

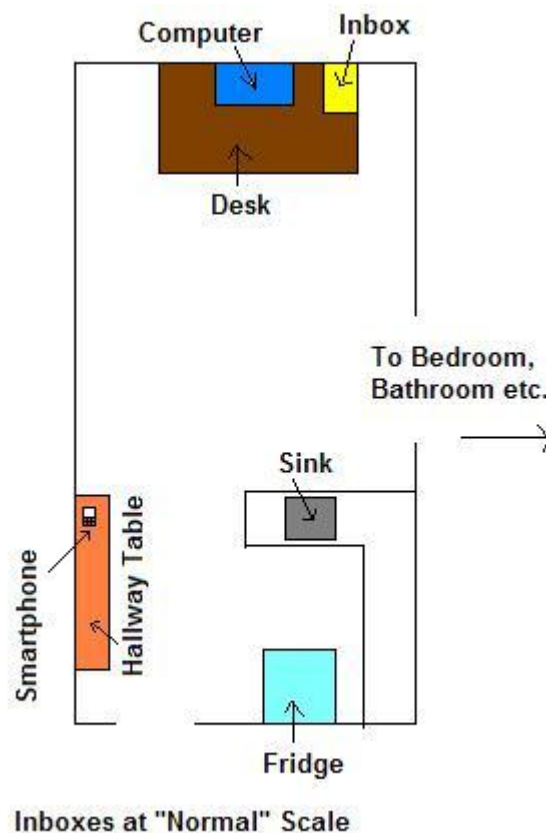
The GTD 2012 Grand Challenge

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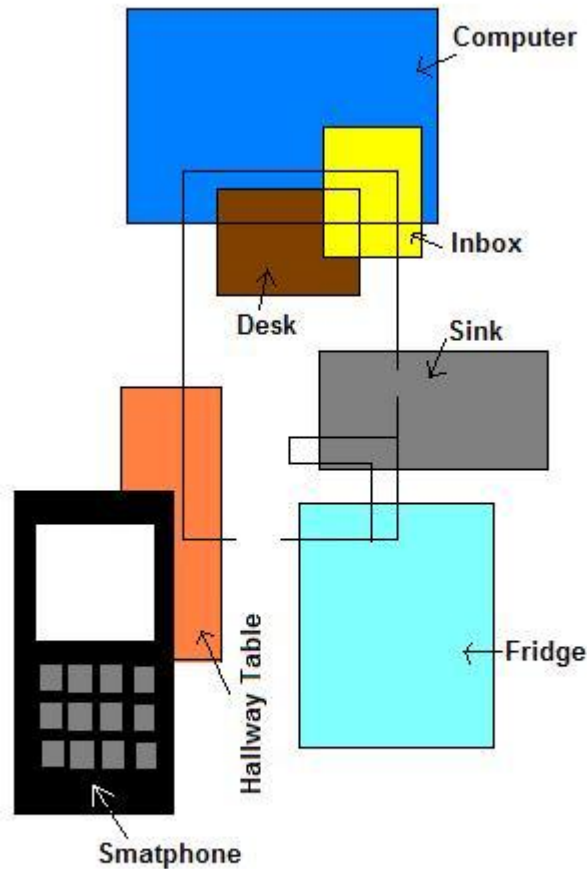
I want to raise a question about your personal vision for GTD in the future, especially as it relates to the new possibilities and problems of new technologies. But following the most basic of GTD principles, let's start at the runway level and frame the visioning problem.

If you've been a GTDer for a while, you know that inboxes, calendars and filing systems are abstractions that can manifest themselves in peculiar ways. Your fridge for instance, is all three (why? think!). To understand the problems that emerge at an intermediate/advanced levels of practice of GTD principles, try this exercise. Draw little, to-scale drawings of your home and office (just one, if you work from home like me). Here is an example of a simplified studio apartment home/office, *sans* bedroom and bathroom.



Done? Now redraw them, only this time, try and draw the components scaled according to the “GTD complexity” they represent. The proportion of time you spend doing GTD meta-tasks at that location is a good proxy. Your carpet is physically large, but has a low

“GTD complexity” (a repeated “vacuum” tickler file item perhaps). But your narrow hallway table is a beast: it holds mail, small groceries and random other things that you “collect,” which don’t belong in your paper inbox. It is also a “filing” system for keys, wallets and the like, as well as shoes (under), umbrellas and coats (hanging off hooks). Here is an example, of our hypothetical apartment redrawn to “GTD complexity scale.”



Inboxes at "information-realistic" scale

How is that for perspective? Not only are there far more “inboxes” and other implicit GTD artifacts than you think, but they are very different in size, in GTD-complexity terms, than their physical size suggests. Your blackberry, if you have one and use it extensively, would dwarf most of the items, while your carpet would shrink to penny size. I am not a very good artist, but if you *really* did this exercise for a real home/office map and scaled and “distorted” things correctly to gain a true GTD-complexity perspective (using the techniques used to make [cartograms](#) for instance), you’d end up with a very different view of your life.

