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Progressing Backwards

Skills and Professional Development



I thought it would never happen to me. Over time, this morphed into “Well, it hasn’t happened to me yet.” Now, I accept that maybe it’s beginning to happen, just a little. I’m referring to a general decline in my technological savvy over time. Not long ago, I was an early adopter; I was that one person around the conference table scribbling my notes on a succession of more-sophisticated Palm Pilots, culminating in one that gave me web access via my tiny flip-phone’s Bluetooth connection. Maybe that’s when I started to lose my groove — I smugly opined to anyone who would listen that this was the wave of the future, that the Blackberrys and Palm Treos will never make it in the long run, that no one’s going to want to hold big metal-and-glass rectangles to the sides of their heads when they could have something more svelte for voice communications.

So, I’m no longer the first kid on the block with the new (insert tech here). I still don’t have a drone, I resisted the Kindle for years before succumbing, and my phone is two generations old. Even so, I finally picked up a Nest “smart” thermostat a few months back, and I’m delighted with it. Unlike my old programmable one, there’s no need to consult the manual — if you’re hot, turn it counterclockwise; if you’re cold, do the opposite. A few days in, and it has you figured out, and you hardly ever touch or look at it. Better yet, it senses when we’re gone, and throttles back accordingly. I get monthly emails estimating the resulting energy savings.

I’ve been saving a bit of energy at work too. I’ve developed the habit of consistent use of my to-do list. My approach is inspired by David Allen’s *Getting Things Done* and the notion that holding any to-dos in one’s head when they can be offloaded to a trusted system imposes a needless drag on one’s thinking and efforts. I’ve taken several runs at this over the years, but it never quite jelled into something that came naturally and was done habitually. This year I hit on a couple of practices that seem to have made the critical difference.

First, I record a task even when the ball is out of my court. How many times, in the course of a protracted issue that covers weeks, months, or years, do you finish a task, deliver the product of your

efforts to whoever needed it, and then think how nice it'll be not to think about that issue for a while? The thing is, you probably don't stop thinking about it. You figure you'll hear something back in two weeks, and as that time approaches, and then passes, your thoughts of other things are interrupted by a nagging concern about when or if the return volley is coming. This was a big distraction for me. Now when I finish something, if I expect further actions in the future, predicated on someone else's input, I take a second to think about when that will likely be, then add a little time to that, and set a reminder for myself to check in if I haven't yet heard something. I trust my system, and because of this, I find that the topic doesn't needlessly clutter my brain in the meantime.

The second is that I make sure the very last thing I do with any task is to decide whether there's a "next action" (including the sort I described above), and then take a few seconds to make note of what that is in my system. This one's actually tougher, particularly when I'm pressed for time or working amidst interruptions (and who isn't?). Sometimes, I find myself scanning my "sent" folder in email or my recent documents on the PC to get refreshed on what I was up to before that surprise call or visit.

Acquiring this habit has made such a difference in my effectiveness and overall peace of mind. The energy I save by not holding those annoying thoughts in the back of my head can now be applied to what actually matters.

Oh, and for another indicator of the creeping senescence I worried about earlier, go back to the beginning of the column, read the first two paragraphs, and imagine the late Andy Rooney saying those words. I really wish that wasn't so easy to do. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think my eyebrows need trimming.

NOTES

1 I use Todoist, a simple, configurable, and platform-agnostic task system I can access from any of my devices.

2 In Windows 10, that's what that "Quick Access" star in File Explorer is for, among other things.

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