

**Newsweek**

## You Need to Get to Work!

There's a cottage industry trying to make you more productive. But are you actually getting more accomplished, or just making more lists?

By Daniel McGinn

**Newsweek**

March 19, 2007 issue - Steffany Mohan needs to be organized. The dentist from Des Moines, Iowa, runs her own practice, as well as a school for dental assistants on the side. She has three children under 8—and is expecting her fourth in a few weeks. Her husband is a busy surgeon. Not surprisingly, her desk is a jumble of in-process items. Her to-do list appears endless, and she's constantly struggling to make headway. So last month Mohan flew in productivity consultant Barbara Hemphill from North Carolina for a two-day intervention. Together they purged her office of unnecessary clutter, set up a system of file folders and discussed strategies that would allow Mohan to make decisions more quickly. Not only is Mohan's desk spotless, but her files are so organized she can delegate more work to her assistant. The cost of Hemphill's consultation: \$5,000. "It was outrageously worth it," says Mohan.

In offices across America, we seem to be at a moment of get-organized-now hysteria. Time-management gurus have been preaching their work-more-efficiently systems since the days of Benjamin Franklin ("Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions"). But more people are searching for new techniques to speed through tasks. In the electronic, gadgetized age of e-mail, BlackBerrys and ever-more-sophisticated desktop software—all designed theoretically to manage digital information efficiently—we've become overwhelmed. That's where the productivity industry comes in. The question is, however, whether this newfound emphasis on productivity is helping—or just making us crazier.

A new and highly publicized book, "A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder," actually argues in favor of chaos. Coauthors Eric Abrahamson and David H. Freedman write that neatness has become wildly overrated. The authors cite successful book and hardware stores with no rhyme or reason to the layout of merchandise, as well as inventors and scientists whose big breakthroughs came because of nonsystematic, improvisational experimenting. In one anecdote, Abrahamson and Freedman describe a worker who became so focused on getting organized that he lost sight of actually doing work. He told the authors: "I used to spend an hour each day planning out my day on an Excel spreadsheet, until my boss told me I was spending too much time on it."

There's no single statistic that illustrates the increased focus on productivity, but lots of anecdotal data points. Attendance at time-management seminars is rising. Tech companies like Microsoft say customers are demanding new tricks to help them work smarter. Sales at the Container Store, which sells organizational gear, have been growing by 18 percent a year. Page views at Lifehacker .com, a popular productivity blog, hit 10.9 million in January, more than double its readership last summer. Membership in the National Association of Professional Organizers has grown from 2,542 in 2004 to nearly 4,000 today. Two productivity self-help books, David Allen's "Getting Things Done" and Stephen Covey's "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," remain in the top 10 on The Wall Street Journal's business best-seller list years after publication. Zack Edison, an Apple consultant in northern California, constantly hears colleagues exchanging efficiency techniques. "It's like everybody who's overweight is always talking about diets," he says.

Both buyers and sellers of this advice attribute its growing popularity to the same causes. Companies have downsized, piling more work on fewer employees. More people are self-employed or telecommuting, giving them more discretion over how to spend their time. Workplace distractions are epidemic—especially as e-mail, once a blessing, has turned into an endless time-suck. A few years ago, discussions of work-life balance focused mostly on programs like flex-time; today, workers realize that no matter how flexible their employers are, most of us still can't go home until our work is done. Adding to our woes: instead of creating new tools to help us, the tech world's biggest innovations of late have been wonderful distractions like YouTube.

Add these factors together, and it's no coincidence that the nation's rate of productivity growth has slowed lately, and economist Mark Zandi of Moody's Economy.com sees why when he considers his own work habits. Thanks to his BlackBerry, laptop and cell phone, his workdays are far longer now, but the demands still

exceed the supply of time. "I just can't physically find another spare moment to do more, so I've reached the point where I need to ration what I do, or do what I do better," he says.

On a recent Thursday, hundreds of similarly time-stressed folks gathered in a Manhattan hotel ballroom. Each had paid \$595 to hear David Allen tell them how to do that. Allen's basic theory is that too many people are using their brain as a filing cabinet, which leads to deep anxiety that something will fall through the cracks. Instead, he advocates downloading these "open loops" onto a giant to-do list. Those to-dos are then carefully grouped by project and by context (actions you can do on the telephone or via e-mail). When you're hit by new information during the day—ane-mail, say—decide whether you can deal with it in two minutes or less; if not, file it away in an "action" folder to process later. Allen, a black belt in karate who's spent more than 20 years perfecting what he calls "the martial art of work," says the goal of his "Getting Things Done" movement—followers call it GTD—isn't just becoming superproductive. It's also about stress reduction. "A lot of the promise of GTD is that it's possible to have nothing on your mind," he says.

