The Routine System, or How Priorities Work

Jakob Jukkovski

FORWARD

While quite a few books have been written about time management, the majority of them simply regurgitate ideas someone else had at some point in the past. Many more are nothing more than variations on a theme, also written by someone else. People retell and rewrite others' ideas without even personally seeing if they work by applying them to their own lives.

The word *efficiency* has taken on an almost mystical aura, and time management is something every self-respecting person should have in his or her arsenal. The abbreviation GTD is now a mantra to be repeated at every turn, which is why we see books and articles titled something like "750 Tried and True Ways to Be Efficient" or "Discover Inner Peace with These 100 Simple and Easy-to-Keep Rules." That is, of course, a joke, but in every joke there is a kernel…

Sadly, today TM brings to mind some kind of share market, where we are sold a piece of paper with nothing backing it that we buy for no other reason than because everyone else is, too. When it comes down to it, we are not being sold an actual product; we are being sold something in which we want to believe. The same goes for the TM market, as the subject has become quite the cash cow. Everyone wants it and everyone needs it, which is why people are willing to pay for a dream, idea, or, we could even say, a mirage. Here in the desert of our everyday lives and problems is drawn a mirage: a lake of efficiency.

Many head off on that path hoping against hope they will be the lucky ones. This book is my effort to dispel the "time management mirage." I hope I will be able to help you look at this topic in a new light.

I am not an author, and so I am counting on your indulgence as I write this book simply and understandably such that it is easy to both read and remember.

This book is for everyone and anyone, be you an old hand at TM or someone just getting into the topic. Regardless, I hope it will be equally useful in the former case and the latter. This, after all, is not just a collection of ideas; rather, it is my personal experience and the conclusions I have drawn after years of practice.

I would like to do two things in this book: first, I will share my experience and offer some warning about the different TM myths, following which I will offer my own TM system.

Your comments would be more than welcome! Please leave them on the site at http://www.routinesystem.com.

GTD: "Getting Things Done," the title of a book by David Allen
TM: time management

Introduction: Where It All Began

Lord, grant that I may always desire more than I can accomplish.
Michelangelo

The business club

I have since forgotten when, but at one point I had the idea of starting something like a business club with my friends. We all wanted to do something interesting and worthwhile, though nobody yet knew what exactly that was. I suggested studying and discussing different business-related books together, thus helping each other find good ideas or avenues to pursue in our lives. It was not that we were all just sitting around with nothing to do; each of us had our own family, work, children, and even different hobbies. However, not one of us felt fulfilled. We were just being carried along by the current, when instead we wanted to change something in ourselves and the world around us.

A new dream

We decided to organize our group and about a year later had not only gone through books on business, but also others on self-development, understanding one's self, searching for one's personal mission and vision, and much more. It was at that point I understood that I needed some kind of system to help me bring a little order to the deluge of information.

I started surfing the internet and came across an entire treasure trove called "time management." I quickly clarified which books were considered the best and raked in a ton of positive reviews, ultimately deciding on David Allen's book, "Getting Things Done." As I read the book I became more and more convinced that I had found something I really loved.

Here I would like to take a moment to mention that way back in 1993 I had to spend some time in the hospital, and when I was released after my surgery I fell deeply into depression. I spent time at home developing my own carrot and stick system for meeting or failing to meet goals, following which I wrote down a list of things to do and got to work. Imagine my surprise when, after two weeks, the entire list was done! Not only that, but I had completely broken free of my depression. While I did not yet understand that I had taken my first steps down the time and project

management road, I did know that I thought the concept was fantastic. Right at that moment I had an idea: while I understood that I no longer needed the business club, seeing as how I had already found what I was looking for, my new dream was to launch TM courses and help others more efficiently organize their lives.

My life as TM practice

For that I had to clearly understand how all this works and of course give it a try in my own life. I threw myself into it, ready for untold adventures. However, I quickly learned that it would not be quite that easy, seeing as how I would not be able to make ends meet if I quit my job and everything else I was doing to jump headlong into the time management world.

My job at the time had me working irregular hours, sometimes occupying me for days on end. For example, on Fridays I traveled to another city for meetings, returning home no earlier than 11 pm. I also frequently had to take phone calls in the evenings and handle a variety of other issues. Not only that, but I had my family, with whom it was important for me to spend more time, and I was also studying Hebrew and English, the latter for work and the former because I live in Israel. On top of all of that, I had a number of other goals, ideas, and hobbies.

