

12 Getting Things Done: Productivity, Self-Management, and the Order of Things

Melissa Gregg

This chapter connects productivity applications—also known as Getting Things Done (GTD) apps—with the tradition of time management pedagogy that has developed in modern business culture over the past several decades. Both spheres have religious dimensions: I show how old ideas of confession, abstinence, and salvation appear as rehabilitative marketing spin in services touted by GTD prophets today. This context illustrates GTD's appeal as a secular ethics, and as what I will suggest is a kind of religious practice. In the shift from the printed page to the network, time management techniques accumulate some of the resonances of Silicon Valley mythology, and become a set of tenets that propel contemporary ideas of creativity and industry through association with vocation and religious calling.

The extent to which this appeal fails as religious comes down to the fact that GTD is a practice that is self-oriented, not other-focused—indeed, its main principles require investment in a default assholery (James 2012) that elevates an elite class of worker beyond the concerns of ordinary colleagues and social bonds. GTD produces an idea of human efficiency that is only imaginable through the mutually constitutive discourses of computation and management. Applying these principles of efficiency to the individual, productivity regimes enacted through new media hardware and software retrain seemingly natural aspects of social being toward more substantial and rewarding ends.

As we will see, time management renders a wide expanse of convivial activities as traps or annoyances best avoided. In this sense, GTD espouses asociality as superiority. It draws together troubling philosophical legacies of exceptionalism in the guise of successful entrepreneurialism. In the networked context, productivity's mandate is to obliterate what remains of voluntary sociability in the otherwise coercive networking context of the modern workplace (Gregg 2011). It takes seriously the possibility of focusing attention purely on the consequential, at least for predetermined periods. That individuals have the power to control life's unpredictability in such a way through the deployment of technological infrastructure is just the first fantasy GTD cannot fulfill.

Feeling Productive

To *feel productive* is to exude as a personal accomplishment the qualities sought and endorsed by modern computing technologies and management mantras alike. GTD apps allow users to achieve their goals and reclaim appropriate space-time perception in the face of network culture's immersive potential. This is done in a number of ways, from shutting down email and nonpriority communication to quantifying individuals' peak performance periods for maximum efficiency. The GTD industry thus epitomizes the trend toward *algorithmic living*, in which data bits and code become the impetus for enlightened behavior. GTD categorizes, with the aim of eventually finessing, different elements of a user's world. Services and pointers provided by productivity apps turn everyday activities into objects of measurement—and hence adjustment and improvement—by a “quantified self.”¹

GTD's “affect of efficiency” emerges from adopting specific techniques “of thinking about doing and not-doing” (Adrian Mackenzie 2008, 149). It transforms the volatility of contemporary living into actionable steps that provide a better pace and orientation for our encounters with time and things. Productivity apps are the harbinger of and contributors to this specific affective bearing: their promise is to deliver productivity regularly and reliably, cognizant of the pleasures to be found in uninterrupted work. GTD strives to deliver an enhanced relationship to time by maximizing opportunities for optimal work “flow” (Csíkszentmihályi 1990; Banks 2014). With names like Self Control, Omnifocus, Rescue Time, even Freedom, these services offer liberation as much as consolation from everyday demands. The objective is to provide mastery over extraneous matters—what time management manuals have long referred to as “trivia”—and to overcome the fallibility of human constraints, like memory. GTD responds to a condition in which the plenitude of data accessible online can lead to an inability to complete routine tasks, as one of the most popular reminder services, Remember the Milk indicates (www.rememberthemilk.com).

Advancing the technological optimism that has characterized key moments in the history of the internet (Turner 2006), GTD's spin on the original hacker ethic is to see personal and professional tasks alike as challenges to be overcome through efficient programming. As is the case in the shift to “cognitive capitalism” (Moulier 2011), life and labor are interchangeable versions of administrivia; GTD's gift is to deliver results in the private and public zones that are equally performative in the online spheres now crucial to displaying competent—which is to say profitable—subjectivity. The very need for so many reminder and scheduling services as digital devices proliferate illustrates certain shortcomings in our ability to “action” what is routinely demanded of us in networked life. GTD allows us to see that there may be a growing section of the population for whom the ability to prioritize without the prompting of computer platforms is either undesirable or unthinkable. In practice, GTD applications exacerbate as

