Getting Things Done (GTD) – a summary

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Outline

Introduction

GTD overview and Motivation

The daily GTD cycle

Tools and practical suggestions

Email

Summary GTD

Introduction

Introduction

- Introduction to *Getting Things Done* method
- Getting Things Done commonly referred to as GTD
- May help managing workload, efficiency, happiness, ...

- Psychology of working patterns (and problems) is not exact science
    - GTD ideas will not work for everybody

These slides are based on

- David Allen: *Getting Things Done – the Art of Stress free productivity* (2001)
  `http://www.amazon.com/Getting-Things-Done-Stress-Free-Productivity/dp/0142000280`
- Summary slides Cyrill Stachniss: *The basics of getting things done*, Uni Freiburg
  `http://ais.informatik.uni-freiburg.de/teaching/ws10/praktikum/gtd-basics.pdf`
- Mixed in some personal views / experience

Motivation for GTD

- Traditional working patterns change
- Traditional to-do list do not really correspond to the way people work today
- There are many more inputs today (email, email, email, text messages, mobile phones, slack, Facebook, Twitter, ...)
- The volume of input is higher and it arrives faster than n years ago (David Allen: $n = 20$)

Problems of Knowledge Workers

- Procrastination
- Avoiding things you should do
- There are items that always stay on your to-do list
- Although you think you plan things well, they sometimes get out of control
- Although you worked a lot, you have the feeling of having nothing really accomplished
- You feel that there is too much stuff to do
- Things pop up to your mind in situations when you cannot do anything about them
- You do not have a clear mind

GTD Aims

Providing strategies for how to

- be more relaxed and less stressed
- accomplish more
- be more creative
- keep track of relevant things
- help to organise and structure your work
- increase job satisfaction

Creativity

Creativity needs a clear mind

GTD overview and Motivation

On your mind

- Thinking about the many things you need to do?
  - *I must not forget to email Mary*
  - *I must make sure to respond to Bruno*
  - *I cannot forget to complete the report by Tuesday*
- Do these things randomly flash up in your head?
- GTD tries to externalise the workload of juggling all these things in your head (”stuff”)
- GTD is about moving stuff into your trusted system (and managing your trusted system)
- GTD tries to achieve a ”clear mind” (and also a ”clear inbox”)

The need of having a trusted system

- GTD needs a trusted system to store, archive, sort, the things we need to do, to remind us etc.
- As soon as the brain knows that your ideas, goals, and actions are stored in a safe place, it will stop reminding you
- So capture and store everything in a trusted system (Slide 38 has some suggestions.)

The Ideas of GTD on one slide

- Identify all the stuff that is not in the right place
- Get rid of the stuff that is not yours or you do not need right now
- Create a right place that you trust and that supports your working style and values
- Put your stuff in the right place, consistently
- Do your stuff in a way that honours your time, your energy, and the context of the given moment
- Iterate and re-factor mercilessly

The daily GTD cycle

Key Steps of the (Daily) GTD Process

- Capture/Collect
- Process
- Organise
- Do
- [Review]

Translate required activities into a list of *actions*.

Actions

- Activities are broken down in *actions*.
- Actions should have manageable size (order of magnitude: minutes or hours)
- Actions that are too large, need to be broken down into multiple actions, forming together a *project*.

Attributes of an action:

- Context – what is needed to be able to carry out the action (next slide)
- Project – the larger project this action belongs to
- optional:
  - due date – deadline: by when does this action have to be completed
  - start data – don't consider starting this action before the start date

Contexts

- Every action in GTD has a context
- Most actions in the real world have a context – only in this context you can do the action
  - You need to be at home, to fix something at home
  - You need to see/talk to a person to discuss something with them in person
  - You need a computer, to do computer-based work
  - You need Internet access for online activities
  - You may need a phone for some tasks
- Grouping actions by context can be efficient (and reduces context switches):
  - do all actions after each other that need the same person, location, equipment
  - ask you trusted system, which actions you could do given the contexts you have (at a bus stop, it may be useful to see all the actions you can do just with a phone)