Even so, do not think that I am some kind of energizer bunny: as it so happens, I tend to be quite sickly. Ever since I was young I have had bronchial asthma, psoriasis, other skin problems, and constant allergies. I get tired easily and cannot go without nine hours of sleep, otherwise my psoriasis acts up and my nervous system goes haywire. By 9 pm, when I am usually putting my kids to bed or readying them a story, I am barely awake myself. My struggle to maintain focus is just the cherry on top.

My son was diagnosed with ADHD, meaning that he has problems with concentration. As I kept an eye on him I realized he got the problem from me. Once, when my wife and I were at my son's school talking with his psychologist, the psychologist was explaining why our son can be inattentive and easily distracted. A bit later she turned to me and asked what my thoughts on the matter were. I realized that for the previous five minutes or so I had not been paying attention, already carried away by my train of thought. I did not know what to say—clearly, I share my son's diagnosis. For me that means that while a normal person would just sit down and get to work on something, I have to struggle with distractions right and left, eventually taking twice as long to accomplish the same task as that other guy.

I would like to add to all of the above that memory is not my gift. I am constantly asking my wife how old I am, and I only remember my son's birthday because it is easy to figure out using the digits 1 and 2: he was born on 12.21.2001.

Knowing all of that, I was excited by the possibilities my life presented. I thought to myself that I would be the perfect guinea pig, given that if TM would work for me with all my energy, attention,

and memory problems, it would work for anyone. Even as I set about tackling my personal issues I was thrilled to see how it would all end up.

What happens next

With that I knew what I was looking and striving for: time management courses. To make my dream a reality I would have to be prepared to offer people something tried and true, meaning that I needed a system or even some kind of simple, balanced, and harmonious methodology. For that I went back to David Allen's book, which is what I would like to talk about next.

Chapter 1: No Rest for the Weary

Getting to know GTD

The first time I read David Allen's book was more skimming, and as a result I only really got part of what was going on. Because of that I decided to jump back in and read it again, this time in detail and without hurrying through to make sure I absorbed everything. I also decided not to move on to the next chapter without giving what I had learned from the previous one a shot to see how it worked in practice. I took to writing in the margins, highlighting, and making notes in a variety of colors, all of which helped me grasp the main thoughts behind each topic.

My work station was gradually transformed: I bought a label printer, metal filing cabinet, desktop sorters, borders for the GTD diagram, and all kinds of folders, stickers, notepads, and other office accessories.

I also started looking for a program to help keep track of to-do lists, something that turned into an endless dig through everything you could think of: online, for computers, cross-platform, and many more. In the end I bought an iPhone, though I was the first among my friends to do so, given that they had not yet been popularized. Many people just did not know what they were, but I needed one for GTD. It was an expensive but important purchase that allowed me to have my to-do lists with me at all times. I was ready for "stress-free productivity" and thought I was on the doorstep of getting everything where it needed to be and understanding the methodology. In fact, it was that hope that drove me forward, not allowing me to stop until I grasped the system and could relax into the inner tranquility about which David Allen talked.

Crisis

At long last I finished my second time through the book, though there was no "peace" or "stress-free productivity" to be found. I had learned beautifully how to sort everything into folders, but I was actually accomplishing much less than before. I was less productive and more stressed to boot,

concluding in the end that I had not quite understood the entire concept. The book was packed with information, and I had the sneaky suspicion that I had missed or overlooked something. Regardless of my disappointment, I was not ready to throw in the towel, deciding instead to read the book a third time.

This time I decided to summarize each chapter, so after reading a section I would write out my conclusions and compare them to what I had read. I needed to look at the big picture to see what I was doing wrong and pick out the biggest problem areas.

Two problems

There was a time when I thought the problems I was having with the GTD system had something to do with me personally. Perhaps I did not quite get something completely, or maybe even my lifestyle just did not fit the system. However, I had a friend who had also gone through the book, though he differed from me in that he was not able to read through it multiple times cover to cover. Where I had been able to implement some of the book's ideas, he had not gone farther than setting up some desktop sorters. Still, Kostya is an irrational kind of person as it is, and so I thought if we had been more thorough, responsible, and disciplined, everything would have worked out.

