

How to Survive as a Solo Admin

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Photo by Kevin Harber

It's pretty chaotic. We're always dealing with the problem of the day, the next office move, the next vendor crisis, the next software crisis, the next new hardware. It all comes so fast. It never feels like there's time to take a breath, to think more proactively. To work on the future.

But you've taken the first step. You're here. This is when it gets better.



The best way I've heard sysadmin work described is walking a tight rope between two buildings



that are on fire.

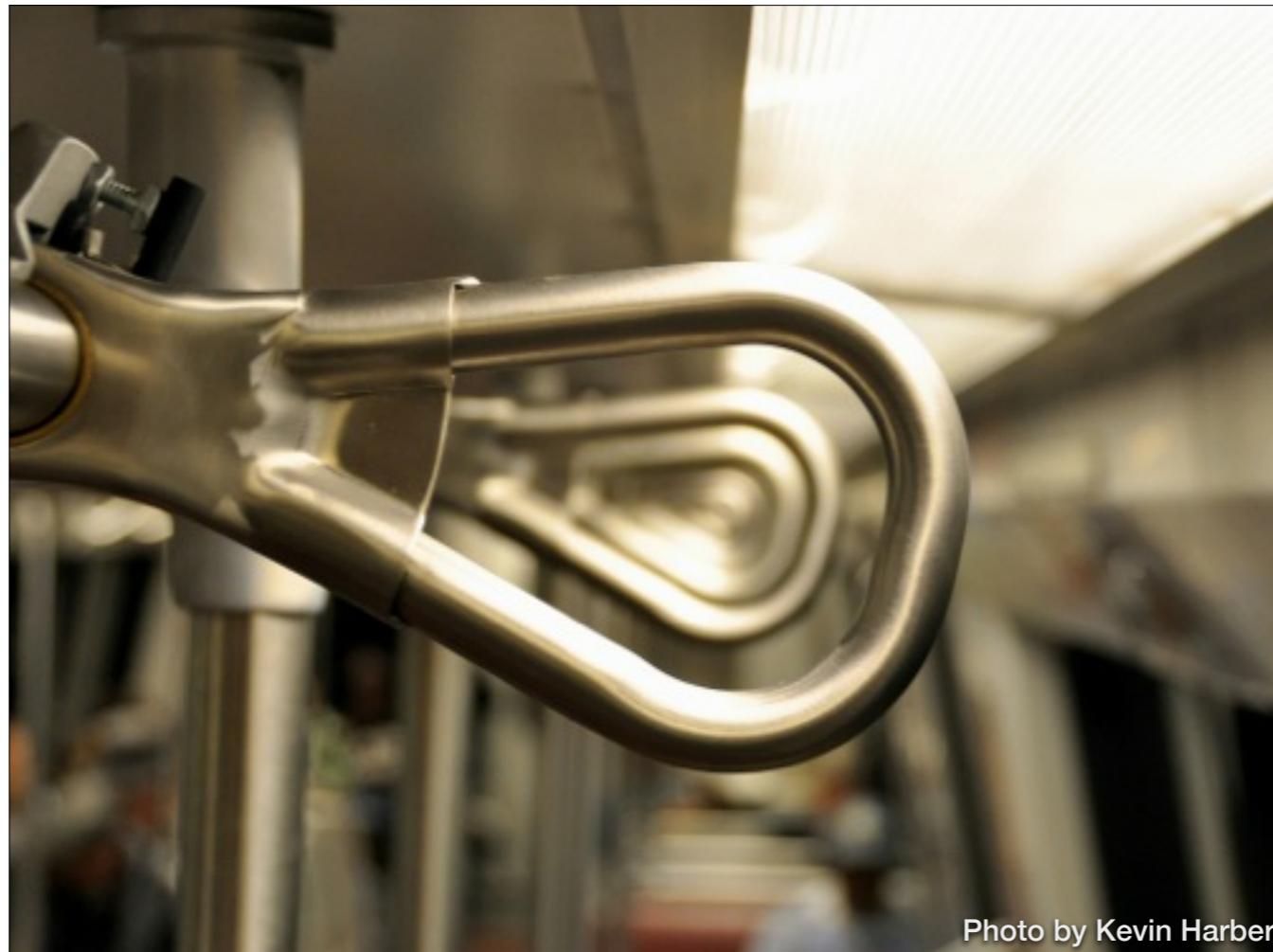
But that's why we get paid the shiny nickels, right?