Example Contexts

- People
  - `People:Supervisor`
  - `People:Landlord`
  - `People:Spouse`
- Technology
  - `Phone`
  - `Smartphone`
  - `Computer`
  - `Internet` or `online`
- Waiting-for
  - `Waiting`
- Locations
  - `office`
  - `university`
  - `home`
  - `errands`
- Ideas and facts you may need to look up frequently
  - `idea`
  - `data`

Key Steps of the (Daily) GTD Process

Step		Slide
1	Capture/Collect	20
2	Process	21
3	Organise	25
4	Do	31
5	[Review]	35

Step 1: Capture/Collect

- Capture every idea, to-do item, or thought that is worth to remember
- Capturing it means to safely store that information in a (GTD) inbox
- Have safely stored the idea, you can forget about it for now (and know that you will get back it later as part of the GTD system)
- Empty the (GTD) inbox regularly, for example daily.

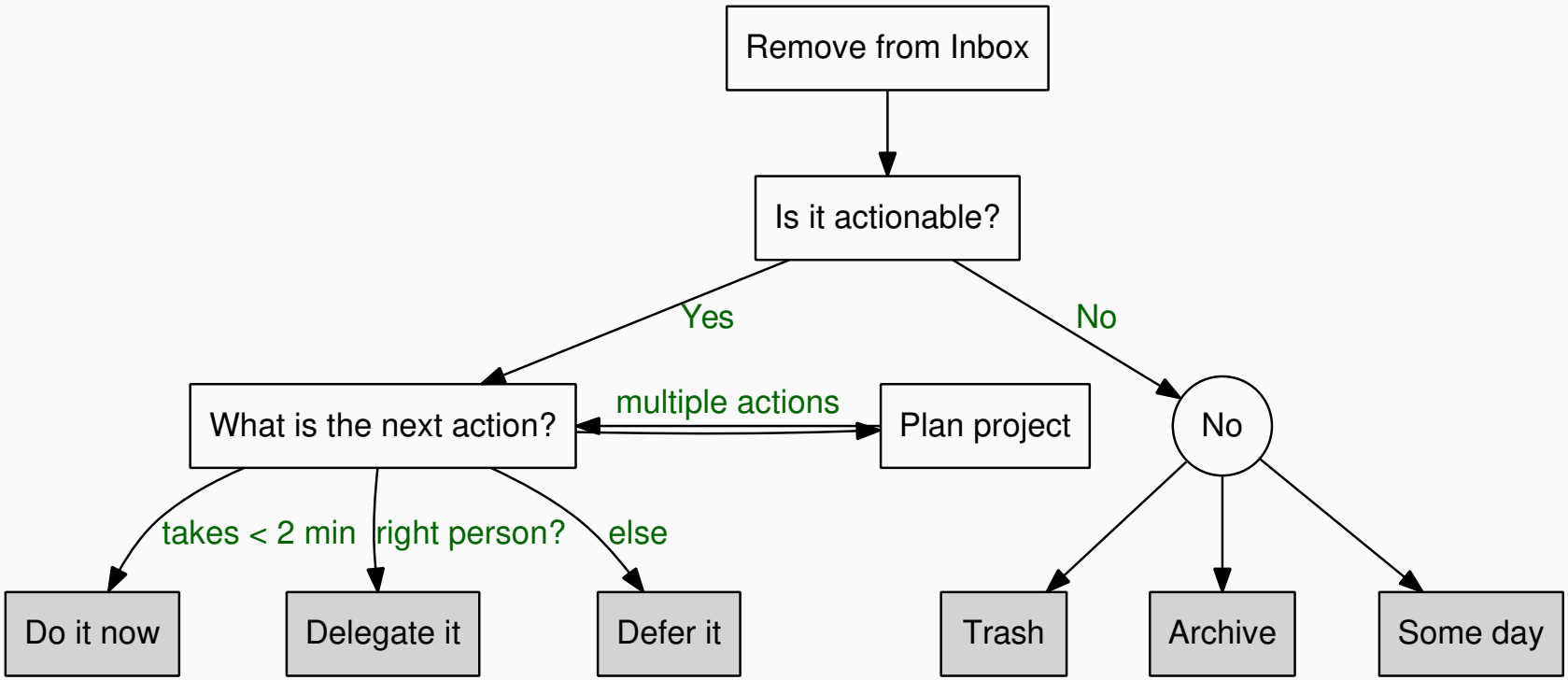
Things to capture in the (GTD) inbox

Things to do, to read, to discuss, to clarify, to write, notes, bills to pay, people to call, Birthday presents to buy, ...

Step 2: Process

- Processing means to look at the captured things in the inbox and to decide what to do with it
- Steps of processing stuff
  - Remove it from the inbox
  - Identify what it is
  - Identify if it is actionable
  - Identify the direct next action
  - Decide what to do with that next action

Step 2: Process (flow diagram)



Archive

The Archive

- A system to store non-actionable items
- Easy to add and retrieve material
- A good archive is essential for GTD
- You need to trust your archive
- Often, you may need multiple systems
  - Digital
    - emails
    - repositories
    - flat files
  - Paper based