The last straw was a conversation I had with a friend from Germany. Andreas was an airline captain who sometimes flew to Israel. Once, while sitting on the beach eating breakfast, during the course of our conversation I mentioned what I had been up to lately, and it turned out Andreas had also read the same book. He said he had not been able to apply it to his everyday life either, which really shook me. One could accuse Kostya or me of being inattentive or undisciplined, but that could hardly be said of an airline captain.

My inspiration led me to an internet search for "GTD criticism," and what I learned was a huge step forward in my quest. Many people wrote about how the system helped them neatly sort their life, but that was where it stopped. Much was written criticizing doing things "in context." I sensed I had found what I wanted to understand and headed back to the book, in the end reading it two more times. After the fourth time it started falling apart, so I used binder clips to hold it together. In the end I was able to figure out the problem, with the criticism I had read online to confirm what I had found to be true in my personal life. There were two issues: first, vagueness about how to prioritize, and second, what to do next. Let's dig into those a bit further.

Prioritizing in GTD

In my opinion, being unable to quickly and clearly prioritize is a major problem, given that everyone one of us, no matter what we do, has a to-do list. The main thing is to figure out what to do and when to do it. Using GTD I was able to neatly sort everything into ever-growing lists, but

the items on those lists generally did nothing more than stare right back at me. So how does prioritizing work in GTD?

The author offers his readers a wide array of tools. Chapter nine, "Doing: Making the Best Action Choices," features both "the four-criteria model for choosing actions in the moment" and "the six-level model for reviewing your own work." I cannot believe how much time I spent on chapter nine to be sure of my conclusion that it is impractical and tough to implement in everyday life—I could write an entire book on the subject. Here it is worth spending time talking about intuition, the most important secret of time management. Later we will come back to this topic a number of times, given its foundational value for modern TM. Regardless, I do not want to spend your time on a detailed review of these models, as they are not among the goals of this book. With that in mind I will simply bring up a few real life examples.

Let's take the four criteria model for choosing actions in the moment, the filter through which the author would like us to run our to-do lists:
  1. Context
  2. Time available
  3. Energy available
  4. Priority

I took my to-do list (at the time it included 328 items) and started asking those questions for every line. That is crazy in and of itself, because getting to the end (if, in fact, by some robotic tendency you do get to the end) takes an enormous amount of time.

So let's take one goal, for example *buy sneakers for the whole family*, and think about which context it best fits: *calls*, or maybe *computer*, or perhaps even *store*? Say you choose *internet* and decide that you will just go ahead and look around for good prices. Now you need to think of the time expenditure: how much time are you willing to spend to find the sneakers? You do not know? I do not either. Regardless, say we can spend 30 minutes. Next we try to understand the energy we need for this. We could do it in the evening when we are tired—but perhaps it would be better to do it bright and early in the morning? We can say we do not care and just pick any time.

Now we get to the most interesting part: priority. That is a bit of circular reasoning, no? You ask how to prioritize and are told, of course: by order of importance. This is where the author tries to get the idea of intuition through to us. In other words, he wants us to prioritize goals in keeping with our responsibilities, objectives, and ideals. Let's say you decide that this is a more urgent task— what next? Next you continue working your way through your list until you get to the end.

However, even that is not good enough, because tomorrow or the day after half the list will already be obsolete thanks to changing circumstances like a broken computer. You might also realize that you are not up for anything in the evening, or something else changed and now you do not need what you previously wanted. So why spend so much energy sorting what you have to do later? I

understood for myself that it simply is not worthwhile, especially given that sorting everything the way I did still did not help me prioritize. I came out the other end with more stress and less productivity.

Context

All right, let's say we have boundless energy, productivity, and a desire to filter our list every day through the "four-criteria model for choosing actions in the moment." Still, how do we take care of *buy sneakers for the whole family*? How does that work? David Allen suggests working in context, meaning that as soon as we find ourselves in the right context we can get to work on taking care of that item: the next time we are sitting at the computer we need to find those sneakers.

