

2. Get Things Done

A productive approach like the GTD cannot be assimilated without understanding the principles upon which it is based. In addition to compilations, contexts, reviews and many other techniques, we must have a clear idea of **why they work and why they are necessary**. If you are told to draft a list of your areas of responsibility, that's fine; but unless you understand how a list will help you to be more productive, you will almost certainly end up abandoning it.

Therefore, we are going to look into some of the underlying principles or universal productive laws before explaining the five processes - collecting, processing, organizing, executing and revising-, on which this methodology is based.

2.1. Reliability

"The mind is bad at memorizing, but excellent at creating."

The principle of reliability says that we must use a system of organization that is reliable- and keeping our commitments in the head is not. Not only that; trying to remember more than one commitment starts to generate stress, a lot of stress, even if we do not realize. Working "from memory" will lead to total organizational and productive chaos, and over time, to the doctor's practice.

So the conclusion is clear: whatever the organizational system we employ, it must be **outside our heads**, and must ensure that we will find what we need when we need it; because it is useless to write an appointment down on a piece of paper if once the date comes we forget.

Once we are able to free our mind from the task of having to remember, not only will the stress disappear, but we will start being much more creative. Just what we need to resolve the problems we face every day, and carry out new projects that make us grow personally and professionally.

2.2. Action

"We cannot make things and ideas, only actions."

Most of us have the bad habit of writing down ideas as they come out of our heads, without giving them shape. In consequence, on the list of tasks pending we have things like "prepare the summer holidays", unable to progress for weeks, or even months.

The problem is the principle of action. The verb to prepare is too generic; it does not evoke a **physical action** we can do without having to think about what it means. We can "find a hotel", or "book a flight", or "research interesting places on the Internet". These are clear and well defined actions. But we are not able "to prepare the holidays" without having to think about all the details involved in "prepare".

As long as a task is not processed, that is, without **being decomposed into things that we can already do** at that moment, it is almost certain that we will ignore it systematically.

Therefore, ideas cannot be done, not even tasks. We can only do... actions! That's why our organization system must provide us with the necessary mechanisms to analyze everything that comes out of our head and decompose it into its atomic actions. Otherwise it will not work.

2.3. Context

"To be able to do something the right circumstances must exist."

Many of the classical organization methods fail to fully comply with this principle. Since childhood we have been taught to "schedule" our tasks in advance –on Monday this, on Tuesday that... -without realizing that **wishing is not enough to be able to do things**.

There are many factors that have an influence when it comes to being able to do something. For instance, wanting to attract customers over the phone this morning, no matter the priority, is useless if we are called to an urgent meeting, we wake up with a cold, or the office telephone switch breaks down.

A smarter strategy is to have all our actions organized -not the tasks, not the ideas, but the actions- depending on the different factors or contexts that will enable their execution. This way, we will simply limit ourselves to selecting those actions that can be carried out under the current circumstances at each moment, and ignore the rest -at least temporarily- until the circumstances are appropriate for them as well.

A system that does not contemplate the principle of context will be very inefficient, and in certain cases totally unusable.

2.4. Entropy

"All order tends towards disorder, unless we do something about it."

The easiest and most rewarding part of starting to use a personal productivity system is to organize the clutter in which we are usually immersed. It is difficult to describe the sense of success that we feel when we are able to classify our actions in lists, our paper work documents in files, and our commitments on a calendar. The problem is that we often think that this is a "one-time only" activity, and that is an error.

Like it or not, everyday new paperwork keeps coming to our radar, new tasks (that we have to process), new commitments; and some of the ones we already have in our system will be no longer relevant. **If we do not organize what comes in new, and delete the old** that is no longer useful, our system will soon cease to be complete, and therefore, will no longer be reliable. All the efforts we made at the beginning will have been useless. Our system must provide us with clear guidelines to ensure that it is always updated, with the latest input, and that it does not contain "junk".

2.5. Relevance

"Doing many things does not necessarily mean being productive."

This is perhaps the most important productivity principle, and it tells us that all actions must be important in the context of our purposes and goals. Filling our lists with actions and finishing them, without a definite purpose, is not productivity. Moreover, we should not even let anything that is not focused, directly or indirectly, on a particular medium or long term target enter our system.

A true productivity system must take into account some way to ensure that we are going in the right direction, that what we do makes sense, that "we are not climbing the ladder, but on the wrong building". And it should give us the chance to change direction when our goals change - because if there is anything certain in this life is that everything changes.

2.6. Simplicity

"Things should be as simple as possible, but not too simple."

Simple things usually work better than complicated ones -this principle is simply the application of Ockham's razor principle to productivity. However, an excess of simplicity may lead to the same problems as an excess of complexity, or even to more serious ones.

Therefore, we must not succumb to the temptation of oversimplification. Real personal productivity requires work, dedication and training. There are no shortcuts. It is like doing the cabbage diet where you only eat cabbage soup during 7 days. Surely you will lose weight, at least for now; but if you want to lose weight effectively and permanently, the only way is to have a balanced diet and exercise... there is no other way.

2.7. Naturalness

"Working naturally always works best."

Finally, the naturalness principle reminds us that we must pay attention to the way our brain and our body naturally work. Trying to do things contrary to the way we work does not usually work, or if it works it is at the cost of huge mental wear and probably much stress.

For example, let's find out what schedules are more productive for us, and organize our work around them. Some prefer the morning, others the afternoon or night. In no case should we insist on waking up at 5 a.m., no matter how fashionable, if our biorhythms- or circadian rhythms -, advise us otherwise.

The same can be said about the way projects are managed, something which David Allen strongly emphasizes. Not respecting the natural form in which we think and solve problems usually leads to delays in the delivery of results, overwork and stress.