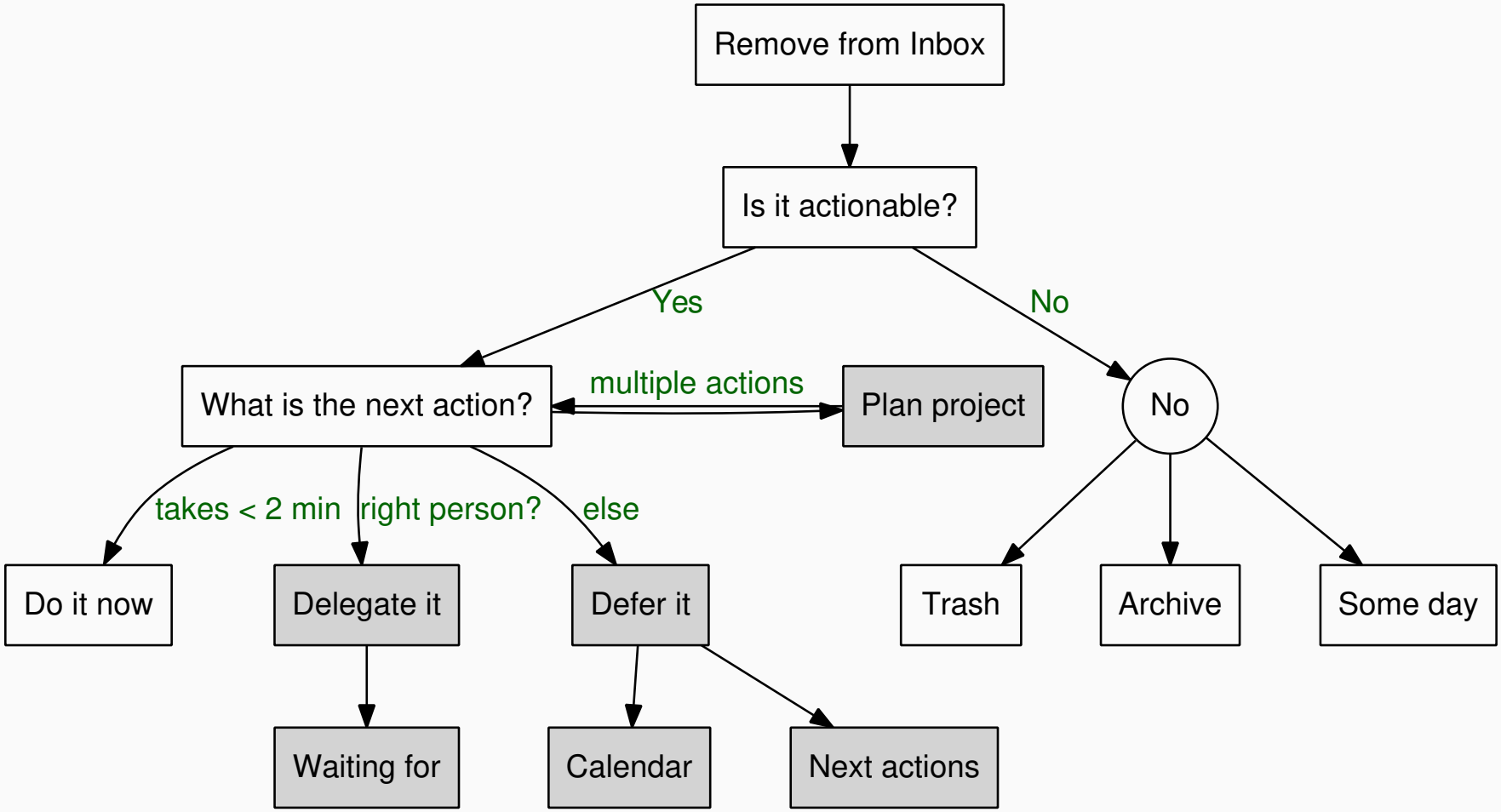
Someday / Maybe list

- Things you want to do but not now
- Storage for ideas
- Examples include
  - *travel to Italy*
  - *Learn Spanish*
  - *Books I might want*
  - *rewrite GTD lecture notes*
- This list is not a second trash bin
- Review occasionally

Step 3: Organise

- Organise the items and actions
- Project planning
- Time planning/calendar
- Waiting-for material

Step 3: Organise (Flow diagram)



Waiting-for list

- When you delegate tasks, you normally wait for a reply/outcome from somebody else
- Make sure you track it (Context: ”Waiting for” or ”waiting”)
- Set a deadline when to chase it if you don’t get a reply

The Calendar

- The calendar should only host time- or day-specific events or information
- Only add what is really relevant
- Do not plan what actions you intend to do in your calendar – distractions will mess up the schedule anyway

[Possible to reserve some time for emails/GTD processes every day, or even reserve larger chunks of time to carry out actions]

The (Next) Actions Lists

- The lists that host all your next actions
- Formulate them as concrete tasks:
  - *Call Fred about Lunch on 1 November* instead of *Fred, Lunch*
- Add meta data in this step if not done before (Context, Project, maybe deadline, ... ,see slide 16)

When picking items from the actions list:

- Typically grouped by projects, context, or deadlines
- Easy to maintain in a digital system

Plan a Project

- In GTD, a project is something that needs more than one action
- Most GTD tools allow to
  - group actions into a project
  - group multiple projects into a folder/bigger project

Step 4: Do

- This is where the actual work takes place, and actions are being dealt with.