Just to drive the point home, when I say your fridge is an inbox/calendar/filing system, I don’t mean a grocery list attached to it by a magnet. I mean the actual *stuff* inside. The expiry date on that milk carton implies a date by which you’ve decided to drink it, even

though it isn't on your official "calendar" or "tickler" file. If you freeze some leftovers, you are "filing" them. The implicit "next action" associated with that whole watermelon is "slice up."

You don't put all this on your written lists because you don't need to. The physical environment is efficiently designed and cues you as needed for most of the things you need to do to it. Which is why the stuff can fade into the background and it can be hard to build routines of list-updating when you *do* need to capture actions in the foreground (as with grocery lists).

I'll leave it to you to finish the perspective exercise (garages, bathrooms, laptop cases and laundry baskets are beasts).

But let's turn our attention to the huge 800 lb information gorilla in the room, your computer (and in "computer" I include your online life as well, to which it is a gateway).

Unlike your physical environment, your digital environment is *not* efficiently organized. It is a mess, but hope is around the corner.

Your Digital Life

By my estimate, stuff happening inside your computer, smartphone and Web browser accounts for about 60-70% of the GTD life for Web-enabled information ninjas. So if you are running short of time to do GTD management, and want to prioritize the heavy-lift items, you need to focus on your computer and online presence. Let's take a look at positives and the problems here.

When it comes to GTD, there are two huge positives to doing things digitally, and preferably online.

Advantage: Aspect Views

First, you can take advantage of *aspect* views of information. You don't *have* to agonize over which folder an item goes into. Use tags, and it can go into many folders at once (to replicate this on paper, you'd need to do lots of photocopying). Aspect view capability has a lot more to it, but this is the most obvious example.

Advantage: Accessibility

The second big advantage is anywhere-anytime access. For 3 years, I did paper-lists GTD. Then for the next 2 years, I just maintained my lists in my inbox. For the last 3 years, I've been using a Google Docs spreadsheet. You can almost travel "GTD naked" if your life is largely digital – all you need is always-on Internet access (I dislike today's smart phones, so I need a minimal "capture on paper" element until I get to a computer).

So much for the advantages. Now for the disadvantages.

Disadvantage: Collaboration Constraints

Collaboration is a good thing, right? Not quite. Not if you have to deal with multiple workgroups that for whatever reason, have picked a particular online repository/workflow management scheme that you cannot change unless you first convince your team AND incur a huge switching cost. At work, I am associated with 3 projects that use entirely different online repositories (with good reasons, see the next point), and I have 2-3 different ways to do “digital filing” in my personal life as well, and I *need* that variety.

And when you think about collaboration, don’t just think of other people, think intelligent software programs as well. Windows annoys me no end by heavily optimizing its hard disk management around its mule-headed “My Documents” concept. Windows being an OS, it likes to organize information by file type, so you get “My pictures,” “My Scans,” “My Music” and so forth. If you choose to wage war to organize files around your projects (as I do), you will constantly be clicking more to do things “right,” and downloading things into the wrong folders by accident.

Disadvantage: Specialization Costs

Online tools lend themselves to specialization very well, which unfortunately leads to *proliferation* of organization methods.

Without a doubt, the best way to “file” code is to put it into a version control system like Subversion or github. The best way to organize team software development work today is to use a tool like ScrumWorks that allows you to adopt agile development methodologies like Scrum. Without a doubt, the best way to organize fast-changing documentation is to use a wiki. The best “inbox” for news is an RSS reader (“must read” news) combined with Twitter (“sample/snack” news).

The faint-hearted among you will retreat to simplicity, giving up power for manageability. If you are among those, read no further. If you have the guts to take on the power of a connected, online digital life, and the courage to be a digital Hydra slayer, read on.

The Future of Digital GTD

There is no doubt that “digital GTD” will increasingly start to dominate “physical GTD,” and that within “digital GTD,” online systems will start to dominate desktop systems. I, like many of you, dream of completely “vaporizing” my information life into cloud-based systems. No paper, and only a netbook as an access point to beam myself up into the cloud.

So extrapolating from where we are, it is obvious where we will be in a couple of years. Wrangling something like a dozen distinct digital-assistant software systems that live

online, and affiliations with multiple different social/work groups. Each of your software agents/delegates will have its own ideas about how to organize things, and depending on how smart it is, will either let you override sensible defaults, or battle you relentlessly.

The people in your collaborative life, even if they are *all* GTDers (you wish!), will make different choices than you, about the best ways to organize things (remember David's conceptual definition of organization: *where things are is related to what they mean to you*, and the same piece of information will *mean* different things to different people and software agents).