However, in my practice and that of my friend Kostya this was simply impossible. At first I was often angry when I found myself in one context or another, but I did not understand why. In an attempt to solve that problem I forced myself to wind up in a context, but that often did not yield the results I was looking for. For example, I figured out that I had a few minutes to call my internet provider and clarify a few issues, but my call ended up a disaster. I had to spend an entire hour on the phone and still came away empty-handed. I needed to make another call, but according to the system I was already in another context, so the call was not made.

When you live in context you do what is next on the list instead of what is most important, but that does not work. I had a few context folders:
- Reading/watching
- Computer
- Calling
- Errands
- Office
- Home

This did not work, and many were always empty! For example, I might not make it to the *office* in a given week, or while at home I would forget that I was in the *home* context.

In addition, there were times when I would go to a shopping center, open my to-do list with the *buy* tag just to realize that I had forgotten something I needed to make the next purchase. It seemed to me that the system would work better for some sort of manufacturing featuring clear working zones, timetables, and procedures. David Allen's claim that a to-do list should never be written for a particular day, but instead should be taken care of "in context" did not fit with my personal experience. I was much more productive when I wrote a daily to-do list and did my best to work my way through as much as possible. Of course, I had the idea to set an alarm on my phone to go off every 5-10 minutes asking me what context I was in, but I quickly understood that I would only gain productivity like that at the expense of my sanity.

Chapter 2: The Deeper You Go, the Harder It Gets

Wrapping up

Reading David Allen's book *Getting Things Done* did not upset me or keep me from pursuing time management; I simply did not find answers for the questions I had. As well, there was a lot I learned that I both found interesting and applied to my daily life: for example, the desktop organizers and filing cabinet.

I did not stop there, and as I moved forward I found that in some sense the going was easier. I knew what the problem was and what I was looking for—all that was left was reading every well-known time management book I could get my hands on and figuring out the answers to my questions:

1. How should I prioritize?
2. How do I actually get things done?

David Allen talked about some sort of intuition that comes with an understanding of our role, goals, and responsibilities. He also cited Stephen Covey, so I decided to see what there was to learn in *First Things First*.

Four quadrants

I should note that I was well acquainted with Stephen Covey's well-known book *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*. In it the author lays out four quadrants that together make up a prioritization system for categorizing everything we do. Covey's new book was totally devoted to that habit, something that I could not help but find exciting.

Stephen Covey's assertion that his book was the most up-to-date TM system available was enough for me. At the end of the book there is even a diagram laying out three generations of time management systems (there are eight in total). Covey claims that his system represents the fourth and latest generation, something that could not help but inspire me to apply it to my life.

The book is packed with clear thinking and ideas, which is why I highly recommend reading it. My goal, however, was to understand if there was a simple and comprehensible system of priorities. Covey suggests breaking everything down into four quadrants:

1. Important and urgent
2. Important but not urgent
3. Not important but urgent
4. Not important and not urgent

The author pushes the idea of prioritizing the first two categories, also stating that the second is most important, given that it carries with it the most results and positive impact. Everything in the second category has to do with your calling, what can change your life, and what can change the world. Covey looks at life as a collection of roles and spheres, something that gives us the ability to focus on what is important. In other words, this is an opportunity to understand what is primary in

our lives, figure out our mission, and move on from that to write out a list of our roles. Those could be, among others:

1. Vice president
2. Landlord
3. Parent

Now our priority is to set goals for each of these roles or assign them from our to-do list, after which we have a list of the most important things for the week.

What is this? A magic filter for everything in our lives? I tried sorting like this and came up with a big pile of confusion. As it turns out, I have a lot in my life that is both urgent and quite important. In time I understood that the "urgent/not urgent" and "important/not important" classifications were very subjective: I think playing video games is very important and want to get to that right away, while taking back the letter that was delivered to us accidentally is somewhere way down on the list.

Here is a simple and real-life example: once a friend stopped by and mentioned how he was feeling pressured by everything he had to do, most of which needed to be done right away. For example, his list featured *buy sneakers for the entire family*—urgent and important. At that point I already had my own system for prioritization, one which I will talk about in more detail in chapter four, so we quickly went over his list again and ascertained that most items on it were nothing more than ideas or at best goals. *Buy sneakers for the entire family* was an idea that according to Stephen Covey would be the main or at least a high priority.