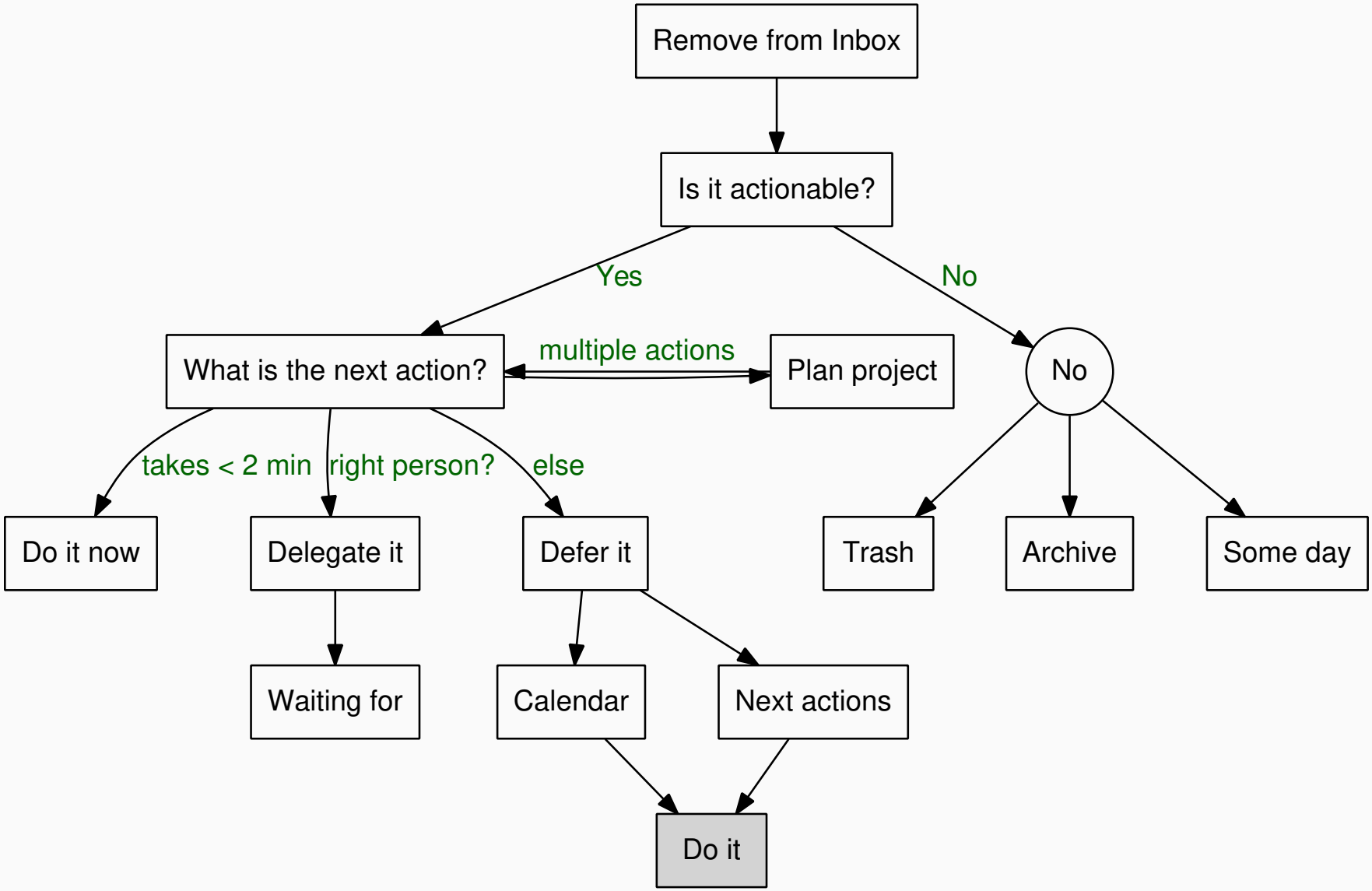
  We did try to delay any real work so far, but now we really have to do it.
  (Inspirational video: `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXsQAXx_ao0`)

Step 4: Do

- This is where the actual work takes place, and actions are being dealt with.

  We did try to delay any real work so far, but now we really have to do it.
  (Inspirational video: `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXsQAXx_ao0`)
- Use the following ”four criteria model” for choosing the actions to do now
  - Context
  - Time available
  - Energy available ($\longleftrightarrow$ fun factor)
  - Priority

Step 4: Do (flow diagram)



How does the work day split into activities?