much as they respond to the fallibility of memory and motivation in the face of data overload. Productivity apps can be seen as one of the “genres of affect management” (Berlant 2011) critical to developing the forms of attention necessary for survival and flourishing in the present. GTD is an index that the seductiveness of online culture is a new opportunity and burden for those whose routine comforts and friendship communities increasingly take place in virtual environments. Time management techniques offer a technological solution to an ontological and empirical problem: that the network delivers more requests for attention than it is possible to act upon, and that these requests often come from colleagues, friends, and family simultaneously.

For workers, GTD encapsulates at least two priorities necessary to succeed within the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005):

1. *To create control*: over temptation, but also demands. One of the key aspects of contemporary online life is the inability to determine whether some notification or ping or contact will be an opportunity or a threat, a source of pleasure or trauma. This reconfigures notions of affect stemming from systems theory, elaborated in the work of Silvan Tomkins and circulated by scholars such as Eve Sedgwick, Adam Frank, and Teresa Brennan (Seigworth and Gregg 2010). A simple example of how networked affect operates is the habit of checking email. In spite of our knowledge that browsing an inbox is usually uninspiring and damaging to concentration, we still do so. The optimistic expectation of a magic message with happy news almost always ends in disappointment, but the cycle of checking nonetheless continues (see also Dean, this volume; Karppi, this volume). Our persistent return to the volatile affective sphere of the digital, in spite of diminishing returns, demands a theory of attachment that accounts for such ordinary practices of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011).

2. *To “thrive on chaos”*: a phrase from management monolith Tom Peters (1988) that appears in minor variations in the subtitle of many work-related advice manuals (e.g., Carroll 2004). The Peters dictum captures GTD’s basic rationale: to maintain a functioning individual with an enhanced likelihood of greatness. Yet the ahistorical technocentrism of GTD’s online subcultures has served to obscure the direct link between this new manifestation of time management techniques and previous examples of popular business pedagogy.

The remainder of this chapter suggests that these are alarming priorities for the majority of workers to accept. Their combination in the GTD lifeworld, in particular, signals a renewed appeal of the ideals popularized by figures like Ayn Rand who held sway over some of the earliest web pioneers (Streeter 2011; Curtis 2011). The heroic individualism characteristic of Silicon Valley myth, from Bill Gates to Mark Zuckerberg, Stewart Brand to Steve Jobs, is one that legitimizes notions of individual supremacy in the name of advancing civilization and success. It is a belief system that normalizes and accepts hierarchical power and collegial disharmony. In its efforts to streamline out

of existence not just distractions but the purportedly unimportant neediness of other people, GTD continues a legacy of thought that is content with the mission of elevating the status of a few especially brilliant people above the struggles of others.

(Still) Getting Things Done

To focus solely on the technological dimensions of GTD is to miss some significant precursors that assist in understanding its function. *Getting Things Done* (Allen 2001) is one of the most successful recent titles among the countless time management publications that have been a feature of office life over the course of many decades. GTD owes a debt to this tradition of management self-help and the discourses of professionalism that typified the mid-century high modernity of Fordist production. As the ranks of middle management swelled in the organization era of the 1950s and 1960s, the genre of popular business pedagogy served as a training ground for a generally male business class seeking to secure reputational capital and the benefits of lifelong employment. By the 1980s, however, such literature was aimed at assisting managers charged with the task of mass layoffs and corporate restructuring. It is in this period, and moving into the early 1990s, that new efforts in professional strategizing took hold. Stephen Covey, author of the phenomenally successful *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, describes this move as an “inside-out approach to personal and interpersonal effectiveness” (Covey, in Mackenzie 2008, 141). Self-help publications expanded in scope from addressing an aspirational management elite to become fodder for the creative class of information workers. These employees not only exercised new varieties of power in team-based workplaces, they also enjoyed the luxury of company-funded air travel, with enough down time to peruse the departure lounge bookshops that are a pivotal site for productivity pedagogy.

