

# The Elusive Inventory of Your Projects

 – by David Allen

One of the most bizarre phenomena I have encountered in 30 years of working closely with some of the brightest and busiest people in the world is how difficult it is for most to grasp the idea of what a “project” is and to consistently manage their total inventory of same. But without the objective awareness and appropriately compiled account of those commitments, it’s impossible to address what lies at the root of most of their universal complaints about overwhelm, email, meetings, and priorities.

If you don’t have a clear sense of the totality of your obligations, you will always over-commit. And commitments occur on multiple levels, from “why I’m on the planet” to “need butter.” But the elevation most amorphous for most is the plane just above your physical activities — your “projects.” I have a radical definition of a project: anything you’re committed to finish within a year that requires more than one action to complete it. Given that broad designation, most people have between 30 and 100. Where’s your list? How complete and current is it?

People complain about “too much to do,” and yet most couldn’t give you, in the moment, a complete and accurately defined inventory of what they’ve committed “to do” if their life depended on it. Sure, they may have a strategic plan somewhere; they’ve got a calendar with appointments they need to keep; there may be a crude, incomplete, and still unclear to-do list. But additionally they have myriads of additional things they feel like they should handle, about which they know they need to think and decide and do something about.

Mom’s birthday. Brian’s college choices. Overdue checkup. Key employee’s potential defection. 401-K investments. Pilates class? Maria: learning disability? Too many subscriptions. What are we doing this summer? Dad’s elder care. New iPad? Next career options. Board politics.

By the way, there are no problems — only projects. A problem is only a desired outcome undefined or lack of commitment to its resolution.

Not only is that morass of commitments both voluminous and undefined, it’s changing shape as you read this. Have you had any input in the last few days about which you know you need to get closure and resolution, but haven’t yet clarified exactly what the project is, or what you need to do about it?

Make a “projects” list. Include them all. Keep it current, reviewed every week, and renegotiated. Notice how differently you might experience your world when you do that. There’s a good chance you’ll feel a lot better about what you’re not doing.

For more David Allen Company tools and educational content, check out our GTD Products section at [davidco.com](http://davidco.com). For our online learning center, visit GTD Connect at [gtdconnect.com](http://gtdconnect.com).