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Founder's Guide to Building a Second Brain

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Founders spend their days putting out fires. Context switching is constant and it's important to step back and make sure the tasks you're doing continue to line up with your long-term strategy.

The best way I know of working through these challenges is to be in a clear headspace. Clear headspace facilitates focus and enables you to do your best work.

When you are worried about forgetting a task, insight, or other important piece of information you aren't able to fully dedicate your brain's resources to a task.

The solution as Tiago Forte's book [a] lays out is to build a "second brain" when you log projects that need to be done, areas you're responsible for, resources you can quickly reference, and an archive to look back on.

This takes a bit of effort but once you're set up you will be able to focus on tasks for longer and with greater cognitive levels. If this guide is helpful you should read Tiago's book for more depth.

Building a Second Brain in three easy steps:

Set up the system

Decide what you want to capture / focus on

- Improve communication across your business.
- Make the content you read more actionable
- Avoid repeating work.
- Reduce the amount of time you spend searching for things.

Identify your inboxes

Where do things already accumulate? For me they are

- Computer desktop
- Downloads folder
- Apple notes (since I use Notion for second brain)
- Camera roll / photo library

Choose a notes app

Just make a choice. I use Notion.

- Computer scientists / power users might like Obsidian
- You can also just use Apple Notes (I use Apple notes for quick input)
- Some people also like OneNote or Evernote — just pick one to use

Select Capture Tools

Use a read later app like Matter

- People also like Pocket and Instapaper but Matter is free and syncs really easily

Download your note app's web clipper if it has one

Make PARA Hierarchy Everywhere

Projects

Short term things that have a definite end date.

Don't be afraid of having "too many"

Areas of Focus / Accountability

Ongoing things you are responsible for for a long term. They might not have a clear end date.

Resources

Things that might be useful in the future. No specific actions are required.

Archive

Inactive things from other areas that move here when completed / abandoned.

Don't worry about sorting things too much since you have a search bar.

And don't build hierarchies below these unless you really need them. Flatter is better to quickly see everything there is.

Do this in your

- Computer File System
- Google Drive, Dropbox,, etc
- Notes App
- Email

Start using the note system

Make a folder for each active project. You should feel fine about having 20+ projects. Even 50+ isn't a big deal.

Make sure you have these projects:

- Someday / Maybe (things you want to or might do at some point)
- 12 big problems you're thinking about (personal, professional, academic - whatever strikes your interest)

  ### Start by getting inspired by writing down 12 big problems you're thinking about

You can just drag everything that already exists into archive (remember you can find it later by searching)

Choose a task app

I use Things3

People also like Todoist, Wunderlist or TickTick — the important thing is just to pick one

Make these projects

Projects in your notes app

Waiting for (with the date you first asked about the thing you're waiting for)

Delegated (if you're a manager who oversees a lot of important projects)

Schedule your first weekly review

The weekly review is essential for getting current on everything going on in your life and feeling like you are on top of what's going on.

Copy my checklist below and adapt it for your system

I do Sunday ~8pm

Others do Thursday afternoon or sometime Friday so they can have a clear head going into the weekend

Purpose: get clear, get current, get creative

Collect interesting things

Keep track of interesting problems you want to keep thinking about

Feynman did this and people were always amazed at how he connected random things in his life to big problems. It was because he kept them top of mind.

Use a read later app to take control of your content diet

I like matter

they take away the urgency of needing to read something immediately or never at all

- you end up reading less because you realize things aren't important in the context of your entire read later app

you can batch all your random internet reading into a more deliberate time you pick

it's really easy to highlight things and save them

no ads

Web clippers can do the same thing for websites

YouTube has a watch later feature too!

I want to put a rule where I can't watch any videos I see for 24 hours

I am looking for a tool where I can highlight YouTube video transcripts right into Notion

Email excerpts are an unsolved problem

Some may say that using something like this is just an excuse to not build discipline. I am somewhat sympathetic to this argument but you require an order of magnitude more discipline than previous generations because teams of PhDs sit around all day engineering their products to be addictive. You need tools to fight this.

Types of things to collect

Highlights of passages

Quotes

Bookmarks to favorite websites

Voice memos

Meeting notes / agendas

Photos

Takeaways / lessons learned form things

Favorite stories (yours or even other people's)

Memories

Reflection

Insights / realizations

Musings / random thoughts

Anything that inspires you

Type of things not to collect

Information that would be useful to a hacker like ID docs, finances, passwords, sensitive health records etc

Special file formats that are hard to open in your notes app

Very large apps that will make the app lag

Things to work collaboratively on (though Notion is probably okay)

Review important notes twice (or even three times)

First bold everything that's important

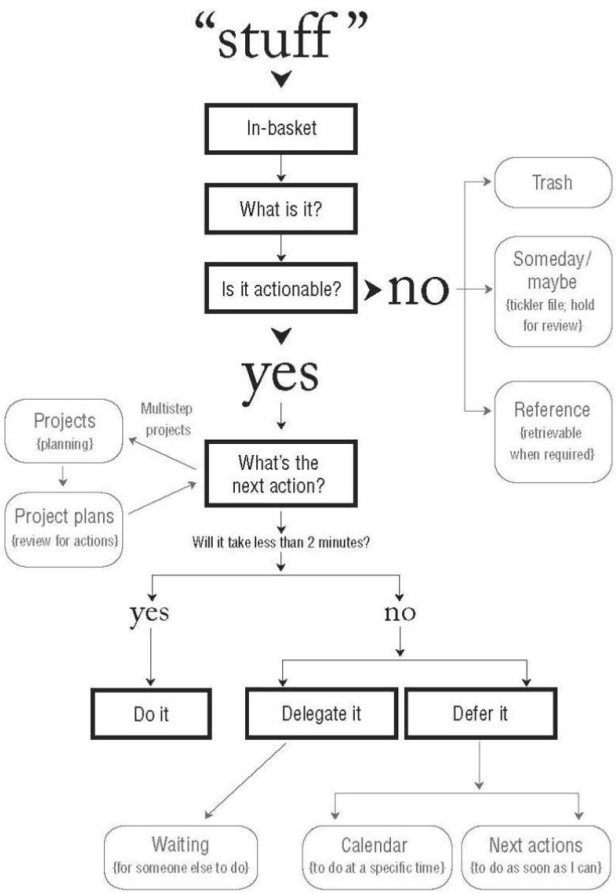
Second read all the bold things and highlight what's most important

Write an executive summary at the top if a you review the note a lot or many people will review the note

This is an important part of starting the creative process and preparing for meetings.

Sort all of the interesting things once a week

Here's a flow chart from the book:



Links

a. amazon.com/Building-Second-Brain-Organize-Potential/dp/1982167386