A curious aspect of this lucrative publishing business throughout its transformations is the timelessness of its advice. From the subtle art of “wastebasketry” (Bliss 1993) to the finer skill of delegation, business self-help serves up a host of tried and true methods to escape “the time trap” (Alec Mackenzie 1972, 1990). Indeed management manuals are notably ahistorical, with repetition not only of particular tips (ranked and refined to-do lists; daily affirmations; time logs; the Pareto principle, or 20 percent rule)² but also of highly repetitive and reciprocal suggested reading lists. Successful writers adopt a fearless approach to self-citation and appear to have no qualms in republishing predecessors’ recommendations, even their anecdotes. Throughout, the authority of the writing is punctuated and enhanced with recourse to pithy quotations, which may derive from religious, spiritual, or conventional wisdom, alongside “quasi-scientific appeals to neurology and psychology” (Mackenzie 2008, 143).

An impoverished attention to precedent is one of time management pedagogy’s key ironies. That its relationship to time and history is distinctly unreflexive mirrors the

presentism of business culture broadly. If the formula for success is largely invariable over time, this only confirms the status of business self-help as a genre, for which there is an apparently insatiable market appetite. As a *popular* genre, however, productivity maintains an ambivalent proximity to any explicit training within the workplace. In-house time management training for corporate professionals is often optional rather than mandatory, marking productivity pedagogy as the stuff of cattle-class airline cabins and weekend sofas rather than office settings *per se*.

Personal productivity literature's recreational tenor exemplifies what Mark Banks (2009) calls "instrumental leisure." This incorporates the broader suite of lifestyle preferences necessary to ensure middle-class hegemony in social and cultural space. As we will see, GTD apps extend this practice, teaching "methods of working that fill gaps between the worlds of enterprise, government, education and everyday life" (Mackenzie 2008, 137). This is part of a wider process that is implicated in the transference of work-based priorities throughout all enclaves of the social (Berardi 2009).

As institutional cutbacks began to throttle the benefits of white collar work, for those lacking the formal guidance or explicit instruction once reserved for a vocation, and for the many increasingly coming to terms with the unlikely prospect of a secure career in an organization, productivity literature has filled a psychological void. In the context of Western secular business culture, it addresses a salariat in need of recognition and the reassurance that its members are not only gifted and capable but, with the right motivation, destined for a prosperous future. In its combination of solace and pragmatism, time management technologies are constituted through a recreational sermonizing in which the basic structures of religion come to fruition. The next section outlines at least three components central to this spiritual dimension as productivity pedagogy has moved online. Through its myths of origin,³ its performativity,⁴ and its constant appeal to disciplined repetition, GTD's networked subcultures address users as potential followers requiring indoctrination. As I will suggest, however, this is a religion of its neoliberal time, in that an inward focus avoids any theory of society that can serve to harness care for others.

The Individual as Failure—GTD and Confession

In his address to Google employees in 2007, Merlin Mann, creator of the 43 Folders website and icon of the online GTD movement, begins with an anecdote.⁵ Appealing to workers on a personal level, Mann relates the history of his experience with email. The tale begins with infatuation and love, sharing the wonder and excitement of email as an "astonishing" new horizon for contact. As the volume of online communication increases, however, Mann admits to growing feelings of inadequacy. His relationship to email deteriorates over time to that of being overwhelmed and paralyzed by messages. Couched in Mann's endearing style, the GTD techniques he discusses are offered as a solution to a familiar kind of inertia. The anecdotal mode is purposeful here, as it is in

so many pedagogical contexts. Mann draws on self-help's formulaic structure, which charts a recognizable course: "You think I'm not like you, but listen. I had your problem. I overcame it. Here's how. Copy me." Mann's Inbox Zero technique follows the same tenets of paperwork efficiency touted in time management manuals for decades. The only novelty is the technological development that makes email the primary platform now delivering information to workers.

