In the transition from faculty member to department chair, one invariably struggles to reconcile his or her former life as a full-time faculty member, steeped in teaching and scholarship, with his or her new role as manager, executive, and administrator. To navigate this transition effectively requires a significant paradigm shift from a daily routine that revolves around one’s own academic pursuits to one centered on the department as a whole. The biggest change for me as a chair came when I realized I was no longer managing just my own business, but the business of a department where my decisions would affect my faculty, staff, and students.

As a researcher and faculty member, I always had been able to set my own deadlines and break them without being accountable to anyone but myself. As a department chair, however, the completion of both simple tasks and complex projects had more concrete expectations associated with them. At any given time, I was accountable to the dean, the faculty, the students, and the public. My time management skills were perfectly adequate for a junior faculty member and I had little difficulty juggling the tasks of teaching (non-negotiable classroom and grading time), service (requisite committee work), and research (every other spare minute, at work or at home). With the responsibilities of department chair, however, came demands for better management skills—management of schedules, staff, faculty, budgets, and of course, management of time. Having never managed even a paper route, I turned to some publications on professional organization that are perhaps geared more toward the business world, but that are every bit as relevant in academia. Particularly helpful for me was *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* (Allen, 2002), which provides a step-by-step process for the efficient management of all those little pieces of paper, e-mails, and ideas that come into our lives each day. Some of the tenets set forth in this book seem obvious at first, but I found that if I really practiced them, I handled paper less, I dispatched my duties more promptly and efficiently, and I worried less about what might lurk at the bottom of a pile of papers.

Author David Allen contends that recent years have seen an increase in the importance of “knowledge work”—work that relies on the processing of information and lacks the clear task boundaries and expectations of manual labor. With its emphasis on information transfer in the forms of teaching, learning, and scholarly publication, academia certainly must be one of the quintessential arenas of knowledge work. Nevertheless, few academics are formally trained in organizational principles, and those taking on the responsibilities of department chair may feel particularly overwhelmed, frustrated, and at a loss to manage time effectively.

Allen notes that much of the daily stress encountered by knowledge workers stems from a suite of broken agreements made with oneself, then hastily forgotten because they were never recorded in a reliable system. Mentally storing reminders of such commitments, he says, is an inefficient use of time and thwarts calm and appropriate decision making. Instead, he advocates a simple yet elegant system to capture all incoming streams of information (paper and electronic, Earth-shattering and banal), and
organizes them according to the next action required to move them forward. The result is a set of lists that, when reviewed regularly and appropriately, reminds the user of what actions can be taken in a given circumstance. By trusting this system to keep track of what is not being done, the mind is freed to focus clearly on what can be done in the moment. Productivity increases, and when critical action tasks are done, delegated, or deferred until a later time, the mind is further liberated to creatively expand and explore far beyond the realm of a pre-defined “to-do” list.

Allen’s system is not particularly intricate, but some of its embedded techniques can have far-reaching effects. For example, *Getting Things Done* recommends unidirectional workflow processing, with equal initial attention given to each item. Addressing an overflowing in-basket, one might first encounter a piece of junk mail. Only after deciding that this item should be discarded should the next item be addressed. (Perhaps it is an invoice from a recent equipment purchase that needs to be routed to accounts payable.) The third item down may be more interesting or important (say, a letter from the tenure committee), but digging for this item ahead of the others circumvents the system and leaves a pile of unevaluated, stress-inducing memos and other items in the wake. By processing input one item at a time, one can decide with just a few seconds’ thought what the item is and what, if anything, should be done with it.

The purpose of this article is not to promote a specific program or publication, but to suggest that a successful transition to department chair should include a candid reassessment of one’s time management skills and system for efficient workflow. Many personal productivity methods exist, and no one system will work perfectly for every department chair. The pathway to increased productivity espoused by Allen capitalizes on a personal, behavioral change made to better deal with extraneous and unpredictable sources of input. It may take many months before such a behavioral shift becomes second nature, but by manipulating the factors one can control, he or she is better prepared to manage the unexpected. For new department chairs, implementing such a disciplined change can foster better communication, enhance productivity, and reduce stresses that negatively affect the work–life balance.

Reference: