



Being More Productive

An Interview with **David Allen** and **Tony Schwartz** by **Daniel McGinn**

David Allen and Tony Schwartz knew of each other's work for years, but they'd never met. Allen is a productivity consultant and the author of the best seller **Getting Things Done**, which outlines the list-driven efficiency system adherents call by its acronym: GTD. Schwartz, the author of the best seller **Be Excellent at Anything** and a **regular HBR blogger**, is the CEO of **The Energy Project**, which helps people and organizations fuel engagement and productivity by drawing on the science of high performance.

The two men have consulted for many of the same companies, sometimes giving seminars in the same auditoriums on back-to-back days. Then last summer Allen dropped in on a presentation that Schwartz was giving at a trade show. In the months since, they've gotten together several times to talk about their approaches to improving the performance of knowledge workers. In this edited conversation with HBR, they discuss the distractive pull of e-mail, how they've been influenced by each other, and why you should do your most important task first thing in the morning (even though only one of them does).



Artwork: Xavier Veilhan, The Cuckoo, detail, 2005, aluminium, steel, epoxy paint, 7.75' x 17.5' x 1.25', Exhibition view, Le Plein emploi, MAMC, Strasbourg

HBR: Let's start with something simple. How does each of you define what you do?

Allen: I help people and organizations produce more with less input. I teach a set of best practices and a methodology that produce a greater sense of concentration and control.

Schwartz: We teach individuals and organizations how to manage energy more skillfully in order to get more work done in less time, more sustainably. That requires a new way of working—one that balances periods of high focus with intermittent renewal.

Both of you have written several books describing your techniques, but give me a quick summary.

Allen: I call what I've uncovered "the strategic value of clear space." Say you're going to cook dinner for people, it's 5:00 PM, and they're coming at 6:00. You want to have all the right ingredients. You want to have the right tools. You want the kitchen to be nice and clear. You need the freedom to make a creative mess. I teach people to achieve that freedom by taking very immediate, concrete steps: downloading all your commitments and projects into lists, focusing on "next actions," and thinking about the context—work that needs to be done in your office, or on the phone, or on the computer. You don't need to change who you are. You just need some simple but very powerful techniques.

Schwartz: We focus on the four primary dimensions of energy that we all need to perform at our best. The ground level is physical—fitness, sleep, nutrition, and rest. At the emotional level, it's about cultivating positive emotions—and as a leader, communicating them to others. At the mental level, it's about gaining more control of your attention—both by increasing the ability to focus on one thing at a time and by learning to shift into the right hemisphere to do more-creative work. And at the

spiritual level, it's about defining purpose, because when something really matters, you bring far more energy to it. Very few C-suite leaders I've met fully appreciate how meeting these needs—in themselves and for others—is absolutely critical to sustainable high performance. They're good at doing things, and they've been rewarded by being given more things to do. But increasingly demand is outrunning their capacity. They're overloaded by e-mail and texts and all the information that comes in. We have to teach them to step back and say, "What do I actually want to do? What are the right choices? What are the costs of this choice?"

Let's talk about some of the concrete principles you teach. Tony, explain why you think people should approach work as a series of short sprints, not an all-day marathon.

Schwartz: There's a fundamental misunderstanding about how human beings operate at their best. Most of us mistakenly assume we're meant to run like computers—at high speeds, continuously, for long periods of time, running multiple programs simultaneously. It's just not true. Human beings are designed to be rhythmic. The heart pulses; muscles contract and relax. We're at our best when we're moving rhythmically between spending energy and renewing it. We need to recognize the insight of athletes, who manage their work-rest ratios. We encourage people to work intensely for 90 minutes and then take a break to recover. We teach them to eat small, energy-rich meals every few hours, rather than three big meals a day. We believe napping drives productivity, although that remains a tough sell in most companies. Still, the reality is that if a person works continuously all through the day, she'll produce less than a person of equal talent who works very intensely for short periods and then recovers before working intensely again.

Allen: It's also an issue of choosing the right work. Peter Drucker said that the toughest job for knowledge workers is defining the work. A century ago, 80% of the world made and moved things. You worked as long as you could, and then you slept, and then you got up and worked again. You didn't have to triage or make executive decisions. It's harder to be productive today because the work has become much more complex.

Tony, you've also written about how the cultures of some organizations encourage people to work in ways that are unhealthful and ultimately limit productivity. Why do companies do that?

Schwartz: I remember giving a talk at a prestigious investment bank several years ago. At the end a partner stood up and said, "Mr. Schwartz, this is all very interesting, but we have a thousand people knocking on the door who can't wait to come in and replace the people we've burned out. Why should we worry about giving people time to renew? When they burn out, we just bring in a fresh new group of people, who are thrilled to get the jobs." I'd argue that in knowledge work, you get more out of a person in the third or fifth or seventh year than out of the replacement you brought in because the first worker collapsed in year two. This is a broader issue that deserves attention. We can't keep pushing people to their limits and expect them to produce at a sustainably high level of excellence. The companies that build true competitive advantage in the years ahead will be those that shift from seeking to get more out of people to investing in better meeting their needs.

