

# No Time to Read This? Read This

• **By SUE SHELLNBARGER**

Are things you need to get done falling between the cracks? Does taking an entire day off seem impossible?

Maybe you need a time-management system.

Many readers seem to think they do, based on the email response to my recent column on the importance of taking time off. Dozens asked me to recommend a time-management method that would help them get on top of their work and home duties. In response, I asked a half-dozen executive coaches to help me pick the most widely used time-management systems—not just software tools or high-tech to-do lists, but behavioral-change techniques that help people get organized, clarify thinking and increase output. Then, I tried out for a week each of the three methods they mentioned most often—including one that involved a ticking plastic tomato.

Of course, a week isn't long enough to reap the full benefits of these methods. Still, I learned a lot from this experiment. Like many people, I am often my own worst enemy in managing my time, distracting myself from the task at hand, or setting myself up for failure by starting each day with an unrealistically long to-do list. Second, the key to getting more important stuff done is often doing less of everything else. And finally, getting control of your time requires a significant up-front investment of mental effort—and, well, time.

Here, in no particular order, are the methods I tried:

• **Getting Things Done:** The reigning gorilla of time management, "GTD," as its followers call it, was created in the 1980s by David Allen, an Ojai, Calif., consultant whose coaching, training materials and seminars can be found at davidco.com. Mr. Allen has since sold more than one million books about GTD and attracted 1.2 million followers on Twitter. GTD's aim is to corral all the projects and tasks floating around in your head into an organizing system you update weekly. No matter what chaos erupts, the system in theory enables you to quickly identify the next step to take on every front to keep all your projects moving forward, while keeping your mind clear to relax, think and be creative.

I start GTD with a weekly "mind sweep," writing down all the stuff I should be doing, want to do or dream of doing. The resulting list ranges from essentials, like meeting my next deadline, to nagging worries, like updating college-financing plans for my kids, to future hopes, like volunteering as a writing coach for needy kids. Next, I sort it all and create new files, action lists, calendar items or reminders based on what is needed next—

for example, whether a project requires action (the deadline); input from someone (a talk with my accountant about college financing); or deferral (the tutoring plan). My daily calendar is reserved for only the most urgent items, such as the deadline.

When all the collecting, reviewing and categorizing required by GTD is portrayed visually on a "workflow map," the result resembles a cross between a corporate organization chart and a map of Middle Earth in "The Lord of the Rings." GTD fans liken it to learning a new sport, such as tennis, and say mastering it can take two years.

Nevertheless, I see some benefits right away. GTD has me clump tasks together by context; phone calls, for example, are grouped so I can run through them quickly during a spare moment. And GTD ends sloppy habits, such as stashing piles under my desk, forcing me instead to decide what to do with all the stuff and either file or discard it. As I comply, I revel in the vast expanse of clear desktop that appears before me. I doubt, however, that I have the perseverance to stick to this system.

• **The Pomodoro Technique:** This quirky method had me working in intense spurts guided by a kitchen timer shaped like a tomato—or pomodoro, in the inventor's native Italian. Developed by Francesco Cirillo, director of XPLabs, a software design firm based near Rome, this technique is spreading via Twitter and other social networks. It can be learned in a few hours from a free guide at [pomodorotechnique.com](http://pomodorotechnique.com); making it a habit takes up to 20 days.

While any timer will do, I purchased my own tomato for \$14.95. I start each day by making a log of things to do, then tackle each in 25-minute intervals called Pomodoros. When a Pomodoro is over, I mark an X on the log next to the item I am working on, then take a refreshing three- to five-minute break. Nothing must be allowed to interrupt a Pomodoro. If co-workers barge in, Mr. Cirillo advises trying to defer the conversation.

The method is based on the idea that time-management tools and techniques should be simple; that frequent breaks can improve mental agility; and that changing the way people think about time can ease anxiety, freeing them to concentrate better.

Although I found this method laughable at first, its simplicity is deceptive. Working with my ticking tomato made me aware that I constantly interrupt myself. Users are asked to put an apostrophe over the "X" on the log each time they are tempted to break a Pomodoro. I had no less than eight apostrophes over one "X"—marking impulses ranging from reading email to ordering a toner cartridge to running outside to see if my car had a flat tire. (Seriously.)

This method offers less help than the others with organizational problems; it is narrower in scope. However, it eased my anxiety over the passing of time and also made me more efficient; refreshed by breaks, I halved the total time required to fact-check a column.

• **Franklin Covey's Focus:** This method, subtitled, "Achieving Your Highest Priorities," hits workaholics where it hurts—in their upside-down priorities. Created by

FranklinCovey, Salt Lake City ([franklincovey.com](http://franklincovey.com)), Focus aims to help users jettison busywork and wasted time and devote themselves to their most valued pursuits. FranklinCovey has trained more than two million people in the method. Some of its concepts are widely known, such as "sharpening the saw," a metaphor for setting aside time to take care of your health so you can work (and play) with more vigor.

Another well-known symbol, its four-quadrant "time matrix," helps users distinguish among tasks based upon whether they are truly urgent and important; important but not urgent; urgent but not important; or neither. A pretest shows I squander one-third of my time on unimportant stuff. To remedy this, I settle down for a half-hour planning session, a weekly Focus requirement, to think through my values, identify the roles and goals most important to me, and block out time in advance to pursue them. I enter other tasks day-by-day on my calendar, prioritizing them based on their importance. Like GTD, Focus requires a fairly high up-front investment of mental effort to be useful.

Focus aims to break users' "urgency addiction," the habit of rushing around needlessly. By week's end, I am surprised at how much calmer I feel, as I let insignificant stuff slide; in a spillover benefit, I am able to help my teenage son see that his race to finish a college research project early isn't truly urgent. Also, in pursuit of the value I place on generosity, I start working early on a holiday gift for my extended family, a photo calendar; not only do I take more pleasure in making it, but I know it won't be the usual slapdash, last-minute affair. In an era when values are often neglected, this system is a worthy antidote.

In the end, I expect I will embrace elements of each of these systems—the approach experts recommend for most people. The essence of good time management is sticking to rituals that make you more productive, and rituals are largely a matter of personal preference. "The only system that matters," says Luke Iorio, president of iPEC Coach Training, Shrewsbury, N.J., "is the one that works for each individual."

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