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Column: Getting things done: Organize, succeed

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Usually we think of productivity and organization as mainly about getting things done. They are also important in issues of focus, multitasking, and procrastination.

I recently read "Getting Things Done," by David Allen, one of the best-known productivity books on the market. One of his key points was that you must create an organizational system that you trust completely, or else your mind will inevitably worry that you're forgetting things.

How many times have you been trying to focus on something and then worried that something else important needed to be done? For some people, this can clutter the mind so much that even a simple conversation can be polluted by trying to keep a mental task list.

If you have an organization system that you trust, this distraction can be minimized. Allen's book calls for an "inbox" to collect things that pop up in your mind that you then process when you finish the task at hand. I found this to work well, and if I am reading and think of something I need to do, I just jot it down and process it later and the focus stays on reading. Further, in that processing stage, a definite decision is made on what to do with the contents of the inbox, leaving nothing lingering in the mind.

Multitasking has become very common, especially with the complexity of modern life. However, many studies have shown that humans are actually not good at multitasking and cannot effectively focus on two things at once. This probably doesn't come as a surprise, but don't underestimate the impact this can have; at times, multitasking can be deadly. Just a few years ago, a study on driving safety was conducted right here at Virginia Tech's Transportation Institute, recording over 8,000 incidents. They found distractions, inattention, and fatigue were the biggest predictors of accidents. You probably know that texting while driving was recently outlawed in Virginia - agree or disagree with the new law, this is the reason.

In my last article on procrastination, I talked about how it arises as a defense mechanism when fears arise of being overwhelmed, failing, or not finishing something. Organization and productivity efforts can have a severe impact on these fears, especially in terms of the confidence required to succeed on these tasks. Regardless of whether you are a professor or student, you know that waiting until the last minute to do things is not a good way to produce your best work.

Together, these all make a strong case for getting productivity and organization in order, and now is a good time. When the semester starts, it will be hard to pick up new habits in the midst of new classes, a new schedule, and the like. Strengthening these skills could be a big advantage, too, as college enrollments are increasing while the job market is in turmoil. Being able to focus, avoiding multitasking on key tasks, and avoiding procrastination can create opportunities and a competitive advantage for you and your goals, regardless of what they are.

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