Mann's career as a motivational speaker and creative talent trades on the popularity of his 43 Folders website and builds from the example of self-help pioneers such as Dale Carnegie (1988), whose lectures to Depression-era Manhattanites punctuated shrewd business advice with multiple anecdotes.⁶ In Mann's case, the cathartic function of his introduction also draws on the Augustinian tradition of confession, dating back to the fourth century.⁷ To confess is to speak the truth of oneself, to access and retrieve the essence of interiority and offer it to others for judgment (Foucault 1978). A generic trait of other self-help programs (twelve-step, AA), confession's retro-introspection calls for an honest and attentive self-criticism to generate a new manner of living. The conversion process initiated by the confessional has mobilizing power. The pattern or refrain—"I too had your problem, but look at me now. If you only adopt my methods, you can be cured"—encourages followers to identify with a leader, see the light, and find a path of better thinking that animates righteousness. In GTD, reinvention is reinforced by repetitive and habitual practices that include positive affirmations and carefully selected catchphrases. The latter are further endorsed by a populist neuroscience that encompasses an evangelical optimism, evident in the oft-cited maxim to "visualize" change.⁸

In combination, the GTD confession-conversion process succeeds on a religious level to the extent that it avoids inherently political structural questions and instead demands a leap of faith. The link between inward focus and individualism is ensured through the aura of the celebrity GTDer, whose visionary status facilitates the recruitment of others. Mann's stardom (he is introduced as a "superhero" by the Google host) rides the wave of enthusiasm for other dot-com prophets whose unique qualities and innate genius inspire others. But his personal charisma rests on a disavowal of this status. His website is *not* just another instance of the GTD trend, but "about finding the time and attention to do your best creative work."⁹ For the regular GTD believer, the discourse of confession articulates a conjuncture between personal improvement and personal productivity. It is an articulation that makes two things appear natural in their alliance, even if they do not necessarily go together (Hall in Grossberg 1996).

Taking Control—GTD and Self-Discipline

Religious traditions are also evident in productivity techniques that encourage periods of abstinence and withdrawal from the network. Self Control and Cold Turkey are downloadable applications that block a computer's access to desirable online sites (those that

occasion regretful indulgence) and the established peril of email. The tagline for Cold Turkey—"I'm watching you"—winks knowingly at dystopian visions of surveillance embodied in Big Brother in its promise to "temporarily block you off of social media sites, addicting websites, games and even programs!" (<http://getcoldturkey.com>). Also noteworthy in this genre, Self Control (<http://selfcontrolapp.com>) offers a "spirit of escape" for users faced with the challenge of too many online obligations. Creator Steve Lambert cites the influence of Merlin Mann's Inbox Zero speech at Google as formative in dreaming up his application's design (<http://visitsteve.com/made/selfcontrol/>). Self Control is his effort "to deliberately create time for me to create that even I couldn't sabotage." It offers assistance for individuals looking to focus "on the work that, hopefully, they care the most about, for their livelihood and for their well-being. It's about making the best of a bad situation" (Lambert 2012).¹⁰

Like the confessional process outline above, any success possible through using these programs requires users to acknowledge a problem. In this case it is the ceaseless temptation of stimuli available in a smorgasbord of online forums. Users of these platforms may remain skeptical of the deification attached to GTD gurus and have little to do with online subcultures in general. Their utilitarian outlook makes them unlikely candidates for conversion. Instead, the pleasures of online life are acknowledged to be the problem in maintaining a healthy balance of activities. Within the framework of productivity, these users respond positively to forced deprivation. Their more militant approach reckons with the sociability and coerciveness of the network, perhaps better figured as a challenge of will in an age of neuromarketing and attention-seeking design.

The block-and-avoid tactics underpinning these instances of GTD are a redeployment of pointers from productivity literature of decades past (e.g., the suggestion to schedule a "golden hour" of uninterrupted time each day, or the imperative to identify a "prime time" for performance).¹¹ But in the online context, the prevention model invokes a health-oriented moralism reminiscent of Catholicism, with its prevailing metaphors of denial, restraint, asceticism, and sin. Too much socializing with friends is a temptation to be trained out of workers if they are to remain appropriately productive. GTD's techno-fix provides a solution to this as well as to common etiquette dilemmas—the Facebook friend who sends constant messages, the IM buddy who ignores a "busy" status. To cope with these situations, GTD extends the moralizing and individualizing tendencies of particular religious traditions as much as self-help more broadly in prompting the ultimate question: could your biggest productivity problem be *you*?

