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1 Introduction

Welcome to myloop.wordpress.com! These are my practices how I manage my life and I am really interested in receiving your comments and in discussing your own practices how you manage your life.

During the last years, I worked on setting up a robust and simple self-management to structure and optimize my workday, to improve the time with my family, and – overall – to realize my dreams.

My practices are a best brew of a lot of techniques out there. I am a fan of David Allen's Getting Things Done® and a delighted reader of Leo Babauta's zenhabits blog. I read a number of self-management books and I practiced for several years.

On this blog I try to summarize my practices as short as possible. – Like on a “one pager”, because I love to have all relevant information on the point without reading that much.

I hope you will enjoy my practices. I recommend start reading the Overview. I will add more and more content during the next weeks.

And: Please do not hesitate to comment on my posts. I am looking forward to receive your feedback! :-)

2 Overview

The current version of my practices how I manage my life consists of three major building blocks:

General setup – How to get started?: To get started with managing my life, I worked on three elements as basic setup. I implemented a reliable task management, I adapted a methodology to process my inboxes, and I started to learn more about my strengths and weaknesses as well as my skills and talents.

Planning – How to realize my dreams?: To structure my thoughts and to achieve my dreams, I developed a top-down approach to define my dreams, to plan the upcoming year and to stay focused during the year.

Daily Operations – How to manage my day?: Finally, I optimized my daily tasks processing and I improved my time management to ease my daily duties.

Overall, I try to keep these building blocks as simple as possible and wherever I find a good tool that supports these tasks, I would definitely try to integrate it in a beneficial way.

Please find out more about the details within the next pages.

3 General setup – How to get started?

Looking back to how I started with the elements of managing my life, I can highlight three major areas that I worked on:

Task Management: Most important was the setup of a reliable system to manage all my to-dos. As I tend to forget a lot of things if I do not write them down, it was quite essential for me to have a system in place that is easy to use and mostly everywhere available. I was also looking for something that makes it easier to prioritize my tasks and that helps me out whenever I am under pressure and do not have the time to organize myself in a proper way. So I just wanted to write everything down without thinking that much about the details of how to organize the tasks. How this system looks like, will be described in “Setting up task management”.

Inbox Processing: A few years ago, I had about 100 – partly unread – emails in my company inbox and my private inbox was even worse. By chance, I listened to David Allen’s book “Getting Things Done®” and started to improve my inbox processing. It was an unbelievable feeling to have an inbox with zero items in it. Today, if I see people’s inboxes with more than 20 emails – or even hundreds of emails – I always ask myself how can they be in control of their tasks and how can they deliver high quality results? Can you tell me? The summary of my procedure is described in “Processing your inboxes”.

Know yourself: Finally, I rediscovered myself by analyzing my skills and talents, my strengths and weaknesses, as well as how I spent my daytime and I used this information as basis for a better planning of my life. I had some interesting insights and I was able to optimize not only my strategies, but also my daily operations. What I did to discover myself is explained in “Getting to know yourself”.

3.1 Setting up task management

During the last years, I experimented a lot with to-do lists to manage my tasks. At the moment, I am working with an online tool which I can easily access from all my devices. This makes it possible to capture all tasks from wherever I am and it releases me from keeping everything in mind.

I use different lists for all areas of my life. For example, I have a list for my main job, for bigger projects, for my private stuff, and for shopping. While writing down new to-dos, I try to write the tasks as actionable “next actions”, referring to David Allen’s “Getting Things Done®” methodology. In addition, I use attributes like estimated effort, priority, as well as start and due date:

Effort: I estimate the necessary time to perform the task. This makes it easy to plan the upcoming day and to evaluate, if it is possible to perform the tasks in the available time.

Priority: I simply use three different priorities to manage my tasks:

- Operational: All routine tasks that do not have a mid- or long-term importance and do not impact my goals.
- Tactical: All tasks that have a mid-term influence on my goals.
- Strategic: All tasks that are from a strategic importance and that influence my long-term goals or my personal development.

Start date: This is the scheduled date on which I want to start working on the task.

Due date: This is the deadline for the completion of the task.

I try to keep the basic setup as simple as possible. I will write more about how I use this task management within the “Daily Operations – How to manage my day?” section. Even if it would be possible to use paper based lists or to use plain excel sheets, I prefer tools like www.toodledo.com – which I use – or www.rememberthemilk.com. These tools assist you with search-, filter- and sort-functionalities and allow you to focus on the tasks instead on the management.