David, what's the biggest roadblock to productivity that you typically observe when you go into an organization for the first time?

Allen: People don't capture stuff that has their attention. They don't acknowledge it or objectify it. And it keeps rolling around in the organizational psyche as well as the personal psyche, draining energy and creating incredible psychic residue. People say, "I'll do that," but they don't write it down, and it goes into a black hole. That would be fine if it were just one thing, but it's hundreds of things. And people don't determine exactly what their commitment to that stuff is—what's the outcome they want to achieve, what's the next action required to move it forward. Your head is for having ideas, not holding them. Just dumping everything out of your head and externalizing it is a huge step, and it can have a significant effect.

The devil's advocate position is that this results in gigantic to-do lists, which are overwhelming in themselves.

Allen: People do look at all my lists and say, "God, you've got too many." But if you don't think lists are the way to go, throw away your calendar. Don't be intellectually dishonest about it. Why do you have a calendar? Because the world started to become a little more complex, and therefore you need help managing creative energy that can't be closed up or finished. You need lists because your brain isn't good at keeping them. Your mind is this dumb little computer that will wake you up at 3:00 AM and beat you bloody over stuff you can't do spit about while you're lying there. All it's doing is repeating stuff in open loops, and it sucks your energy like crazy.

Schwartz: There's a process of humility that's required here. It's a little bit of a turn on the 12-step notion of admitting that

you're powerless over your addictions. In this case, the addiction is to e-mail and information. The problem is that our willpower and self-discipline are wildly overrated. We think the way to make a change is to push harder—to resist that chocolate chip cookie, or wake up early and get to the gym. It doesn't work. It's humbling to discover that we're creatures of habit, and what we did yesterday is what we're going to do today. You want to co-opt the process by which negative habits arise without your intention, and substitute what we call "positive rituals," or deliberate practices.

How much do you know about each other's work—and how much do you use each other's strategies?

Schwartz: I always kept lists, but until I connected with David's work, I didn't realize that anything I didn't download would potentially create distractions—so now I keep lists of *everything*. Another ritual I have that aligns with David's work is to always do the most important task of the day first thing in the morning, when I'm most rested and least distracted. Ninety percent of people check their e-mail as soon as they get to work. That turns their agenda over to someone else. They do it because it's easy—you can feel more effective in a shorter time by answering e-mails. It also feels good to be wanted, and e-mails affirm that people want you. Human beings are designed to do two fundamental things: avoid pain and move toward pleasure. One instinct kept us alive; the other allowed us to reproduce. Those are still the impulses that drive us. You need a higher part of the brain to be able to step back and say, "There's a better choice to be made here."

Tony, there's one test that separates GTD dabblers from true devotees: Do you have a label maker?

Schwartz: No. But you know what? I'm early in my career with GTD, so I don't feel bad.

David, how has Tony's thinking influenced the way you work?

Allen: The piece that's made the biggest difference is his work on energy cycles. I actually brought a pillow into work. I work in a glass office, and now people can see me lying on my floor taking a nap for 20 minutes. That's directly from Tony's work. I wish I had the discipline Tony does to tackle the hardest tasks first thing in the morning, but I don't.

Schwartz: It's not that you don't have the discipline—it's that you don't have the ritual. If you built that ritual, I have zero doubt that you could do it. There's a problem with making a decision based on how you're feeling at any given moment. Generally speaking, that doesn't work. Psychologically we have two different selves. One is very primitive and reactive. The other is more evolved and reflective. People need to recognize when the primitive, reactive self is taking over and influencing them to avoid things that are uncomfortable. You can't wait to do things until the spirit moves you.

Allen: Part of the way to attack that problem is to break big tasks down and focus on smaller "next actions," which can seem more manageable. What most people put on a to-do list are vague things like "Mom." Great! So Tony will write down "Mom," signifying that he has to decide whether to get his mother a birthday present, and what to buy, and how to deliver it. He'll resist looking at the list, because he knows there's a lot of work in that simple notation. Instead the list should specify a smaller next action—say, "Call sister re Mom's birthday." Oh, look—I can do that! There's actually a part of us that loves to produce, that loves to be complete. Now I've created motivation: I see a desired result, I have the confidence I can get there, and I see the path. A lot of what GTD does is set it up so that you only have to think about things once. The problem is that everybody is multitasking and getting distracted by the latest and loudest. They fail because they haven't captured, clarified, organized, or built in a regular review system they trust.

