

# Marta Filickova

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"The organized mind : Thinking straight in the age of information overload", Daniel J. Levitin, [b.m.] 2015 : [recenzja]

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

**RECENZJE / REVIEWS****MARTA FILICKOVA****DANIEL J. LEVITIN, *THE ORGANIZED MIND:  
THINKING STRAIGHT IN THE AGE  
OF INFORMATION OVERLOAD*,  
PENGUIN BOOK 2015, SS. 528\***

The book *Organized Mind* represents a useful guide for large variety of people ranging from students through house-wives to white-collars, from ordinary people to top managers. It is the book meant for every person who wants to learn how the brain works in order to improve its performance. The author of the book, Professor Daniel J. Levitin, has been working in the fields of psychology, neuropsychology and behavioural neuroscience for decades. With this background, he discusses different aspects of organizing mind. Aiming for teaching the reader how our brain organizes information so that we can use what we have, the publication brings comprehensible insight into our minds.

The author tackles the up-to-date issue how to organize our time better in this era of information explosion. The book unveils the general principles that anyone can apply to recapture a sense of order, and to regain the hours of lost time spent trying to overcome the disorganized mind. Moreover, it provides practical tips what one can do to minimize the chance of losing things, and to quickly recover when things get lost. The value of the book is reinforced by the fact that it is written in a reader-friendly way. With a light, amusing manner, the author translates difficult neuropsychological constructs into easily understandable language and thus enables the reader to grasp the abstract concepts of mind, working memory and attentional system. In order to achieve that, the book uses fictional and real life stories to exemplify, case studies to justify, metaphors and analogies to real world situations to illustrate. In addition, short activities and exercises are included to demonstrate the fallibility of our memory.

The book is structured into three main parts: 1) the history and biology underlying the use of organizational systems, 2) organizing the brain itself, and 3) the future of organizing with an extension to children. In the first part, the

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author discusses different aspects of organizing mind by reviewing the history of organizational systems that humans have tried over many centuries and comparing it to the present time of information. Within this context, we can learn about the attention difficulties related to attentional switching, when the brain cannot function well since thinking about many things at one time comes with neurobiological switching cost. What author stresses here is that we do not need to absorb less information; what we need is to have systems for organizing it. The book works with the idea of externalizing memory to lessen the effort of keeping everything in our head- such as key hooks, cell phone trays or special drawers for keeping certain things in them. Calendars, smartphones, address books are perceived as brain extenders: when information is externalized, we do not have to keep it in our mind. Getting things out of the head clears the brain of distracting things and enables us to focus on one thing we want to focus on. This part of the book also reveals the secret of successful life: to be successful in life means to become an expert in categorizing useful knowledge. We need to learn to do conscious active sorting, to separate things we need to deal with from those we do not, and to prioritize and focus on one most important thing, while others can wait.

Second part of the book deals with organizing world around us. It brings practical advice how to better organize our homes, time, social and business world and even information for the hardest decisions. The reader can learn that in order to have well organized homes we need to put together functionally or conceptually similar objects and maintain cognitively flexible categories to create cognitive economy. The book provides us with organization rules, such as 1) a mislabelled item is worse than an unlabelled item; 2) if there is an existing standard, use it; 3) don't keep what you can't use.

The second part brings also the strategies for putting systems in place at home: we should follow the rule of designated place, which means not to carry things from room to room. On the contrary, things should have their residual place and being consistent in putting things there ensures the system sustainability. Another strategy for having system is providing duplicates of things we use frequently. It all saves our mental energy for more important tasks, since we do not need to waste time looking for things.

The author works with the topic of digital age; he mentions the advantages of digital filing which dwell in saving space, being environmentally friendly and electronically searchable, and being easy to share with others. At the same time, he compares them with the advantages of keeping paper copies, such as no need for power, no attacks from viruses, not easily altered and/or changed. The advice from the author is to use both sources, with the factor being the ease of information retrieval. However, we should create categories for filing systems (file folders, use labels), hierarchically organized files and folders in both print and electronic versions.