3.2 Inbox processing

A few years ago, I listened to David Allen's "Getting Things Done®" audio book and since that point of time I try to continuously process my inboxes to keep them empty. The experience of having zero emails in my inbox for the first time was absolutely great and it still keeps me processing my inbox all the time. To do this, I classify my inbox items (digital and paper) into four categories and act accordingly:

1. Delete (Archive): Is this item relevant for my life? If not, I simply delete it right away. – Or in case of the feeling, that I might need it as reference later on, I archive it in a proper way.
2. Delegate: Can I delegate this task to somebody? If so, I forward the item immediately or create a task to hand it over later. If necessary, I schedule a task to follow up the results before the due date. (See 4. Schedule)
3. Do: If it takes only one or two minutes to process the item completely, I process it right on the spot without inserting it into my task management.
4. Schedule: All other tasks are inserted into my task management as actionable tasks as described in section "Setting up task management". If I have to store reference material until processing, I move these items from my inbox into a "to be processed" basket.

Continuous application of this procedure helps me to stay in control of my inboxes. I found it valuable to process all my inboxes according to this classification when I started with my task management. In addition, I reduced my inboxes to a minimum and I still try to cut the number down further more.

How I use this processing during the day will be described in "Daily Operations – How to manage my day?".

3.3 Getting to know yourself

Inspired by an audio book (“Endlich mehr verdienen” by “Bodo Schäfer”) I set up two journals and started to record my daily successes and the fun events to get to know myself even better:

Success Journal: I record all events that I realized as a success. In addition, I added the skills (trained) and the talents (born) that made these successes possible.

Fun Journal: I record all events where I experienced a relevant fun factor or where I reached a relevant level of flow that made me to forget everything else while doing these activities.

After maintaining the journals for a period of four to six weeks, I started to evaluate the records and identified the skills and talents that helped me to achieve the successes as well as the activities that were a fun experience to me. The results of this evaluation – for example – helped me to focus my energy onto the right targets and to sharpen my resume.

Today, I still force myself to record my successes and my fun events into these journals on a daily basis and even if the findings are repetitive, it helps me to motivate myself.

Another interesting way to identify my skills, talents, strengths and weaknesses was to write down all key events of my life. – Just a short list of the 10 to 15 most relevant events that formed my way to where I am today.

Beside these findings on a very high level, I started to record all activities of my workday to evaluate how I spend my time in more detail. Starting a simple paper-based list in the morning and recording all activities or projects in its timeline would have been sufficient, but I decided to use software for this. I chose the tool TimePanic (www.timepanic.com) which makes it quite easy to capture and evaluate the spent time. A beneficial side effect of the time recording is, that I am only able to book my time to one project at the time and this forces me to do single-tasking only. That helps me to focus on the current activity without multi-tasking between several tasks as I did in the past.

All findings of my time analysis are integrated into my daily operations.

4 Planning – How to realize my dreams?

During my last years in school, the idea of visiting all seven continents grew in my mind and this dream was born. But at those days, I did not really start planning to realize this dream. I was just traveling wherever an opportunity arose and many of these opportunities made my visit North America, but no other continents. Thus, realizing this dream was still a dream...

Influenced by the experience that I made within my main job – where I have to plan a lot in the context of project management, continuous improvement and Deming's Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle – I began to transfer these planning habits to my personal life. This gives me structure and guidance throughout the year and helps me to realize my dreams.

I differentiate between three different levels of planning:

Strategic planning: This is the big picture of my life that I update once a year. It contains the dreams of my life, my overall goals and looks up to 10 years into the future.

Tactical planning: Once a year, based on the strategic planning, I develop a plan of concrete measures that I want to implement during the next year to get a little bit closer to my dreams.

Operational planning: During the year, I check the status of my measures every month, adjust the planning (if necessary), and add additional activities for new measures to my task management as starting point for my daily operations.

I perform these different levels of planning in a top-down approach from strategic to operational planning on a regular basis and insert upcoming issues during the year in a bottom-up approach from my daily operations into the planning.

To read more about this approach, I recommend starting with the “Strategic Planning – Define your dreams”.

4.1 Strategic Planning – Define your dreams

Once a year – normally during the Christmas holidays – I sit down for half a day to review the previous year, to adjust my dreams according to the current situation, and to plan how I can realize these long term goals. My planning horizon for this strategic planning is about 5 to 10 years into the future. This is the very big picture of my life!

To visualize my dreams, I use a simple table with the following columns:

Area of Life: This is a description of the area of my life that I am thinking about. Just to give you an idea what I am talking about, here are some examples: family, job, education, health, languages, sport, culture, finance, etc.

Dream: I try to put my dreams that are related to the respective area of my life into words. While doing this, I think about the next 5 to maximum 10 years. Examples are: “become my own boss”, “finish a marathon”, or “visit all seven continents”.

Current Situation: To define the starting position for every dream, I write down the current situation. In case of the dream “visit all continents” I have been to Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America so far.