I had a similar situation. My highest priorities were often reserved for ideas or very raw goals, while the most important items were liable to get pushed down to the third quadrant. The goals and ideas taking up the focal point on my to-do list were incredibly stressful. Needless to say, if you use Stephen Covey's method and it helps you, I am more than happy for you. For me and my friend, however, it was confusing and did not work.

So we took care of our *inbox*, assigned everything to a quadrant, and had a ready list. What next? Where is the fourth time management generation's magic secret? A simple to-do list is nothing new —you get that with any old system—but I will be honest with you: Stephen Covey surprised me. On page 90 he uses the ABC method to lay out his weekly to-do list.

The ABC method

What is this method? In my opinion it is a bit of circular reasoning: premise A is true because of premise B, which in turn is proven by the truth of premise A.

I once happened across a YouTube video that one would call corporate coaching. A group of women was sitting in a small room (probably the employees in a single department) listening to a TM specialist who was speaking up by the board. The clip began with him saying, "So do you get how

to do that?" His listeners' eyes widened, their expressions shouting that they had no idea what was going on. The specialist continued by saying, "All right, then let me show you a new TM system I've developed. Not many people know about it yet, but it will help you out a lot. You need to split your to-do list into categories A, B, and C (at the same time he drew "A," "B," "C," and "D" on the board with a marker). Then you need to figure out what is most important, what is less important, and what isn't important at all."

That was when I just about fell off my chair. Just think: you paid money to learn how to prioritize, and what you get in return is a TM guru who tells you that "You need to understand what goes under A, which is most important, B, which is less so, and C, which is least important." Excuse me, but the question itself was about how to understand what is most important, what is less so, and why. This is where one more popular TM tool comes into play: intuition.

The great and powerful intuition

I should note that Gleb Arhangelsky's *Time Drive* went the furthest: while many TM books just write about using intuition to prioritize, Arhangelsky provided a mathematical formula.

Arhangelsky gets to the main point on page 107: how to understand what is most important and where to begin. Everything can seem important, and so the author states that the problem is in the criteria we use. He suggests using what he calls a "multi-criteria evaluation," which is a table that uses those criteria—for example, *place, price,* and *space*—to prioritize. Now we assign a value: for example, 0.4 for *place.* Where do we get that value? Intuition, of course. A deal like that would work just as well for prioritizing bets at a casino, believe me.

Certainly, intuition helps if you have, say, three or ten things to do, but when you have 50 or even 300 it simply does not. You will always have tasks that are neither A nor B, instead ending up an eternal sticking point. The problem with the ABC method and intuition is that you will always split your list into two categories: *do now* and *do at some point*. Think about it this way: at the emergency room do they assign patients by intuition—who gets help now, who can wait until tomorrow, who can be sent home? Of course not. First they diagnose, and then they use that diagnosis to decide what to do. It is the same with us: if we cannot figure out a diagnosis, intuition will not help and may even be a hindrance.

Conclusions:

I did not find what I was looking for in Stephen Covey's book, in particular:
• How to quickly and simply sort my to-do list
• How to prioritize
• How to get to work

While I did not get what I was looking for, a negative result is still a result. My studies taught me that we are all very subjective in how we understand what is urgent and important. I saw the disadvantages of the ABC method, while it was also interesting to see how intuition can be deceptive. That, however, will be discussed further in upcoming chapters.

As I wrap up this chapter I would like to apologize if I have been overly critical. I may be writing somewhat emotionally given that I am not only sharing the path I took, but also the feelings that went along with it. I am in no way belittling the work of other authors who have gone before us—I am grateful to them for their work.

Chapter 3: Widening the Circle

Book, programs, and more

I was not about to give up, instead keeping up my search for a clear and understandable methodology. I sketched out a modest plan and set to work reading TM books, though I should note that my reading was more of an in-depth study of the topic. Every book I picked up was studied chapter by chapter, including detailed outlining. At the end of each chapter I wrote down some thoughts I had based on the material and often went back to read once more.

In addition, many books offered practical advice that I sometimes needed to try out before moving on. I regularly had to master new programs: I was the first among my friends to buy an iPhone just because there are many TM programs available for iOS. Eventually I lost count of the number of various sites and programs for both smartphone and computer I tried, which does not even touch on the purchases I had to make.