- Do predefined work (processing GTD inbox, and email inbox, GTD housekeeping)
- Meetings, lectures, scheduled activities
- Deal with work as it shows up and may need immediately activity
- Work through next actions list (doing GTD)

Step 5: Review

- The goal of the review is to ensure that all projects/actions are up to date
- Remove irrelevant/expired actions and projects
- Review all your Waiting-for lists
- Are there any uncollected items (left in the inbox, actions missing meta data)?
- Git rid of / halt / move to Someday any projects that are unrealistic

Recommendation: schedule regular review, for example weekly

Tools and practical suggestions

GTD tool requirements

Important Features (subjective)

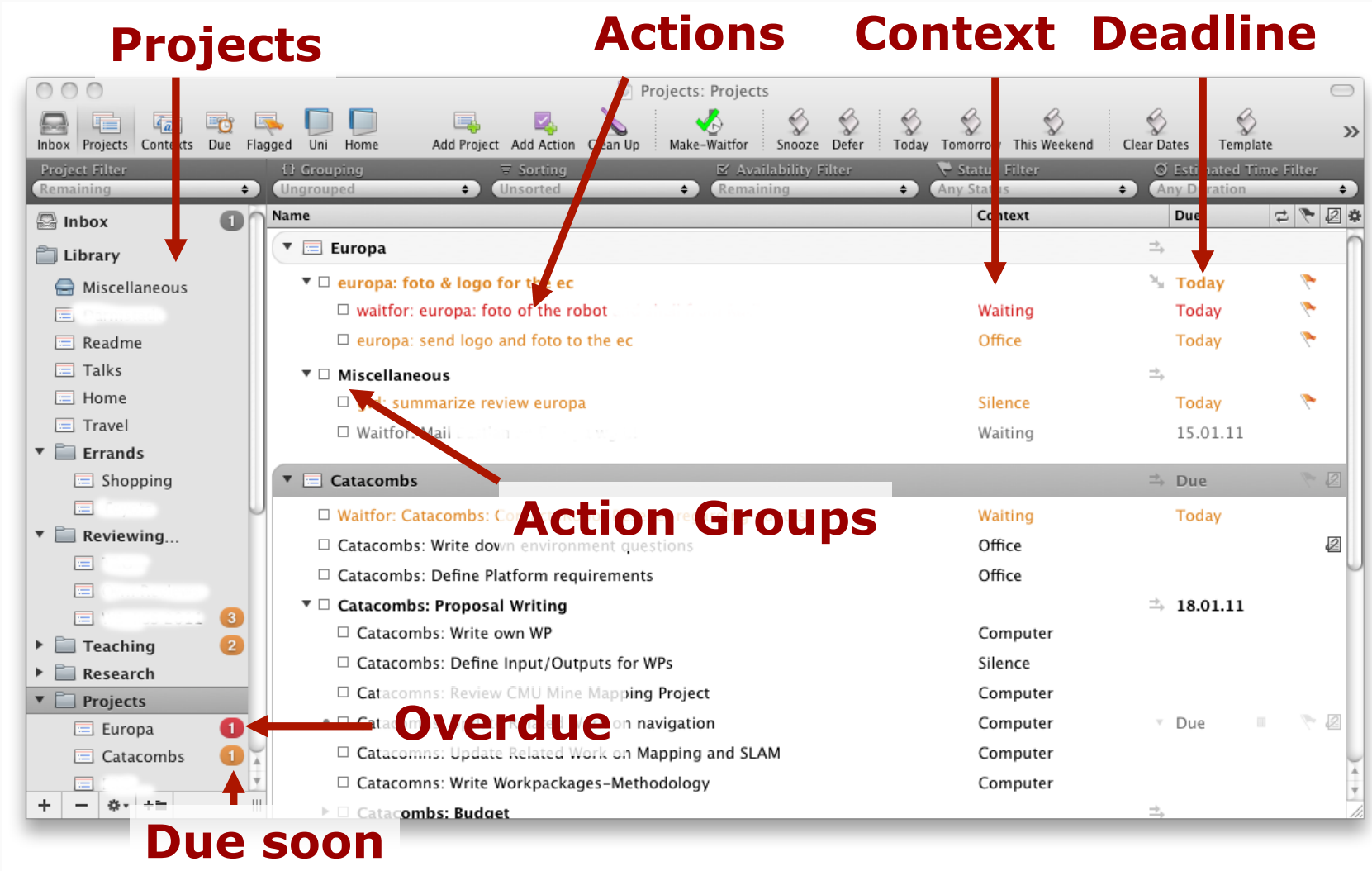
- Easy & quick to capture/collect stuff
- Import of & references to emails, copied text, and any files
- Allows to define context, start and due dates
- Predefined context-view
- Easy to re-organise actions and project
- Possibility to sync with my phone
- Sync between different computers