Challenges

- Time Management
- Constant Churn of Updates and Improvements
- Serving Many Groups
- Staying Ahead of the Curve
- When do I sleep?

Strategic Control

Or, don't let the blind man tell you what an elephant is.



So how do we get a handle on it all?

Start with the basics. Start with the big picture. This is the Strategic Overview, if you want to get technical.

- Know what you have.
- Know where you're going
- Know what's next.

The Big Picture

1. Know what you have

- Documentation (Keep it up to date!)
- Maps
- Contacts & Contracts
- Passwords, Keys & Credentials
- Save it, print it, encrypt it, store it elsewhere.

This is all about documentation and understanding what's present in your inventory. In the words of the Reverend D.Wayne Love: take a searching inventory of all your good [stuff]

Understand it. Don't just write down what you have, know what it means. I can tell you an IP address, but it doesn't mean anything without the SNM & next hop.

Write it all down like you're leaving tomorrow.

Once you've started with documentation, you can't ever, ever stop. Documentation is a bit like fitness. Once you stop, everything spirals out of control in a hurry. So keep writing.

The Big Picture

2. Know where you're going

- Yes, this means going to meetings.
- Roadmaps are crucial
- Be involved in budgets and expansion plans
- Builds allies

This means a lot of tedious meetings. Sorry.

The only way you take Red Route One at 20 knots is if you have a hyper accurate map of the underwater canyons.

Knowing where your organization is moving gives you everything you need to survive the onslaught.

It lets you budget for hardware and new staff

It gives you a part in the process and a stake in the results. Don't skip those meetings if you want allies later.



Tors Tvillinger
(Thor's Twins)

Logsfabóttur

Myraburg

1072

1068

1084

927

853

608

178

350

314

508

1243

1439

1552

178

53

46

45

60

70

77

1019

696

74

29

25

6

7

Aurora

Myraburg

Logsfabóttur

Tors Tvillinger

Myraburg

The Big Picture

3. Know what's next

- Know the cycles in your IT areas of responsibility
- Know the cycles in your company's patterns
- Have a good idea of where the tactical weaknesses lie

iOS and Mac OS X have fallen into a pretty solid schedule, with dev releases in Summer and production releases in the Fall.

Other software manufacturers may follow suit (Office 2007/2008, Office 2010/2011, Office 2013/201?) There's a rhythm, you just have to find it and adjust to it. If you're not planning on starting your Yosemite testing now, will you be ready to deploy it this Fall?

You also have to know what your group's patterns are. Do you have big conferences every year? Meetings every quarter? Contracts due at certain times? Making sure you're ready for the big crises is part of your gig. Don't deploy massive updates - or any updates - in the lead-up to those events.

You also have to understand where your tactical weaknesses lie. Inexperienced endusers? Old routers? Bad WiFi? Everyone's got something, and each of these is a tactical situation that you have to keep aware of.

The Big Picture:

4. Make A Plan

- Doesn't have to be detailed, it should be high level
- Block time from your calendars to avoid problem times
- Block time for budgeting periods
- Start to chart your update patterns
- Include some time off, you'll need it.

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	30	July 1	2	3	4
• Weekend Sitrep	8:30 AM	8 AM	12 PM	11 AM	12 PM
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus Check • AutoPKG TEST • Management Meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Configs Review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AutoPKG Deploy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Backups Check • Timesheets & Expen... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timesheets & Expen...
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• Weekend Sitrep	8:30 AM	8 AM	12 PM	11 AM	12 PM
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• Weekend Sitrep	8:30 AM	8 AM	12 PM	11 AM	12 PM
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Tactical Control

It's not just where to put your photon torpedoes

The Short Term:

1. Make your task list

- Take stock of your environment's needs
- List your strategic tasks
- Build a calendar for those tasks
- Be aspirational in tasking

I'm not talking about fixing someone's email or reimaging the CFO's laptop.

I'm talking about all the tasks that are about disaster prevention. Checking the backup logs. Saving router and switch configs. Updating the paper copy of your master file. Doing your expenses.

Once you have that inventory, list those strategic tasks with their frequencies, and start to build yourself a calendar.