For instance, I bought a pair of filing cabinets, a label printer, and even wall-hung filers. There were even more specific devices: after listening to Jim Rohn's audiobook on keeping a journal, I decided to give it a try. I thought it would be great to be able to move pages back and forth from one section to another, sorting pages by topic.

That system is called ProClick, which offers special binding that can be opened or closed to move pages around. However, to use it I needed to buy a special hole punch that was at that time sold only in the US. Happily, soon after I was in Miami, though the seller started talking to me in Spanish. I should have answered, "I'm sorry sir, I'm not from around here; I'm from Israel, so I only speak Russian" (kidding).

I will not even begin to write about all the different types of stickers and folders I tried. In a word, there was no stopping me. I did, however, move slowly, taking enough time to be thorough and sure that I did not miss a single piece of the time management puzzle. It would be more accurate to call it, I suppose, not just one puzzle, but rather several different ones. Some may think I was wasting

time, which is possible, but it did allow me to understand that not all the puzzles were even from the same set. I read a good deal and continued summarizing, leaving me with over 20 books read at the end of the first year.

Book classification

In the space of a few years I made my way through many new books, an experience that allows me to sort them into five categories.

1. Tricks and tips
Gleb Arhangelsky's *Time Drive* is a class example of this category, one in which books do not offer a clearly laid out TM system. Instead, readers are provided with a wide array of time management tools and tricks: incentivizing calendars, memoirs, personal epitaphs, long-term goal maps, strategic boxes, results-oriented to-do lists, "strict" meeting planning, and much more. Could an average Joe use all of that to finally achieve tranquility and be more efficient? I think not.

2. Do A, B, C
We already talked about the ABC method, so I will not go into it again.

We'll need 44 survival habits, we'll have to be on the go constantly and never sleep, and we'll have to check our inbox every day, as well as our to-do list, master list, mission list, and self-realization list. Then we'll finally be happy!

3. Ideology
There are not many books like these that offer their own idea or system. Some highlights are Julie Morgenstern's *Time Management from the Inside Out*, Marla Cilley's *Sink Reflections*, Stephen Covey's *First Things First*, of course, and David Allen's *Getting Things Done.*

4. Rewrites by an authority
These books are simply attempts to rewrite an existing idea in other words.

5. Rewrites based on authority
While these are also rewrites of earlier ideas, the problem is that authors appear to not practice what they preach. The books are more collections of sage advice.

Many books talk about Vilfredo Paleto's 80 – 20 rule, which has become some sort of time management enchantment. It is surprising how superficial time management approaches can be in the 21st century.

Once I was watching a program about the planet that talked about how mankind has been studying it for many years, each time making new discoveries that shatter old myths or fallacies. It hit me that TM also has its share of myths, resembling the study of the planet at its early stages.

Regardless, that understanding gave me the ability to tell if a book was worth reading after just glancing at its table of contents.

New directions

As I studied TM books I learned that some things I wanted to learn fell outside the bounds of time management literature, leading me to open up new avenues of inquiry. They were:

1. Books discussing how we make decisions
2. Books on making business plans
3. Books on strategic planning
4. Books on achieving personal goals
5. Books on project management
6. Books on documentation
7. Books on paper work
8. Books helping to understand one's self, temperament, and character

Regardless of the enormous quantity of ground I covered, I was disappointed that I still could not find a simple and understandable method I could use. There was a good deal of information and great advice, but how was it that it was all about organizing and sticking papers in folders? There was a time after I finished the twentieth TM book that I was ready to read another 32, but that did not happen. I finally found something I will talk about in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: the Routine System

A new system

Once I gave some thought to the paper on which I had written out my work plan for the week. It was divided into several sections: *crisis situations*, *current*, *upcoming*, and *ideas*. Later I added one more sections: *goals*.

I started thinking about why the list was laid out the way it was and understood that its layout allowed me to quickly look over everything happening at work. Within minutes I could see what I needed to do and what was really necessary, and it dawned on me: there were my priorities. I had the feeling I had found something, even though the picture at the time was still dim, leaving much to be hashed out.

What the word "routine" means to me

I would like to immediately clarify that the word "routine" means something a bit different to me than it does to others. As I looked over the projects and goals I had in one of my sections I knew that I could not avoid doing them without incurring consequences.