Your "inbox" will largely be a set of filters (RSS, email, Twitter) that capture stuff from the real-time information stream that you need to process. With some automated help, you will store them into a set of "storage streams" (filesystems, versioning systems, bookmarking systems) or delegating/sharing them through a set of output "pass through" streams (email, blogs, Facebook).

This, I think you will admit, is going to be a mess if we don't do something. We're going to have to go back to GTD first principles, and re-apply those basic principles to the new information environment.

The GTD 2012 Grand Challenge

Let's try to frame the main problem we will face in implementing GTD implementation in 2012 and beyond:

How do you integrate your digital input, storage and output streams in a largely online and virtual information workflow management infrastructure? How do you do so in a way that reflects the true "GTD complexity" of different elements in your systems?

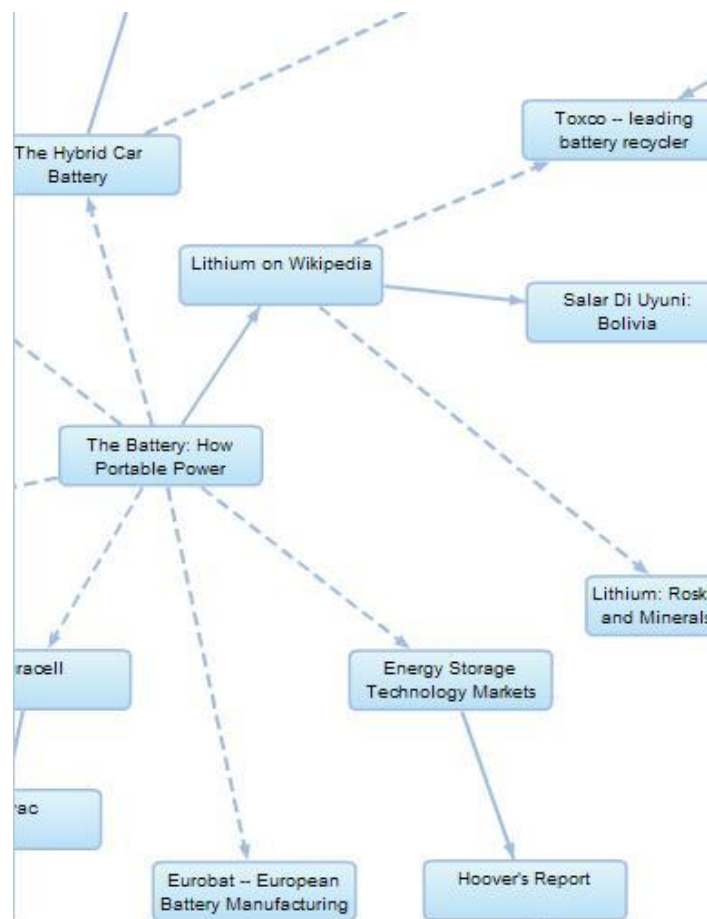
So what's your answer? Some thought-starter sub-questions, which David, Kelly Forrister, Robert Peake and I discussed in the accompanying podcast, are:

1. How do you balance runway-level tools with higher-level tools to support 30-50,000 foot thinking?
2. How do you balance right-brained/creative support tools (to allow you to think with patterns, stories and metaphors for example) against left-brained ones?
3. How can you make your tangible physical environment be more directly adapted to your online life, and be more in proportion to its complexity? (For example, big screens)
4. A lot of the new technology is fundamentally *social* in nature, so in what ways are you planning to "socialize" your practice of GTD by taking advantage of new tools?
5. Deciding what tools to STOP using, or not start using is as important as selecting ones to use. What are you going to leave out of your 2012 architecture attempts? (I personally am inclined to give up smart phones).

Trailmeme as a High-Level, Right-Brained GTD Tool

A lot of these questions and thoughts came to me while I was thinking through the marketing and positioning of a beta product I manage at Xerox, trailmeme.com. As a GTDer, a good part of my vision for trailmeme was inspired by my own need for a more right-brained tool to support higher levels of GTD practice.

Trailmeme allows you to go beyond social bookmarking and organize all your links as interconnected “trails” (it’s like creating a mindmap out of Web content). Here, for example, is [a trail](#) I made as part of one of my “look into” projects – researching the battery industry. Here’s what the main interface looks like:



Personally, I find it very useful as a way to organize my links for specific projects as meaningful patterns and stories, rather than a garbled collection, and quickly get myself up to 40-50,000 feet level thinking when I need to.

A Special Invitation for GTD Connect Members

If you are interested in trying out Trailmeme, you can [sign up for a beta account here](#), using the **gtdconnect** invitation code.

You can also help shape the vision for the technology at blog.trailmeme.com, where we have an ongoing conversation about the relationship between technology and lifestyle design.

About the Author

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