But I called and ordered that on March 12") will make it worth establishing this as a lifelong habit.

Defer It

It's likely that most of the next actions you determine for things in "in" will be yours to do and will take longer than two minutes to complete. A call you need to make to a customer; an e-mail you need to spend a little time thinking about and drafting to your team; a gift you need to buy for your brother at the stationery store; a piece of software you need to download from the Web and try out; a conversation you must have with your spouse about an investment you think you should make—all of these fit that description.

These actions will have to be written down somewhere and then organized in the appropriate categories so you can access them when you need to. For the moment, go ahead and put Post-its on the pieces of paper in "in," with the action written on them, and add these to the "Pending" stack of papers that have been processed.

The "Pending" Things That Are Left

If you follow the instructions in this chapter, you'll dump a mess of things, file a bunch, do a lot of two-minute actions, and hand off a number of items to other people. You'll also wind up with a stack of items that have actions associated with them that you still need to do—soon, someday, or on a specific date—and reminders of things you're waiting on from other people. This "Pending" group is made up of the actions you've delegated or deferred. It is what still needs to be organized in some fashion in your personal system, a topic I'll cover in step-by-step detail in the next chapter.

Identifying the *Projects* You Have

This last step in getting to the bottom of "in" requires a shift in perspective from the single-action details to the larger picture—your projects.

Again, I define a "project" as any outcome you're committed to achieving that will take more than one action step to complete. If you look through an inventory of actions that you have already been generating—"Call Frank about the car alarm"; "E-mail Bernadette re conference materials"—you'll no doubt recognize a number of things that are larger than the single action you've defined. There's still going to be something about "car alarm" to do after the call to Frank, and there will still be something to handle about the conference after the e-mail to Bernadette.

I hope you're able to see the very practical reason for defining projects as broadly as I do: If the action step you've identified will not complete the commitment, then you'll need some stake in the ground to keep reminding you of actions you have pending until you have closure. You need to make a list of projects. A "Projects" list may include anything from "Give holiday party" to "Divest the Widget product line" to "Finalize compensation package." The purpose of this list is not to reflect your priorities but just to ensure that you've got placeholders for all those open loops.

Right now you probably have between thirty and a hundred projects.

Whether you draw up your "Projects" list while you're initially processing your in-basket or after you've set up your action lists doesn't really matter. It just needs to be done at *some* point, and it must be maintained, as it's the key driver for reviewing where you are and where you want to be.

For now, let's make sure your organizing setup is "all systems go."