Schwartz: Let me beg to differ a little. Say you're working on a primary task and you get an e-mail. You hear that little Pavlovian beep, and you cannot resist it. So you turn to the e-mail and lose track of the initial task, and it takes you time to reconnect to it afterward. Researchers have found that over time and with practice, people get better at task shifting, but they never get remotely as good as they'd be if they did one thing at a time.

Allen: Let's take it a step further. Why do people get disturbed by that e-mail beep? It's because they don't trust that they've emptied their e-mail every 24 hours. Most people are living in an emergency scan mode. They never deal with their e-mail, so they're afraid there's still something sitting in there, and they're constantly allowing themselves to get distracted by it.

Schwartz: Before the next question—how long have we been talking?

Allen: Eighty-five minutes.

Schwartz: Can we pause for a moment? I'm thirsty, and my mind is starting to be less than 100% here. I've built this 90-minute cycle into my body, and it's gotten very good at saying to me, "Give me a break."

[After a 10-minute break] What role do leaders play in making workers more productive?

Schwartz: The leader's role is to be the chief energy officer. It's to mobilize and focus and direct and inspire and regularly recharge those he or she leads.

Allen: If bosses don't appropriately manage the tasks for which people are coming to work, it's impossible for employees to get the bandwidth to do what Tony is talking about. If jobs are not clear, if projects are not well defined, if outcomes are not focused on, if action steps and accountabilities and responsibilities are not allocated, then the leader hasn't done his job.

Can you talk about why organizations fail when attempting to make knowledge workers more productive?

Allen: Ironically, the people who are most interested in our work—and for whom it sticks the most—are the people who need it least. What our work does is eliminate drag. Who's most aware of drag? Those who are already the fastest. Formula One race teams spend millions to save a fraction of a second. Many of the companies that embrace our work are already very successful. It's hard for me to point to an organization that truly failed with our work—if you do only a piece of what we teach, it will improve productivity. So there aren't any huge disasters where companies tried our method and failed.

Schwartz: I'm going to be honest: We've had failures. By that I mean an organization will bring us in to work with a group of people, but the group will fail to ignite. Typically these companies are the most conservative, most hidebound places, where unhappiness among employees runs deepest. They're in what we call the survival zone.

Allen: Well, if we use Tony's definition, whereby an organization fails to fully take to what we teach, then I'm a total failure, too.

Schwartz: We're finding that more and more companies have an appetite for our work, and it's no longer just the early adopters. For example, financial institutions have been consistently successful in adopting our work. They're not seen as progressive organizations, but they are highly entrepreneurial, and the financial upside for individuals who get more done is so great that all of them behave, to one extent or another, like athletes. Being a better performer has a lot of direct financial upside in that industry. We're also finding takers in the most traditional businesses, because the reality is that nearly everyone is feeling overwhelmed.

Do you have any point of view about the kinds of companies you work with?

Schwartz: I'm certainly happier working with companies that make products that clearly add value in the world. If they're making cigarettes, I'm not eager to help them get more productive at that.

Allen: What about Twinkies?

Schwartz: I'm more ambivalent about Twinkies. I've been known to eat a Twinkie myself. A Twinkie here and there won't hurt you. What I do hope is that food companies get more thoughtful about how they package and market their products. I was working with a large food company lately—it doesn't make Twinkies, but it makes Twinkie-like products—and we ended up talking about whether they should be selling smaller packages, because it would be better for customers' health. This was a group of senior executives, and it didn't seem to me that they'd entertained the question before, but I was encouraged that they were willing to discuss it.

David, when you work with a company, how can you tell if your ideas have really taken root?

Allen: I can see it when the culture starts to incorporate the principles as expected behaviors and makes them part of the common lexicon. You'll hear people build them into the language: "What's the next action?" "I have three 'waiting for yous' here—can we go over them?" They're writing things down. They're starting meetings by going over what they expect to accomplish. Those rituals can become enculturated.

Last question: If people could take just one thing away from your work, what should it be?

Schwartz: Organizations need to recognize that human beings are basically organisms containing energy. And that energy is either being renewed or being dissipated over time. An organization has to realize that part of its responsibility, whether it wants it or not, is to ensure that people have full tanks of energy. This is one of the big variables that will determine which organizations thrive in the next 10 or 20 years.

Allen: Think about it this way: While we've been sitting here talking, stuff has been piling up in our in-boxes and our voice mails. Some of it has the potential to meaningfully shift our priorities. When we turn to this accumulated stuff, we'll need to eliminate old business that is pulling on us, that's taking our attention, and reallocate our resources to these new priorities. You can only do one thing at a time, and you only have so many resources. You either feel OK about sitting here talking to us, or you feel bad about the 9,000 other things you're not doing. Everybody needs a system to make those choices wisely.

Daniel McGinn
