

The Threefold Nature of Work

– by David Allen

Why do people complain that there's no time to get their work done? Because there is more work to do than the work they think they have to do.

Many times people we work with express frustration that they "can't get any of their work done" because of the overwhelming amount of interruptions, email, and other inputs that show up during the course of a normal day. "I can't get my work done, because there is so much (other) work to do!"

If you are ever in that frustrated state, it might help to understand the threefold nature of what constitutes your "work."

You have a choice of doing three very different things when you work – pre-defined work, ad hoc work, and defining your work.

1. Pre-defined Work

This is what you would be doing all day if you got no new input or interruptions of any sort. You would probably be working off the inventory of actions and projects that you came in with – work that you have already determined needs doing. There are the phone calls you need to make, the documents you need to draft, the ideas you need to outline on the project, etc. That list of things to potentially be doing, when you have some discretionary time, would be challenging enough to sift through given your volume (most professionals have 150-200 of these discrete actions). But what you are very often faced with is the necessity (and opportunity) to do...

2. Work As It Appears

The phone rings. It's not on your lists or your calendar. But you take the call, nonetheless, and consequently spend twenty minutes talking to a client of yours about a potentially important, or at least an interesting, topic. Before you're off that call, your boss sends you an instant message to schedule a half hour meeting in the afternoon to update you on a new development and get your input on it. You acknowledge back "OK" while you're still talking to the client. For that meeting, though, you know immediately that you are going to need to update two spreadsheets and surf the Web about a company that's been on your radar pertaining to this project, before you walk in. That means do it now, or otherwise not eat lunch. In this scenario you are doing the work as it shows up to be done. You are actually defining your work rapidly in this case, and choosing to do the new stuff instead of any of the pre-determined potential activities. Many of us have whole days of this nature. We can't get to anything on our action lists because the ad-hoc nature of the day wound up defining and requiring our total focus, non-stop.

That, added to our inventory of pre-defined work, creates a substantial volume of on-deck options for things to be doing. But then there's the e-mail constantly filling up your in-basket. And meeting notes from last night still on the legal pad on the corner of your desk. And the fourteen voicemails that you keep saving because they mean something you might need

to do, but you don't know exactly what yet. And more voicemails coming in during the day. So, in addition to all the stuff on your lists and all the stuff coming at you during the day that you have to engage with as it shows up, you know there's still the on-going requirement to be...

3. Defining Work

This is processing and emptying your in-basket, your email, your meeting notes, etc. – assessing the new inputs and making decisions about what needs to be done about them. You may do some quick actions as you define them (a la the two-minute rule), delegate things to others (to be tracked on your “Waiting For...” list), and you will probably be adding more action items and projects to your inventory of defined work, as you review and think about the meaning of the content of those notes. “Oh yeah, I told Raphael I would call him back about possible times to meet next week...”

This activity of defining work, based upon the constant flow of new incoming information and communication, requires an average of one hour per day, for the typical professional. That's just to stay current – not to clean up and process any backlog that may have accumulated prior to today.

So what? Everything I have described so far is common sense, or at least a common awareness about the way things really are. Here's the rub: I have noticed that many people act as if (2) is some sort of burden to endure, and (3) is some irrelevant activity aside from their work. “I have my list of things to do. Why am I being burdened with things that aren't on my lists, and why am I now in addition having to deal with all of these e-mails, voicemails, conversation notes, business cards, receipts, and tons of other inputs coming at me from my outside world?”

I don't get it. It's all your work. Some is done when it appears, and some is done when you choose to do it instead of what's showing up. And processing input is required to trust that the inventory of your pre-defined work is complete enough to evaluate its contents against your new options of things to do.

Are you truly pretending that your boss doesn't have the authority to reallocate your focus toward a new and unexpected priority? Get real. Are you honestly saying that now the world is at fault for reconfiguring itself to present you with things you weren't aware of twelve hours ago? Get a grip. And how long can you honestly say you are comfortable doing anything, without checking your voicemail or e-mail?

The key is how efficiently and effectively you know how to process new stuff, and how functional your system is for maintaining and reviewing your inventory of commitments. Then you accept and manage the input processing as a critical component, you review the whole game frequently enough to know (in your gut) how to evaluate the surprises and unexpected work, and you have a sufficiently functional system for capturing and managing all the various rivers and streams of this complex environment, to feel at least OK about what you're not doing. Master key to life.

How much of which kind of work to do, when, is the eternal dance of the workday. You can't really do more than one of them at a time, though you can get really fast with processing work while you're on hold on the phone, and waiting for meetings to start. There may be interruptions that are allowed that are not functional or valuable, but managing those is just tactical to your definition of your job. It's an eternal challenge of allocating limited resources (the definition of “management”) – it's not an inherent problem.

How much of your day and week do you need to assume is going to be ad hoc and unexpected? How much of your day really is required for cleaning up your in-baskets so that you can trust your backlog doesn't have landmines and unseen priorities lurking? When are you dedicating critical executive time for updating your contents and maybe improving your own process for capturing, clarifying, organizing, and reviewing your work?

Get your habits and your systems up to handling it. And get used to it.

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