



The Art of Getting Things Done

by Meg Gott and Lynda J. Katz, Ph.D.

ADLTS WITH AD/HD are bright, energetic and at times intensely enthusiastic and goal driven individuals. However, it is for these and other reasons that they may often find themselves in occupational settings that are cognitively challenging, highly ambiguous and unstructured, and without tangible or quantitative measures at times. These positions are in direct contrast to those which require completion of a task or product, driven by pre-established standards and clear directions as to outcome expectations, which many adults with AD/HD would find unrewarding, unchallenging and most frequently boring. Thus, we have two extremes confronting the individual—the requirement for higher order executive brain functions inherent in these challenging positions (planning, prioritizing, strategic decision making, follow-through and task completion) and the presence of deficits in these same cognitive functions which often define the nature of the disorder in many of these same individuals.



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Given this set of circumstances, it is not difficult to predict that a collision course between demands and deficits may well ensue, ending in disaster. At the very least, the anxiety that such a situation creates and the individual must face on a daily basis (“what will come up and bite me” or “I know I drop the ball 20 percent of the time”) is unrelenting. At the more extreme end, performance appraisals are negative and contracts are not renewed unless strategies and solutions are available and put into place to support and reinforce the exercise of those higher order executive functions in the workplace. And, while psychopharmacological interventions are a must for many adults with AD/HD, they are a necessary but not sufficient means to enable these highly creative and bright individuals to succeed in the workplace.

One set of tools that has proven extremely beneficial for individuals with AD/HD who find themselves in managerial, executive, or largely self-directed professional occupations is the Getting Things Done®

(GTD) method of workflow coaching developed by the David Allen Company. This strategic decision-making process focuses on enhancing personal productivity. It begins with a bottom-up approach that acknowledges the volume of information with which the individual is confronted on a daily basis, the importance of context when making decisions about next actions, the distinction between unitary tasks on a to-do list and multi-step projects, the effective use of a calendar, the need for an efficient system for filing and retrieval, and the necessity for a weekly review process. GTD was developed as a strategic workflow coaching model in working with corporate executives. And, its application for individuals with AD/HD in knowledge-based work, who are ready to implement behavioral changes, has also proven to be highly beneficial.

So how does one begin? First off, it is important to define the levels on which work takes place and where one might file the “stuff” of work—the paperwork, e-mails, specific tasks, responsibilities and deadlines that confront us on a daily basis in both our professional and personal lives. There are several levels of work, from the “runway,” which contains our current actions and the 10,000-foot-level which contains our current projects, to the 50,000-foot-level where we are concerned with the meaning of life and our life goals. At 20,000 feet we list specific areas of responsibility. Short-term (one to two-year) goals come into play at 30,000 feet and longer-term (three to five-year) goals fall under 40,000 feet.

Most folks, we are convinced, get stuck at the runway and 10,000-foot-level, the potential for 30 to 100 things that individuals typically have on a variety of “to-do” lists at any one point in time. Dividing these items into single actions or projects (one action alone won’t complete the task) helps to establish whether they belong on the runway (single actions) or whether they belong at the 10,000-foot-level (projects) and not blocking the runway in the first place. Second, we need to place action reminders into a context (i.e., are they to be done at home, at work, when working at the computer, when traveling on a plane, in a hotel, near a phone, etc?).

Most people’s to-do lists are impossible to complete, blending multiple levels and types of commitments, which can become very overwhelming. There is tremendous value and freedom in separating all the things on your mind into these discrete levels and categories, where they can be viewed and worked on objectively and appropriately.

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Once the context is established, the specific categories can be culled out (errands, computer actions, phone calls, appointments, in-office tasks). Next, one can set time allowances for each specific project. Then there's the "someday/maybe" category where we list things that we would like to do, but might never get around to doing. What a relief to acknowledge that category. We can drop the ruminating and self-recriminations that so often accompany thoughts about "what we should be doing or should have done." Also, this is a place to list wonderful and creative ideas so that we don't lose them.

This process is unique in its delineation of the appropriate stages of capturing, defining and organizing everything that has our attention. It starts with collecting absolutely everything that potentially has value, interest or commitments involved. Then, each item is evaluated or processed to determine exactly what to do with it. The resulting well-defined actions, projects, reference materials, etc. are now appropriately organized into functional categories that keep our agreements with ourselves clear and functionally at hand. Now we are better prepared to accomplish our goals.

As the initial step to clear off the runway, we do a kind of "mind sweep," making a list of those things that pull at our attention—"the stuff." We then process each item on our list, an action, a project or a someday/maybe. It is important to note at this point that while individuals with AD/HD talk about not being able to get "organized," and thus they have trouble getting started because they don't know where or how to begin, with the GTD method, organization is not the first step. We first ask the individual to engage in a process of collecting. Only after putting things in the "in basket" do we begin to process "stuff." Organization becomes a third step, never a first. In addition, by respecting and following this process, we have set up a means to facilitate the working memory aspect of executive brain function (encoding, filing, storage and retrieval), a key aspect that often interferes with follow through in multi-step tasks.

What are the tools for organization? They can be high-tech or low-tech depending on one's comfort level. One means can simply be establishing file folders arranged alphabetically by category: agendas, calls, computer, errands, home, office, waiting for. For those

who travel frequently or work both at home and in an office, use of a PalmPilot with similar lists may be more effective. One other means of organization is appropriate use of a daily calendar. By this we mean placing three and only three types of items on a daily calendar (appointments that day, "to-do's" for that day, and special events for that day). Our "in basket," filing system and calendar are cues at the "point of performance" (Barkley, 1997) where executive function skills are thought to break down for individuals with AD/HD. These are also among the first steps in the GTD strategic decision-making process that allow one to begin thinking *about* things vs. thinking *of* things, to be freed from the internal chatter that frequently adds to the distractibility and/or obsessive thinking that can plague adults with AD/HD.

But, for the process to truly work for the individual, one must implement a weekly review. As with any skill, the question will always be, "How good do you want to get?" The GTD thinking process, like the games of tennis or golf, requires practice if one is to habitualize the skill, and for neuronal memory or muscle memory, both demand repetition over time.

As one client wrote:

I was at the 20-year career mark; I'd tried every system known and had managed at best a barely functional approach to the information flow associated with my job...Since my weakness is in following a multiple-step process, I learned how to conceptualize every incoming piece of information: phone calls, mail and e-mail and the myriad of work tasks into single next actions. I then record these next actions on one of five lists [collect, process, organize, review, and do]. Everything I need to do, but can't complete right at that moment gets captured on one of these five lists. In five months, nothing has gotten lost. As a result of knowing where everything is, I feel I now have an extra day and a half each week! ■

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References

- Allen, David. (2001). *Getting things done: The art of stress-free productivity*. New York: Viking Press.
- Barkley, R.A., (1997). *ADHD and the nature of self-control*. New York: The Guilford Press.



The levels of work

- **The "runway"**
(current single next actions)
Most people have 30–200 next actions.
High potential for getting stuck here
- **10,000 feet**
(current projects to be broken down into single actions)
Most people have 30–70 projects.
High potential for getting stuck here
- **20,000 feet**
(specific areas of responsibility and focus)
- **30,000 feet**
(1–2 year goals and directions)
- **40,000 feet**
(3–5 year vision and strategy)
- **50,000 feet**
(personal vision and life goals)
- **someday/maybe**
(ideas and projects that may or may not ever come to fruition, but are worth holding onto for now)