Don't just list the stuff you're doing, list the stuff you *wish* you were doing, too. If that's doing regular restoration checks from your backup, or meetings with management, set that up as part of your list.

These aren't tasks that take forever, they're tasks that get lost amid the fray.

Caesura 1: On Writing Things Down

- “I’m not writing it down to remember it later, I’m writing it down to remember it now.”
- Have a system for notes in your meetings and actions, be it Behance, Evernote, Field Notes, Yellow Note Pad, etc. But have a system. Be accountable for that.
- Ideally any note-taking environment is something you can backup.

The Short Term:

2. Build yourself reminders

- Setup a Calendar separate from everything else.
- Add reminders on your phone that are location based, or time based.
- Now here's the hard part: Actually Do Them.
- Set these times as either first thing in the morning, or last thing before you leave.

Build Yourself Some Focus Time

Every week. Every. Single. Week.

The Short Term:

3. Build Yourself Focus Time

- Time that is disruption free
- Hahahah, Funny, Right.
- No, Seriously.
- This should be weekly time spent on the bigger picture items and longterm goals.
- It doesn't have to be more than 2-3 hours per week.

This is the important one. This is one you're going to need help to implement. This is the one thing that, if you take away and do it, you will be better for it.

If you listen to nothing else I say today, do this.

Got it? Cool.

This is time when you plot out the longterm stuff we talked about in the last segment. Plot it on your calendar in a clear place when your head will be clearest. Some folks like that at 8am on Tuesday. Others like it from 5-6 on Wednesday. But chart it, calendar it, and put your phone on Do Not Disturb and keep your house in order.

Use it as time to track your upcoming weeks' projects.

Operational Maintenance

Keeping the ship right

The Ongoing Life:

1. React With Intent

- Zen and the Art of IT Maintenance
- Test Often, Deploy Once
- Don't Tempt the Demon Murphy

Don't be in the habit of patching your users' machines every day unless there's a compelling reason for it.



No 47

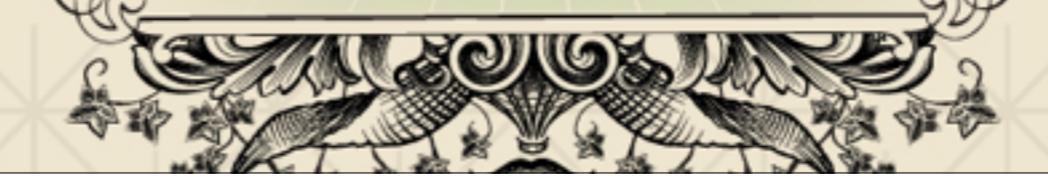
2010

IF ANYTHING CAN GO
WORNG, IT WIL.

MURPHY'S LAW

— *Riesling* —

COLUMBIA VALLEY, *Washington*



The Ongoing Life: 2. Become A Triage Nurse

- Is it on fire? Fix it first, and fix it now.
- Your organization's priority's are your priorities
- Except when your knowledge supersedes.
- Have an issue tracker - it will help you spot patterns
- Build yourself sit-rep time when you know issues will be coming in.

The Operational Life:

3. Handling Updates

- Find a schedule that works for you
- Roll out your testing users ahead of your main cadre
- Test your own updates
- Freeze your releases ahead of busy times

Caesura 2: Playing Outside Specialty

- We're all technical folks, not development staff, or sales, or teachers, or principals, or janitors.
- Except that we have to understand every part of the organization we support. You're going to need to learn budgets and management.
- Playing politics is the worst part of work. But failing to show up at the table means you only get scraps.

Useful Tools

What are you using to keep yourself sane?



Omni Outliner

Great for notes & organization

Good checklist creation

Supports inline images & files

Styleguides & Audio Annotation

Staying Sane as a Solo Admin

What's it mean to roll solo?

▼ The Life of the Solo Admin

- It's pretty chaotic. We're always dealing with the problem of the day, the next software crisis, the next new hardware. It all comes so fast. It never ends.
- The best way I've heard sysadmin work described is walking a tight rope.
- But that's why we get paid the shiny nickels, right?

▼ Where are the challenges?

