

Why To-Do Lists Often Don't Work

To-do lists are a tried and tested tool of self-organisation. According to one study, people even fall asleep nine minutes earlier if they have prepared a to-do list for the following day. Yet perhaps you know the problem: certain tasks seem to stick to the list – you just don't get them done and carry them forward from week to week. The reason often lies in a missing distinction.

Peter Näf

It is the distinction between a stand-alone activity and a project. David Allen introduced this in his classic on work technique «Getting Things Done». The book title also became the name of the method, which is now widely used: GTD – Getting Things Done.

Another book on the subject illustrates this with a fitting example. The author recounts how she carried one task forward from list to list for months: «Change the bulb in the guest room.» Since the unfinished task drained her energy each time she read it, she finally sat down to analyse it.

Distinguishing between single activity and project

She realised that she could not simply change the bulb because she was too small and needed a ladder she did not own. So, she wrote down all the steps required to change it: call the neighbour to borrow a ladder and agree on a time to collect it; pick up the ladder; unscrew the bulb and check which model it was; go to a household shop to

buy a new one; insert it; and return the ladder.

So, it was not an independent single task that belonged on a to-do list. Instead, it was a small project in which the activity «change bulb» only came fifth.

Beware of old habits

That mere knowledge is not enough and that only consistent application brings success, I experienced myself. Years ago, I taught this principle in seminars on work techniques and believed I had internalised it. Yet suddenly I was struggling with one stubborn, seemingly simple task: «Call Mrs Meier and invite her to lunch.» Sounds easy, doesn't it? Just pick up the phone.

After weeks of procrastination, I looked more closely and realised it was in fact a small project: I had forgotten the name of the restaurant where I wanted to invite her. The next independent activity was therefore to find out the restaurant's name. That broke the spell – and nothing stood in the way of getting it done.

If you do not yet know David Allen's book, I strongly recommend it. For me, it is one of the best there is about work techniques. And now you also know which concrete task belongs on your to-do list, so that reading it does not remain just a good intention. Here's a hint: «Read David Allen's book» is not it.

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