

Too busy organizing to be productive

The quest to find better ways to manage work and life may slow people down in a flood of paperwork, e-mails, blogs and books

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Colin McKay begins most meetings by taking out two of his essential productivity tools: first, his BlackBerry; second, a Moleskine notebook he has divided into sections using coloured tabs.

To anyone in the know, that heavily tagged notebook is a dead giveaway: Mr. McKay is GTD.

"That's the calling card," says Mr. McKay, 38, director of communications for the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada in Ottawa.

GTD stands for Getting Things Done, a personal productivity system created by David Allen, whose bestselling book of the same name was first published in 2001.



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Colin McKay's essential productivity tools: his BlackBerry and his Moleskine notebook, with duct-taped tabs. (*Bill Grimshaw for The Globe and Mail*)



Today, Mr. Allen's company employs 32 people and expects to earn \$6-million (U.S.) in revenue this year from book sales, public seminars, corporate training sessions and a variety of GTD organizational accessories, including wallets.

At a time when stressed, overwhelmed and unproductive workers are grasping for better ways to manage their work and lives, a whole industry of productivity systems, websites, blogs, newsletters, books and experts has sprung up, focusing on major issues in time and workload management right down to ridiculously minute and basic activities.

"GTD helps me create checklists for myself," Mr. McKay says of the method, which uses tools such as e-mail and paper file folders, index cards and notebooks to organize commitments and workflow. "It has given me that little bit of a sense of order."

But as the productivity-obsessed swap tips online and around the office about filing systems, checklists and time management, advice often moves from the practical to the arcane. And the glut of suggestions and systems can actually cause people to become less productive while trying to master a constant barrage of new methods.

"Some people are system junkies," says Janet Barclay, who runs Organized Assistant, a productivity and organization consultancy in Hamilton.

"They try something and say, 'This is the greatest!' Then next year they spend all their time learning a new system."

On Lifehacker.com, a popular productivity site, a tip about managing e-mail or running a more effective meeting can be

followed by a link to "15 awesome uses for aluminum foil." (Hint: You can sharpen scissors with it.)

Gina Trapani, the site's editor, says she's surprised by some of the tricks and tips sent in by productivity-obsessed readers.

"We've run some tips about incredibly mundane everyday activities that people put a *lot* of thought into speeding up or making easier," she wrote in an e-mail. (Ms. Trapani preferred an e-mail interview because, she wrote, "the telephone can be an inefficient way to communicate.")

One writer for the Productivity501 website is on a mission to achieve the elusive goal of a paperless office.

At 43 Folders, another well-known productivity site, the editor declared a "War on Clutter" around U.S. Independence Day this year after reading *It's All Too Much*, an anti-clutter book.

Mr. McKay says he follows the productivity websites but "draws the line where people describe in detail how they made a pen holder for their Moleskine and then get into a debate about which pen they use."

Mr. McKay confessed his own moment of system overload on his blog, CanuckFlack.com, when he wrote about "staring at a desk covered in GTD flowcharts, Covey checklists, coloured folders, varying sizes of Moleskine notebooks, and the latest DIYPlanner."

While some find it hard to stick to one system, others profess an almost cult-like devotion to their chosen approach. A dedicated GTD practitioner recently created a series of GTD fan buttons for sale online. One features a picture of Mr. Allen inside a pink heart with the words, "gtd 4-ever."

"David Allen said it, I believe it, that's the end of it," reads the product description. "This is a set of three buttons that celebrate the bliss of being organized."

And it's not just adults getting carried away with the productivity craze. In January, Geoff Ruddock, a 15-year-old student in Grade 10 at St. Andrew's College in Aurora, Ont., teamed up with some friends to launch Gearfire.net, a productivity blog for students. He can now talk the GTD talk with the best of them.

"I wanted to get on the headmaster's honour roll, so I looked for tools and ways to work smarter, not harder," he says.

"I see some people that really try hard but are always run down, and others who have a lot of initiative but don't have the time-management skills. I wanted to do well and wanted to make my time more efficient."

Is this something he picked up from his parents?

"Yeah, they get a lot done," he says.

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