- ▼ Time balance
 - Instability in Systems
 - Coping with the little things amid the big things
- ▼ Constant Churn of Updates
 - 5 OS updates
 - 9 Office updates
 - Countless Java and Flash updates
 - How do you test and keep it all in place?
 - When do I sleep?

So how do we get a handle on it all?

▼ Start with the basics. Start with the big picture.

- Know what you have.
- Know where you're going
- Know what's next.

Know what you have

Know where you're going

Know what's next

<http://www.omnigroup.com/omnioutliner/>



OmniGraffle

Build Network Maps & Flows

Supports multiple layers

Supports Vizio Export (Pro feature)

Template Support



<http://www.omnigroup.com/omnigraffle>



VMware Fusion

Virtualizes OS X

Linked Clones

Snapshots for Testing



Windows 7 x64
Suspended



Mac OS X 10.9
Suspended



Mac OS X 10.8
Suspended



Mac OS X 10.10

<http://www.vmware.com/products/fusion-professional/>



Yojimbo

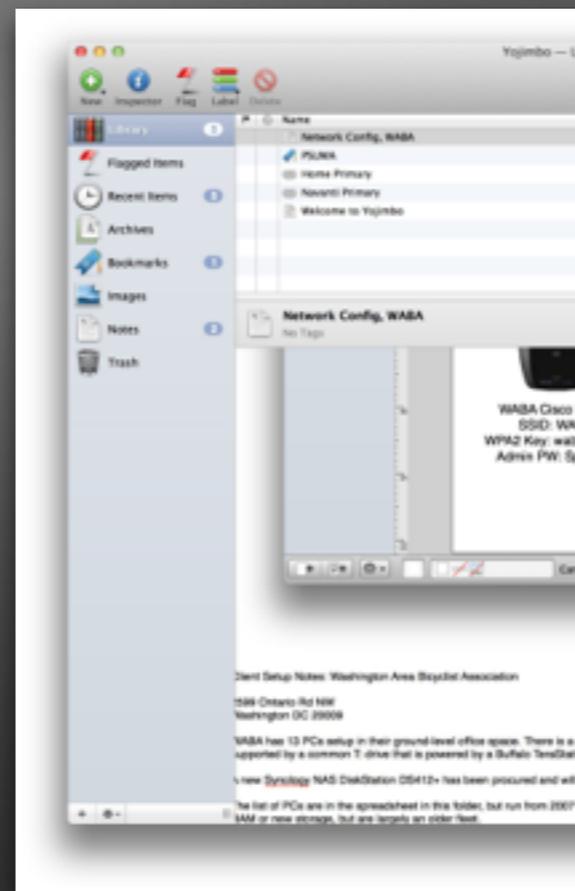
A Tech Info Library of your very own

From the makers of BBEEdit

Rich Content Area for putting notes that aren't just tech

Bookmark Support

Encrypted Password Support



<http://barebones.com/support/yojimbo/>

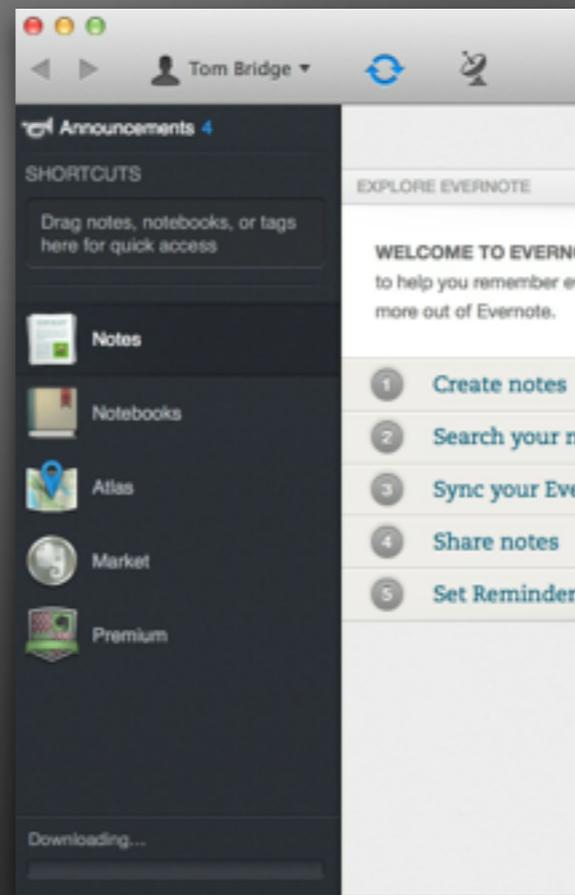


Evernote

Online service with a Desktop app

Support for Notes & Places & Notebooks

Premium model available