Some GTD tools

Include

- OmniFocus (`http://thesweetsetup.com/apps/best-personal-gtd-app-suite/`)
- Orgmode (`http://orgmode.org/worg/org-gtd-etc.html`)
- Things
- BamBam
- Producteev
- Remember the milk
- Todoist
- Wrike
- Zendone
- ...
- Overview from gettingthingsdone.com (`http://gettingthingsdone.com/`

OmniFocus Screenshot

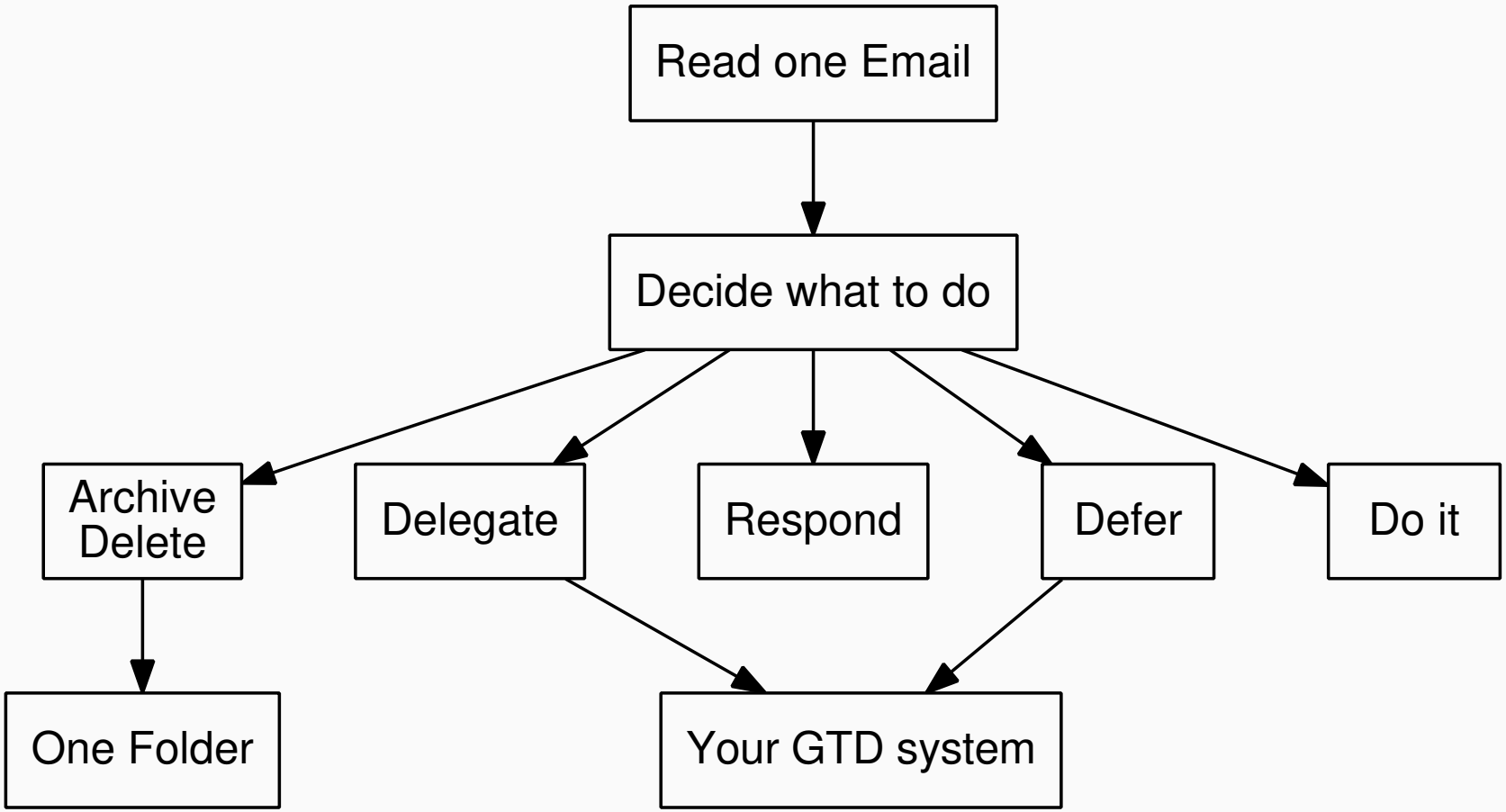


OmniFocus discussion

- ticks the boxes on the ’important features’ list from earlier slide 37
- syncs multiple computers and phones / tablets
- OS X / iOS only
- commercial (education version available)

Email

Using GTD with your Email inbox



Keeping emails in your inbox

- Email inbox is often treated as a todo list
- requires you to repeatedly re-analyse what to do with an email
- promotes procrastination and random hopping between unrelated tasks
- requires to keep the email client open (distraction)

Don’t do it.

Inbox Zero strategy

Inbox Zero Strategy:

- Process your email to zero
  - if you don't want to use GTD, at least have a folder 'to-process' and move all email that requires action in there
- Close your email client for at least 60 minutes (or longer)
- Work (do things!)

Summary GTD

Benefits

What are benefits associated with using GTD

- fewer things on your mind
- enables focus on main task
- supports creativity
- reduced procrastination
- fewer things get lost
- more things get done in time
- reduced stress
- ability to quickly find archived documents

Why GTD may not work for you

- You track only a part of your “stuff”
- You do not trust your system
- You are not doing a regular review
- You are not familiar with the software tools you use
- You “over-engineer” your system (too many folders, special cases, etc)
- Your system is too complex or too easy (“keep it as simple as possible and as complex as needed”)
- It is not your thing.