Omniscience and Omnipotence—GTD and Freedom

A third religious strain of GTD is its desire to produce the elevated perspective necessary to deliver improved productivity. Quantification apps such as Rescue Time (www.rescuetime.com/) and Vitamin-R (www.publicspace.net/Vitamin-R/) join project management suites like Omnifocus (www.omnigroup.com/products/omnifocus/) in the

aim to deliver fully integrated maps of the territory of waking life. These examples allow users to track work/life cycles by day, hour, or minute, so that energy levels and communication patterns can be identified for improvement or discipline. The ultimate goal is to siphon off periods of greater concentration from the mass of undifferentiated data and demands.

The pivotal religious experience delivered by these services is the sense that *you* can be God, in charge of your destiny, for at least twenty-five minutes a day.¹² Their objective is to provide uninterrupted time to be creative—to get on with the “real” work of producing the product, idea, or insight that others in the office will likely miss. This process manipulates the unwieldy “order of things” (Foucault 1970) presented by the network to make space for guilt-free concentration. The cumulative habit of indulging this superior use of time enlivens awareness of productive opportunities throughout the workday. Such mindful attention to time may allow room for extraneous matters, but only after more noteworthy targets have been met.

GTD’s Order of Things

The notion of freedom that GTD services animate updates for the network era regimes of prioritization first naturalized in time management manuals of the 1970s and 1980s, in which readers were taught how to classify tasks and disruptions from the urgent to the not so urgent, the important to the trivial. Thus categorized, anything that can be delegated is delegated, according to ruthless regimes of calculation. The “how to” section of Mackenzie’s 1972 edition of *The Time Trap* shows the politics of order involved in these earlier precedents. The things that come to count as trivia include updates on overdue reports alongside telephone calls from one’s wife. In describing tactics to avoid “the avalanche of paperwork,” the author argues that everything comes down to assessing “which materials ought to come into your desk and which ought to be screened out mercilessly by your secretary” (Mackenzie 1972, 69). GTD apps extend time management’s longstanding effort to produce a hierarchy of attention for workers whose jobs reward elite performance. This is the freedom to act and make history through the consequential decisions confined to the privilege of high office, once all other administrative burdens have been delegated down the workplace hierarchy.

A historical reading allows us to note that the rise of techno-mediated efficiency infrastructure occurs in tandem with post-Fordism’s reconfiguration of the sexual contract. Productivity apps are the digital assistants increasingly required when the gendered labor of the secretary and the wife are not so easily available.¹³ In postfeminist work cultures mediated by personal mobile devices, business and home-based administration are less likely to be delegated to others, even if, as we are realizing, a key component of GTD philosophy is to absolve responsibility for certain kinds of labor. In the wake of the significant rupture brought about by feminism, the affective labor of the

secretary is a luxury fewer numbers of workers will know. As such, GTD allows us to appreciate the extent of the administrative and logistical labor once provided largely by women.

The notion of freedom GTD celebrates is, perversely, the freedom to work (Gregg 2007). In practice it typically means liberation from a raft of unrewarding labor that others must still perform. This understanding of freedom as the power to delegate fits with broader attitudes that have shaped the development of the internet for several decades. It is a vision that naturalizes the power of men over women, to the degree that the freedom it promotes is understood “in terms of the power to command, to walk out the door, to deny the work of nurturing and the material fact of interdependence” (Streeter 2011, 13). It is also a vision that is specifically American, a “habit of understanding freedom negatively, blindly, as freedom from government, freedom from dependency, freedom from others” (Streeter 2011, 13). The idea of freedom through creative labor relates to the broader glamorization of work in successive dot-com booms and the origin stories attached to pivotal leaders (Jobs and Wozniak, Gates, etc.). The quasi-religious appeal of these narratives resonates strongly with the elements I have been describing as crucial to the GTD worldview.