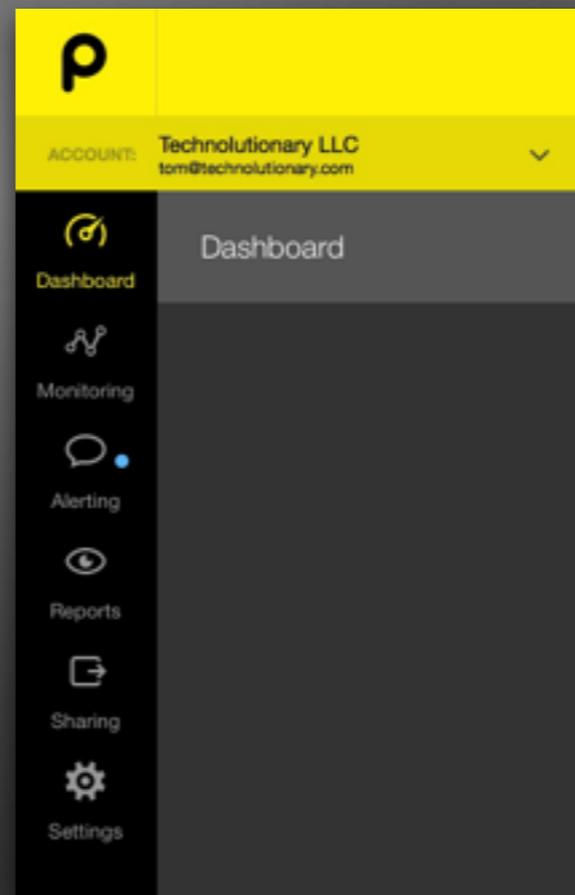


<http://www.evernote.com>

Pingdom

Monitors Connectivity &
Server Functionality

Pager Functions



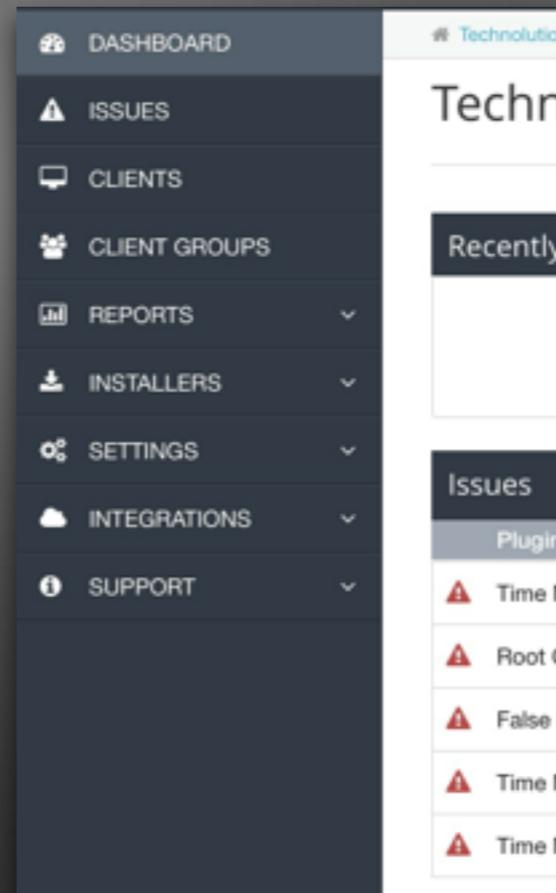
<http://www.pingdom.com>

WATCHMAN
MONITORING

Watchman

Early Warning Systems

Per machine focus allows different levels
of alerts



<https://www.watchmanmonitoring.com>



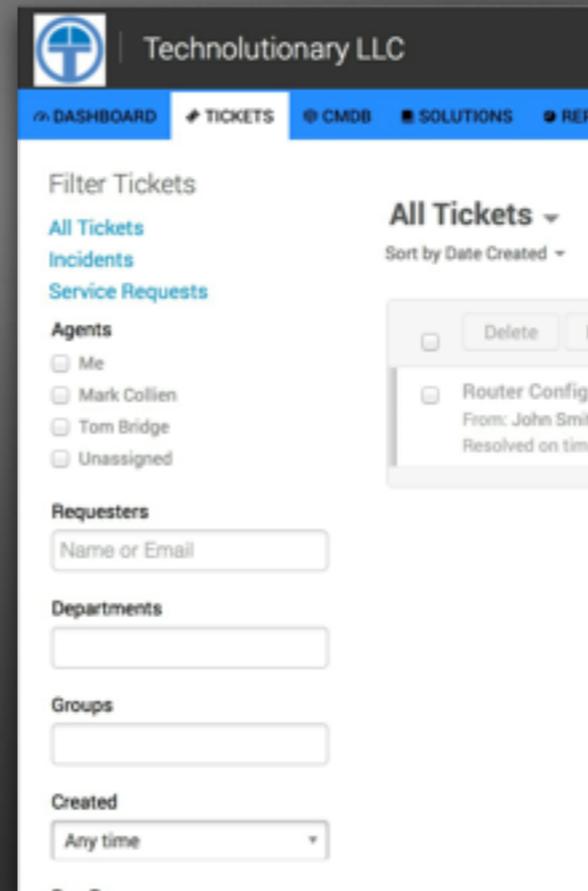
FreshService

Cloud-based Help Desk

Includes light inventory system

Includes a Knowledge Base

Has an Asset Discovery system



<http://freshservice.com>

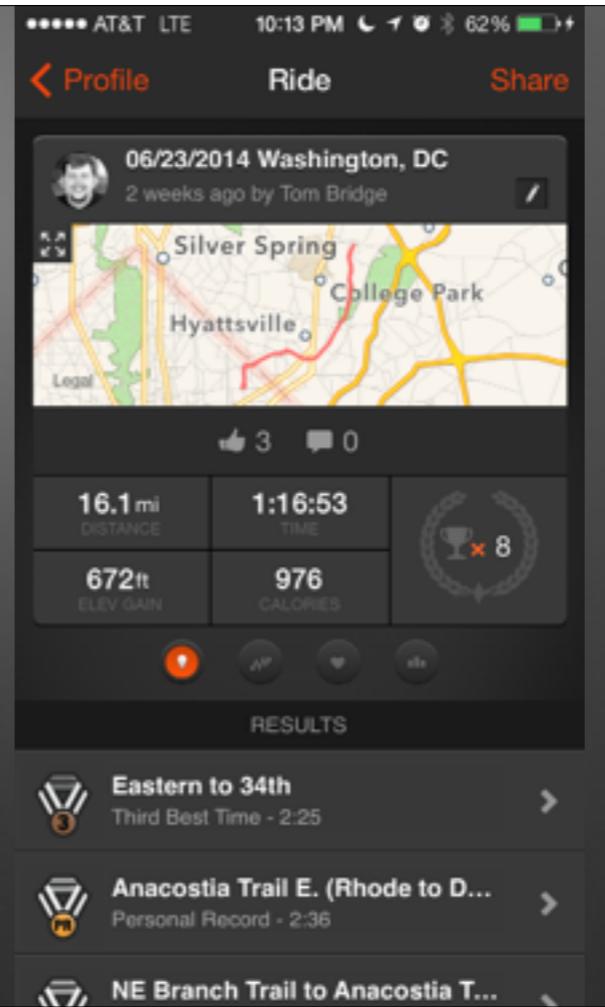


Strava

Get Outside

Go for a bike ride

Step away from the computer.