Measures: In this column, I develop measures to close the gap from the current situation to the dream. As far as possible, I break the measures down to years to have achievable milestones. In the “visit all seven continents” context, I have to assign trips to Antarctica, Australia, and South America to the upcoming years.

While defining these dreams and measures to achieve the dreams, I try to integrate my findings from the success and the fun journal to focus on goals that are supported by my skills and talents or that will create a relevant fun factor.

In addition, I maintain something like a waiting list for dreams and ideas that come to my mind during the year and that I would like to integrate into my strategic planning during the next cycle.

How I continue with the results of the strategic planning will be described in the “Tactical Planning – Plan the upcoming year”.

4.2 Tactical Planning – Plan the upcoming year

Subsequent to the strategic planning, I do the annual planning to structure the upcoming year. I use the strategic planning as basis and I try to select not more than three to five goals – maximum one per area – to focus on.

To ease the planning process, I use a table with the following columns:

Dream: Copy and paste the selected dream from the strategic planning. Again, let us use “visit all seven continents” as an example.

Measure: Copy and paste the measures to realize the dream that are assigned to the upcoming year. In the context of the dream “visit all seven continents” it could be a measure called “Travel to Australia”.

Steps incl. effort: I brainstorm the steps to realize the measures and estimate the effort. For example “Plan journey (30 hours)” and “Perform journey (4 weeks)”. I do not brainstorm all activities within these step, I only do a rough estimation of the necessary activities and their effort.

Timeframe: I schedule these steps throughout the upcoming year as basic planning to know when I want to work on what steps. In the context of the Australia example, it would be possible to plan the journey from January to April and to perform the journey in May and June.

Selecting the measure and planning it helps me to make up my mind for the next year. This simple table is the reference that I use within the “Operational Planning – Stay focused during the year” during the year.

4.3 Operational Planning – Stay focused during the year

My operational planning throughout the year is quite simple. To stay focused, I check my yearly planning once a month and adjust my current activities, if necessary. To remind me of doing this check, I integrated a repetitive 30 minutes task into my to-do list on every Friday of the third week of the month. During these 30 minutes, I check my current status and integrate – if necessary – additional activities for new measures starting during the upcoming month.

For example within the first operational planning of the year – normally subsequent to the tactical planning – I develop and add the first “next action” of all measures that are assigned to the next month to my task management.

As I explained within the “Tactical planning” section, I do not plan all activities to realize the measures upfront. Thus, I have to develop a plan of the activities while doing the operational planning. This gives me the opportunity to be more flexible during the year and to adjust my planning according to the current situation without having spent too much time on the details during the tactical planning.

In short: At first, I have a look onto the dream and the selected measure. Then I think about the necessary actions to realize the step of the measure that is assigned to the upcoming month. Finally, I add the next action as to-do to my task management. That is it!

In the context of the Australia example, I have to define the necessary activities to realize the travel planning: Inform yourself about Australia, define the places to visit, detail the travel route, buy flight tickets, and book rental car and hotels. Based on this planning, I simply add “Inform yourself about Australia” into my task management. Sometimes I insert the rest of the planning into the comment of this task to have it at hand when I have finished this activity.

After doing this for all steps of measures that are assigned to the upcoming month, I am ready to start the “Daily operations”.

5 Daily Operations – How to manage my day?

Basis for my daily operations is a reliable task management and a continuous inbox processing as well as a proper operational planning. While performing my daily operations, I follow three basic rules:

1. Single-tasking: I avoid working on several tasks at the same time because switching between active tasks just wastes my time by refocusing. Thus, I try to process one task after another.

2. Important tasks first: Every day, I start working on the most important tasks of the day before processing my inboxes or before reading news etc. Otherwise I might lose too much time without processing the important to-dos.

3. Buffer: Based on the findings of my time tracking, I started to structure my day more and more by adding buffers for several recurring activities:

- Inbox processing: I reserve about half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the evening for my daily mailbox processing and I “try” to keep my inbox closed for the rest of the day to stay focused on my tasks. I process my inbox as described in “inbox processing”.

- Unplanned activities: I add a buffer of about 30 minutes to my daily schedule for spontaneous ad hoc activities.

- Daily planning: Every morning, I need about 5 minutes to check what has to be done during the day. In the evening, I take about 10 minutes to reschedule tasks I could not complete and to update my journals. Every Friday, I widen my focus and check what is coming up during the next week.

Beside visiting meetings, I “simply” process my tasks according to the importance during the day. The importance is calculated based on the due date and the priority. Fortunately, toodledo.com is doing this for me.

Finally, whenever I complete a task, I decide what action has to follow the completed task to accomplish the overall measure/project and I add this to-do to my task management as next action.