People usually think that a routine is something they do every day or have to do that is boring and best to just finish as fast as possible. For me, however, routine is consistency. We go to work at the same time every day, we wake up and go to sleep, eat lunch, eat dinner, clean the house, buy groceries, do the laundry, and so much more. When we do all that haphazardly or just whenever we feel like it, sooner or later we have issues.

I am not just talking about a regimen; I am referring to a normal and regular order for a given area of your live. We can use work as an example. There is a minimum that needs to be done: arrive at a given time, work no less than eight hours, and carry out some sort of plan. All of that is your work routine.

I started imagining my routine as a wheel that must continue spinning so that everything is in order. There are, however, some things that can slow it down or stop it from spinning altogether, though there are also other things that facilitate how it works. Let's look at both those factors.

Active projects

The main element of a routine is your active projects (the "current" section I talked about at the beginning of the chapter), which are what require action right now. These are the projects you cannot avoid doing, are personally responsible for, and would suffer consequences for not doing. What projects can we include here?

1. "Order gas." If I do not do this within a week, it may run out and we will not be able to cook or even heat up food.
2. "Pay the electricity bill." If we do not pay on time, we may be fined or have our electricity shut off.
3. "Buy a printer cartridge." If I put this off, we will not be able to print important documents.

These examples show that putting these types of things off leads to unnecessary wastes of time or money as well as other problems. I think it is clear what belongs in the *projects* list.

Problems

Everything that interferes with your routine belongs here. Usually these types of things have strong negative consequences and can put the brakes on your wheel or stop it completely.

For example, if we do not buy groceries for this week, we will have to stop by a 24 hour store where the prices are higher. Ultimately, moving away from one's *routine* leads to problems and crises.

Of course, there is no avoiding problems completely, seeing as how they will always pop up somewhere. That is why we have this section in the list: *problems* are your number one priority, given the fact that they often come with their own consequences. They need to be resolved as soon as possible so as not to interfere with your everyday routine.

Upcoming projects

We always have projects that have yet to begin, though we know for sure that after a certain period of time they may become *active projects*. They often do not have a set date, but can still become important and necessary at any moment. If we do not pay attention to them in time, they will most likely cause problems.

Upcoming projects should move to *active projects* before they lead to crises and problems.

Recognizing this helped me clarify my priorities, as I first had to deal with *problems,* then *routine tasks*, and then turn to *upcoming projects*.

Conclusions:

Your routine is made up of *upcoming projects*, *active projects*, and *problems*—in other words, everything that requires something of you now or in the near future to avoid negative consequences.

Now let's talk a little about *ideas* and *goals*, both of which I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

Ideas

When I started thinking of my routine as a wheel, it was important to understand the role played by *ideas* and *goals*. How do they affect our everyday routine?

Most difficult for me was separating ideas and goals from my routine, though understanding the difference between them was no walk in the park either.

So why do we call one task an *idea* and another a *routine project*? I was generally able to tell the difference intuitively, but laying out clear criteria was another matter altogether. Another issue was that some things seemed to straddle the border between the two concepts, some even leaking over into *problem* territory. I started thinking about delineating them in time: for example, how soon do I need to accomplish a certain task or project?

That led me to the following time frames:
1. Problems are very urgent and need to be done today, right now, or tomorrow at the latest.
2. Active projects need to be done today, tomorrow, or this week.
3. The upcoming projects category encompasses a wide variety of deadlines, but is generally for things that need to happen this month or next.
4. Goals can occur this year or not at all.
5. Ideas may or may not occur in general.

By then my to-do list in ToodLedo had grown to over 300 items, a number that in itself was causing me stress. Way back when I was mastering GTD everything just moved around into separate lists and laid there like dead weight. Instead, I now started taking different items from my list and asking myself five simple questions I had puzzled out of my time-based analysis and criteria:
1. What happens if I do not do it today?
2. What happens if I do not do it tomorrow?
3. What happens if I do not do it this week?
4. What happens if I do not do it this month?
5. What happens if I do not do it at all?

You can always modify these questions to fit your situation, with problems for some people ranging from one hour to one week. Everything depends on the tempo and intensity of your life in addition to the situations themselves. Regardless, I think that for most people problems are what need to be resolved today or tomorrow at the latest.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- ➢ HTML (Free /Available to everyone)

- ➢ PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)

- ➢ Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below