A few remarks when starting

- Setting everything up may take a few days
- Initial dumping all the things on your mind into the system may keep you busy, or could be done as and when your remember something
- It takes a while until your mind starts trusting your system
- Keep your archive easily accessible
- Select a predefined date for a weekly review (e.g., Fridays at noon), end of month
- Schedule an action every morning to empty inbox (and go through steps 1 to 3 to process and organise new actions)

Typical flow for me 1/2

- Process incoming email:
  - do short items and replies immediately
  - defer others
    - create GTD actions for them (attach email to action in trusted system). Or
    - move email in 'to-process' email folder [and remember to go through that folder at some point]
- During the day: enter short notes into GTD inbox during meetings, while having ideas, concerns
- Once a day:
  - go through items in GTD Inbox, process and organise (i.e. add context, project, deadlines,)
- Whenever possible:
  - do stuff.
    - in theory: select item from next actions that I would enjoy
    - in practice: deal with actions with immediate deadlines
- Review rarely (maybe monthly)

Typical flow for me 2/2

- Use Omnifocus 'perspectives' to only show:
  - actions related to a project
  - actions related to teaching
  - actions related to non-work duties
- When meeting people: check for all actions related to that person
- Occasionally use Orgmode todo lists (in an ASCII file) for fine-scale management of a particular project/paper, etc
  - particularly useful when working with others

Summary / Literature

- Subjective summary of Getting Things Done
- not a magic recipe, not able to providing 'the right answer'
- collection of ideas, some of which may work for you
- massage into a system that works best for your needs