GTD resembles a religion in providing a solution to the inadequacies of an individual who, following successful inculcation of its systemized set of practices, is ultimately destined for a higher calling. In the first category of techniques identified above, conversion to a productivity program is initiated through confession. Recruitment is premised on admitting a deep truth—being a fallible human and therefore in need of repair. This acknowledgment of personal failure becomes material to be rehabilitated through techniques of mastery, whether it is elevation above the day-to-day concerns of this life (Zen Habits, <http://zenhabits.net>) or the elimination of obligation (the “four-hour work week”—see Ferriss 2007). In the second category, the seeker similarly admits to character flaws, acknowledging the sin of relationships outside work, which in the logic of productivity amounts to quasi-incompetence close to a lack of will. The sinner calls upon a higher power to reward productivity and punish unproductive activities through the policing tactics of blocking and surveillance. This is, however, an ethics of resignation, one that effectively cedes control over access to seductive communication to a stronger force. Technology becomes a judging deity, a suprahuman fix for problems generated by technology itself. Finally, in the third category, GTD is the route toward the ultimate good: pure creativity. Quantification and metrics allow the user a divine perspective, that of a creator-God liberated from the fallibility of self *and* others. Elevated above the fate of peers through data insights and behavior tracking, the successful GTDer focuses attention on being brilliant and imagining a world of greater things.

Each of these versions of GTD orthodoxy involves a vision of mastery and control that entails freedom from obligation if not from work. There is no register for the

materiality of other people, the infrastructure enabling freedom, or the mutual dependence that liberation requires. The accomplished individualism of the GTD subject enjoys what is claimed as a natural freedom. Yet this “natural” bearing is the result of technologies of self-management arising from a dedicated literature of popular pedagogy over many decades. This forgotten history has the cumulative effect of making GTD’s myopia an acceptable good, even while its vision of personal emancipation requires segregation among workers. Productivity technologies thus provide protection from the pollution of incompetent others, a means to avoid “idiot compassion” (Carroll 2004). As a philosophy, GTD operates on the premise that “taking time for oneself is a form of liberation” (Lambert 2012).

The Territory of the Postprofessional

GTD’s lack of novelty is only understandable given that it inherits a tradition of repetitive recommendations synonymous with the emergence of the modern business press. If motivational literature of the 1970s and 1980s helped managers to maintain their distance from those under their watch, GTD apps are a sign that, for many, the distance between manager and employee has collapsed. This collapse is a large part of the revolution that online connectivity has wrought upon organizations, “as knowledge workers began to discover the pleasures of online communication in substantial numbers, and elites groped for an organizational framework” capable of managing the “structure of desire” epitomized in web browsing’s “endless ‘what’s next?’” (Streeter 2011, 25). In flexible, decentralized worksites today, time management has been one of the most prominent techniques cultivated by individuals to maintain employability in the face of growing occupational insecurity. Increasingly dissatisfied by (when they aren’t also prevented from achieving) the predictability of a company career, employees have apparently gained fulfillment through proximity to “projects” and “networks,” just as employers have offered the benefits of “flexibility” rather than stability in this “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). With their emphasis on streamlined workflow, the efficiency logics of GTD apps epitomize these broader cultural trends. They evolve in tandem with management protocols inviting employees to display autonomy and responsibility by “working smarter, not harder.”

Unlike earlier individuals engaged in forms of professional strategizing, however, the self-sufficient worker downloading GTD apps today takes on the imperative of productivity in spite of a generalized lack of employment and institutional security. The difference between time management in the organizational era—defined by to-do lists, clock time, and a highly gendered division of labor—and GTD in the network era—where employees at all levels are equally responsible for their own productivity—is thus the difference between professional and *postprofessional* subjectivity. This is a work context in which prior versions of management surveillance are less obvious or

necessary, since the innate value of productivity is no longer questioned. It is no coincidence, I have been suggesting, that it is also a moment in which the commonsense tenets of individualism and freedom have become so embedded in technology design that a cooperative politics seems elusive.

In contrast to the social ethic attributable to the organization era (Whyte 1956), in which workers gained status and privileges through association with a firm, GTD's asociality reflects a more widespread experience of mobile work. Flexible freelancers and remote workers of all kinds are liberated from the office because they are assumed to be willing to provide their own, ostensibly inexhaustible, resources. These resources begin with the logistical benchmark of constant connectivity and stretch to include the psychological resilience and composure entailed in day-to-day affect management. In this context, GTD's anti-institutionalism inaugurates a digital nihilism that obviates the need for, and reality of, mutual dependence and reciprocity in the workplace.