When it comes to organizing our social world, the author introduces *crowd-sourcing* as a way of getting help from a large number of people using technology such as social networks. The reader is recommended to use other people as

a transactive memory. This way, the publication reflects on the latest changes in society; i.e., the way how we interact with each other and have online relationships. To keep the track with people, we should make social categories with concepts (such as friends) as well as externalize social details in order to clear our mind (e.g., contact list, social media).

Moreover, the book provides advice how to organize our time, how to plan and properly prioritize our tasks, and how to maintain attention and stick to a task. From describing the origin of time and its division into time periods, the author continues with revealing the secret of efficient time management. He recommends to avoid distractions (both internal and external) by creating systems that will encourage us to stick with the work at hand. Time management requires to structure our future with reminders, anticipate future needs. The importance of taking breaks is also stressed; if we compensate hours of hard work with leisure time, the productivity goes up. All these is possible with proper organizing of our time, our minds, which leaves time for creativity, for mind-wandering.

In the second part of the book the author also touches the topic of organizing scientific and medical information and explains how to make more evidence-based choices. Based on the book, in order to make a decision, to choose between two negative options, we need to calculate probabilities. The author provides detailed instructions how to do that. Realising that each decision carries uncertainty and risks, when choosing the best treatment option we need to gather information, take some time to make the decision, consider it from mathematical perspective, and discuss statistics with our doctor. Moreover, the book furnishes the reader with some simple tools for organizing information about health care, such as using fourfold table to make decisions, enabling us to lay out the information in a way that is easy to visualize.

Regarding organizing the business world, the reader learns about the factors contributing to productivity, the steps managers can take in order to increase the productivity, the process of decision-making involving heuristics and cognitive impulses, file folder management, as well as organizational charts visualizing reporting relationships among employees. The author brings also simple tips how to keep the documents effectively organized, based on the urgency and categorization. In addition, the book reveals the history of document storing in previous centuries.

The third part of the book considers the future of organized mind and provides the reader with the advice what to teach our children. Taken into account that school-aged children in these days have more information sources that are easily and quickly available than we used to have, the author stresses the need to teach next generations how to evaluate the masses of information that are out there, to distinguish what is true and what is not true, to identify biases and half-truths. In other words we need to teach children how to become critical, independent thinkers, and how to think clearly, completely, and creatively.

As the author points out, teachers in particular should stop functioning as mere transmitters of information. They should train mental skills related to

critical thinking, such as setting boundary conditions consciously; i.e., deciding what the lowest and highest answers could possibly be. In addition, teachers should teach children how to be more understanding of others and other points of view, keep an open mind and try to see things from another's perspective. This way, learning to organize their world will help children to improve their cognitive skills and capacity for learning.

Throughout the whole book, the idea of multitasking penetrates. It is mentioned in connection to everyday life, using smartphones and tablets. The author's opinion of multitasking is clear. He relates to it as to a powerful and diabolical illusion. According to him, our brains are not suited for multitasking. As the author explains, multitasking means shifting our attention rapidly from task to task. Multitasking results from information overload, when we try to attend to too many things at once. As a result, there is not enough attention to any one thing, and we end up decreasing the quality of attention applied to any task. Multitasking takes more energy to shift attention from one task to another, but if we organize our time and focus on one task, we are going to get more done and be less tired.

In conclusion, the author does great job in explaining how our brain works and why things go wrong. Reading the book will teach us why we lose things in the first place and what clever, organized people do so they do not do that. It also shows us that it does not matter if we have a good or bad memory, since even people with exceptional memory keep losing things. With notion that we can categorize objects in many, and often seemingly infinite, ways, one should remember that it is important for our organizational systems not only to have place for everything, but also to allow us a miscellaneous folder, a junk drawer where things collect until we have time to organize them. Indeed, organizing our lives is the main idea of the book. Repeatedly, the author stresses the most fundamental principle of organization, i.e., to off-load the information from our brain, use the environment itself to remind us what needs to be done. Following this key principle ensures us that we will be less like to make mistakes in our lives.