

# Overtime...All the Time

— by David Allen

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## Caught in the busy trap.

Recently while coaching a leader, I discovered another level of the busy trap—the syndrome: “If I can just do something that feels like I’m working with focus, I don’t have to deal with the angst about all the other stuff I should be doing.”

He had processed down to the last dozen or so emails—ones he wanted to keep in there because he needed to more than two minutes on each of the responses. He had already set up a category of tasks in Outlook called “At Computer.” Because I wanted him to stop using Inbox for a holding bin, and taste what it was like to get it empty, I nudged him to go ahead and move those emails out of the inbox and onto the “At Computer” list.

As he did that, you could see the light dawn. “Wow! Now I see all my work inventory in one place! And I now realize that I would let myself spend time on those emails before anything else, because that would seem the easiest choice to make. Now I can assess them immediately within the context of everything to do. They’re not lost, and they’re in proper perspective. I’ve been letting myself get sucked into the easiest being busy thing, instead of feeling better about better choices.”

## Out of the busy trap.

Edit email subject lines when you store or reply or reroute. One moment of mental effort and movement on your part helps grease the processing skids for yourself and others later in assessing what this email is about, as it morphs into different things with different purposes.

Psychic RAM tends to bring to awareness items based on criteria of latest (most recent in time) and loudest (emotionally), which is hardly the most effective file-and-retrieval system. Similarly, if your system of action reminders is haphazard (post-its on the screen, phone slips on the desk, notes on your chair, people interruptions), your busy energy momentum will glom on to the easiest thing to maintain itself. But the most obviously in your face is not the best criterion for in-the-moment choices of what to do.

Stop. Do what you need to do to feel as good as you can about what you’re doing. You can never be busy enough to dispel the need to be busy. And when you choose the work you are doing, it’s a lot easier to choose not to work. “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler,” said Albert Einstein.

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