Productivity's self-inflating rhetoric positions the creative worker as a heroic individual who triumphs through the adoption of superior techniques. This is the pleasure individual workers feel in identifying with imperatives that are directly productive for capital. GTD produces meaning by providing an order in which to do things so that they appear superficially manageable. In doing so, GTD erases any need to question the overall structure determining *which* things are important.

GTD's individualized response to workplace inefficiency is a marker of the inchoate labor politics of the precarious white-collar worker. The careerist concerns of today's wannabe managers are matched only by the competitive mindset of the freelance entrepreneur battling for a break in the jackpot economy. GTD shows how the cut-throat requirements of even the most ordinary middle-class job are in the process of becoming detached from a horizon of ethical conduct once critical to participation in the bourgeois public sphere. Of course this horizon was always something of a fantasy. This chapter's brief history of time management is not intended to eulogize a golden age of good conduct that produced an ethics of business. The nine-to-five imaginary of Fordism may have allowed some to opt out of the careerist and managerial thinking now required of the majority, but it did so at the expense of what came to be known as "minorities," in relation to the particular gender, race, class, and sexuality assumed of the default worker (Mitropoulos 2006). Productivity apps extend GTD's "response-in-denial to the competitive pressures of the information economy" (Mackenzie 2008, 138) by consolidating what were already innate advantages for well-educated, because well-networked, men. That GTD emerges—as religion, as fad—within the growing demographic of information workers highlights the winning combination of poise, access, and literacy that defines participation in today's digital networks.

The further story GTD tells is that of the segregation between the information haves and "have-less" (Qiu 2009). Its cutting-edge user base jostles to stay at the top of the division of labor in an increasingly global economy. It provides "a delusional and probably

short-lived self-satisfaction to individuals keen to keep abreast of the waves created by their own careers and their own enthusiasm for more communication and more speed” (Mackenzie 2008, 138). Mackenzie’s analysis accentuates GTD’s casual solipsism, which enables already privileged individuals “to differentiate themselves.” GTDerS are defined by productivity’s circular reward structure, which holds that it is always better to “do more than their friends, partners, and colleagues.” But such “enhanced efficiency only matters if some other people appear to be less mobile”—that is, if all agree to the same economy of activity (Mackenzie 2008, 143).

Alternatives to this regime of value are thankfully already available, for instance in the “refusal of work” legacy in the tradition of autonomist Marxism (Berardi 2009). The language of the “social factory” is useful for showing productivity’s limitless ambition, and the pointlessness of “gaming” a system with predefined ends.¹⁴ Recent feminist theory (e.g., Weeks 2011; McRobbie 2010) reads autonomist histories in combination with the ongoing devaluation of women’s work—a move that is crucial to appreciate how the desire for time management underpinning productivity applications takes a particular notion of time for granted. It assumes that time, like the worker, can be managed according to the imperatives of capitalist production, and it does this in an unreflective way. Such a perspective cannot register the phenomenological or affective experience of multiple and conflicting stimuli: a reality that has long been the standard for working women, especially mothers, both within and outside the home. GTD’s faith in technology as the salve for broader ontological insecurity in many ways exacerbates the hierarchies of labor inherited from previous configurations of work. A closer look at the “order of things” that it is GTD’s mandate to reproduce reveals that the variety of labor valued within its system is highly selective.

As has always been the case, productivity logic offers a pedagogy of time that legitimates some workers’ freedom over others. In its online manifestations, it provides a technical apparatus to deflect awareness of this fact, as it delegates work downward to those without the social or technical means to escape. GTD is in this sense an inkling of what has happened to the Protestant ethic in the new spirit of informational capitalism. Whereas capitalist values were once thought to align with the desire to move closer to God *in spirit*, productivity’s mandate of outsourcing and delegating labor suggests that we now seek to become Godlike ourselves. The GTDer justifies his difference from the mass of workers, whose lack of self-discipline condemns them to administrivia. This is a particularly pernicious brand of nihilism, since it promotes *as* autonomy and freedom what is, in effect, a refusal to place any hope in improving conditions for others.