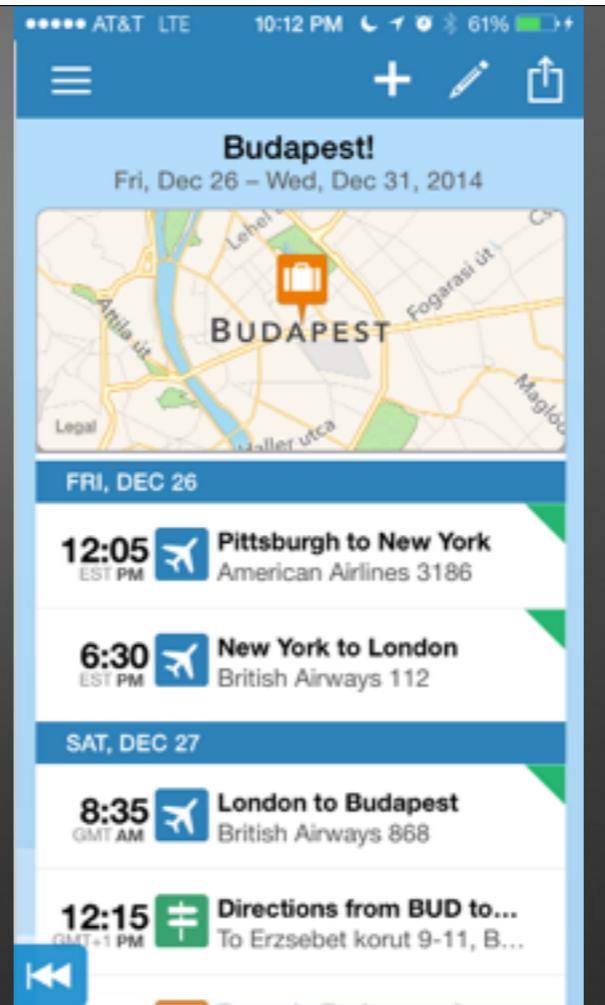




Triplt

You have to take vacation

It's not as bad as you think



Useful Practices

What are you doing to keep yourself sane?

Inbox Zero

Effective task management through email maintenance

Can be more stressful than not doing Inbox Zero



<http://www.43folders.com/43-folders-series-inbox-zero>

Action Method

Really just a series of notebooks

But they're really
well thought-out notebooks.

DOT
GRID
BOOK

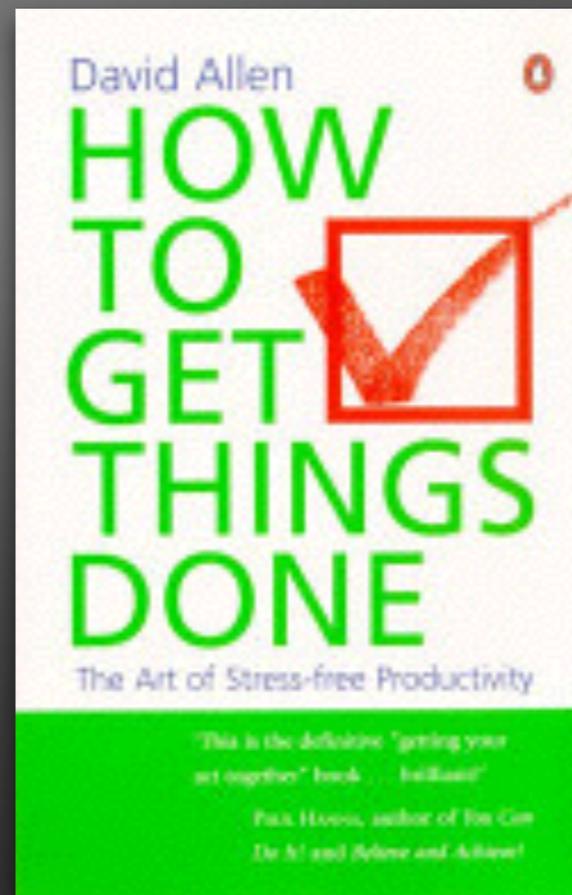
<http://www.theghostlystore.com/collections/behance-action-method>

Getting Things Done

A series of books on staying focused and engaged

Also a bit of an online cult of productivity

Not all cults are bad, okay?



<http://www.amazon.com/Getting-Things-Done-Stress-Free-Productivity/dp/0142000280>

Time Management for Systems Administrators

Phenomenal book by
Thomas Limoncelli

Very conversational, only slightly technical,
and always good for the soul.



<http://shop.oreilly.com/product/9780596007836.do>

Sanity May Be Overrated

But Trying to be Sane has Value

The pursuit of sanity is the pursuit of order amid the chaos

By itself, that has value that you should be considering as part of your workflow

**And remember, if all else
fails**



**KEEP
CALM
AND
ALL HAIL THE
GLOW CLOUD**

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tinyletter.com/technobits

Feedback URL:
<http://j.mp/psumac34>