Allen may be the hot productivity preacher of the moment, but he's not the only one. Arguably the industry's biggest corporate player over the last decade is Franklin Covey Co., the Utah-based company cofounded by Stephen Covey. The company offers a broad range of seminars and one-on-one coaching, and sells fancy day planners in 89 retail stores; revenue last year totaled \$279 million. While much of the gurus' advice overlaps, there are subtle philosophical differences. Allen's adherents work their to-do lists, and Covey's system focuses more on daily schedules and setting priorities. "We don't try to help you get it all done—we teach you how to get the most important things done," says Gordon Wilson, a Franklin Covey senior vice president.

Alongside those two stalwarts, new gurus are ascending. In the past several years New York City-based organizer Julie Morgenstern has gained prominence, through her frequent TV appearances and her book "Never Check E-mail in the Morning." Last fall she signed a partnership with Covey's organization; today Franklin Covey sells her gear, much of it stylish day planners aimed at women. When it comes to time management, Morgenstern's big innovation is that instead of just listing to-do items, she suggests estimating the time each one will take, to allow you to better gauge how much you can really accomplish in a day. She says the most important skill is answering the question "How long will it take?" and then "learning to accurately and honestly estimate it in advance."

Spending time among people who've discovered these systems can feel a bit like mingling with religious converts. There's no shortage of people who say these principles have changed their lives. Boston executive coach Alisa Cohn discovered Allen's teachings two years ago. Today she uses an electronic label-maker to keep meticulous files and updates her to-do list daily. "I found it a profound way to structure the way I get things done," she says. "My mind is much more rested than it used to be." As with diets, everyone cheats a little: Cohn's desk still isn't clear, and her e-mail in box isn't completely empty. But her to-do list, including the long-term "Someday/Maybe" category of far-off notions, is just about perfect.

Even so, the mess-for-success advocates like Abrahamson and Freedman say that turning your life over to any "system" has a downside. Abrahamson, a professor at the Columbia business school, believes people freshly enamored with time management can become as obsessive as new users of Quicken personal-finance software, who begin tracking the cost of every pack of chewing gum they buy. Abrahamson believes today's hot productivity schemes may prove as short-lived as Total Quality Management or Six Sigma, yesterday's management fads. "You find people who will say, 'This is like the invention of fire!' and then a year or two later it's replaced by something else," he says.

Not surprisingly, "A Perfect Mess" has created a loud negative buzz in professional-organizer circles. "He's made it seem like we're all a bunch of neatniks, running out to clean up people's messes and tell them what bad people they are," says Barry Izsak, president of the National Association of Professional Organizers. In fact, the business is less focused on physical messiness than it used to be. Ten years ago Izsak, an organizing consultant in Austin, Texas, spent most days helping homeowners declutter living spaces and create residential storage systems. Today he spends 70 percent of his time in offices, helping workers manage their e-mail and better understand the difference between feeling busy and being productive. He says he's typical of the industry's shift from residential to business organizing. Last year several dozen organizers formed a new group, the Network for Productivity Excellence, to better reflect their business-oriented practices. It's a shift partly driven by economics, says NPE cofounder Chris Crouch, since offering training classes for corporations is much more lucrative than doing by-the-hour consulting for people with ill-kept garages.

Office workers' desperation for better focus stems largely from the avalanche of e-mail. Management experts constantly advise desk jockeys to check e-mail just a few times a day. But turning off that in box is a discipline that's hard to achieve. Microsoft is trying to help. Its latest version of Outlook, which went on sale in January, allows users to "flag" e-mails for follow-up. The point is to help people realize it's OK not to respond to a note immediately, by making it easier to automatically add it to their to-do lists, specifying the time by which they want to reply and blocking out time on their calendars to write back. To keep workers focused, Outlook and the new Vista operating system allow workers' task lists to be featured prominently on-screen, no matter what other programs are open.

In this quest for productivity, even the experts acknowledge it's important to strike a balance. The best bosses will always find ways to get work done while still leaving time for agenda-less "managing by walking around." Likewise, every worker can benefit from controlled doses of unstructured water-cooler time, when some of the best business ideas are born. And even Abrahamson, the advocate of messiness, has found he can't manage his time wisely without putting every appointment in his Outlook calendar, which he syncs to his handheld com-puter and his wristwatch. No matter what strategies we use, says Morgen-stern, "we will never—any of us—get to the bottom of our to-do lists in our lifetime." But a growing movement stands ready to help those who aim to die trying.

*With Samantha Henig*

URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17522665/site/newsweek/from/ET/>

---

© 2007 MSNBC.com