GTD’s impossible promise is to transcend the competing affects of networked, which is to say contemporary, experience. Its religious valences seek a Pentecostal conversion of the Godlike power to control time and space. It is enough of an affront that this lifestyle actively endorses a form of living that substitutes action for thought (Mackenzie 2008). In joining the ranks of GTDerS, we subscribe to a religion without an ethics, an

ontology without an epistemology, along with a set of gestures meant to console us when faced with the knowledge that there are always too many things to do, but there may never be a sense of meaning behind the disorder.

Notes

1. Quantified Self, like GTD, is a trademarked movement focusing on the insights to be found in life tracking. See <http://quantifiedself.com/>. A useful overview is Nafus and Sherman (2013).

2. The Pareto principle, “the law of the vital few,” is based on a formula first outlined by Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923) to explain the unequal distribution of wealth in his country. In time management pedagogy, this has been repurposed variously to explain that the least important work takes up eighty percent of our time—or, alternatively, that the top twenty percent of workers triumph because they focus on the most meaningful results/projects/clients. In either case, the principle is used to encourage better attention to prioritizing tasks and producing the right order of things.

3. An example of one such myth is a story told repeatedly in time management publications (e.g., *The Time Trap*, 1972 and 1990 versions) regarding Charles Schwab—an early president of Bethlehem Steel. Interested in how he could improve his productivity, Schwab engaged a consultant who urged him to write a daily to-do list with only one or two items on the list that, no matter what, had to be completed before anything else that day. This simple technique is said to have saved the company major ongoing costs, and the source of the advice was given a \$25,000 check in gratitude. In a footnote, Mackenzie attributes the story to an anecdote reproduced in another productivity manual, further obscuring the source of the original tale.

4. Time management manuals typify Butler’s (1990) notion of performativity, in that they produce a compelling and mobilizing ideal image that is itself based on a copy for which there is no original.

5. The address to Google employees is available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9UjeTmb3Yk>. Mann is unique in time management pedagogy circles for addressing his debt to predecessor Dave Allen in an FAQ on his popular 43 Folders website (<http://www.43folders.com>). Yet the origins of Mann’s blog, as an attempt to implement the GTD philosophy, follow generic conventions on at least two other fronts: in documenting a project inspired by a book; and also, as we have seen since, in the retrospective renouncement of the very principles that contributed to his rising celebrity (see Babauta, 2011).

6. First published in 1929, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* set the standard for self-help, perhaps for all time, and has been reimagined in recent years to address the context of social media specifically in Carnegie and Associates (2011).

7. This passage arises from conversation with Jason Wilson.

8. The combination of pseudoscience, spirituality, and motivation in business self-help is especially great in the US. A striking example is Lewis (2008, 192–193):

Your mind holds all of the power necessary to propel you toward your goals. You may have heard the expression “If you can believe it, you can achieve it.” I know that statement is true. Nothing can take you farther or make more of a difference in your life than the incredible power of your own mind.

9. His FAQ section further states: “I am the guru of nothing,” even while “my out-the-door price for a one-day visit inside the lower 48 starts around the price of a nice Honda Civic. Goes up from there”: <http://www.merlinmann.com/faqs/hiring-merlin/okay-so-whats-it-cost-to-hire-you.html>.

10. Lambert offers a generous engagement with early sections of this paper in Lambert (2012).

11. Both appear in various forms in Mackenzie (1972, 1990) as well as Bliss (1993).

12. This marks their synergy with life-hacking philosophies such as “The Pomodoro Technique.” See www.pomodoratechnique.com.

13. This chapter is partly inspired by reactions to Twitter’s acquisition of the early GTD app I Want Sandy. Mourning the closure of the service online, a remarkable number of users invoked gendered language which fit with the retro-secretary aesthetics of the application itself. See Dornfest (2008).

14. The gamification of GTD is evident in productivity apps like Epic Win (www.epicwin.net). In its sample screenshot, pushups and garbage duties attest the interoperability of labor and life, with some schoolboy fantasy to boot (in the to-do item “to marry the Queen of England”).

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