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Personal Productivity

A detailed look at how I manage a lot

By Paul Klipp

I have now spoken at two conferences about my time management solution, which is not original, but rather a collection of best practices from several approaches to personal productivity. The presentations were very well-received and I was often urged to document the approach, and so I will attempt to do so here.

From David Allen's *Getting Things Done* I learned that my brain is for processing, not storage. Most of the stress in my life, perhaps all of it, used to come from the nagging fear that there was something more important that I ought to be doing. From Tony Buzzan I learned that the best way to empty my brain on paper is a mind map. From Steven Covey I learned that I have many roles in life, and the most important are the easiest to forget when budgeting time. From Nick Cernis, the author of *Todoodlist*, I learned that visualizing my life can be fun. From David Anderson I learned to visualize my workflow and limit my work in process for faster task throughput times. Finally, from Francesco Cirillo, the creator of the Pomodoro technique, I learned to break myself of multi-tasking and the power of focus.

If you're a personal productivity geek like myself, you might have recognized all of these popular productivity techniques. I have tried them all in their purist form, by the book, and extracted from each those parts which worked best for me.

For those who don't know me, I own a software company and an event management company. At the present moment, I am coordinating sales with a dozen warm to hot prospects in various stages of the sales process. I am wrapping up the Agile Central Europe Conference, and planning the EuRuKo and TEDxKrakow conferences. I am coordinating four product teams developing different web applications. I am about to launch a new magazine and I'm writing a book. Additionally, I do

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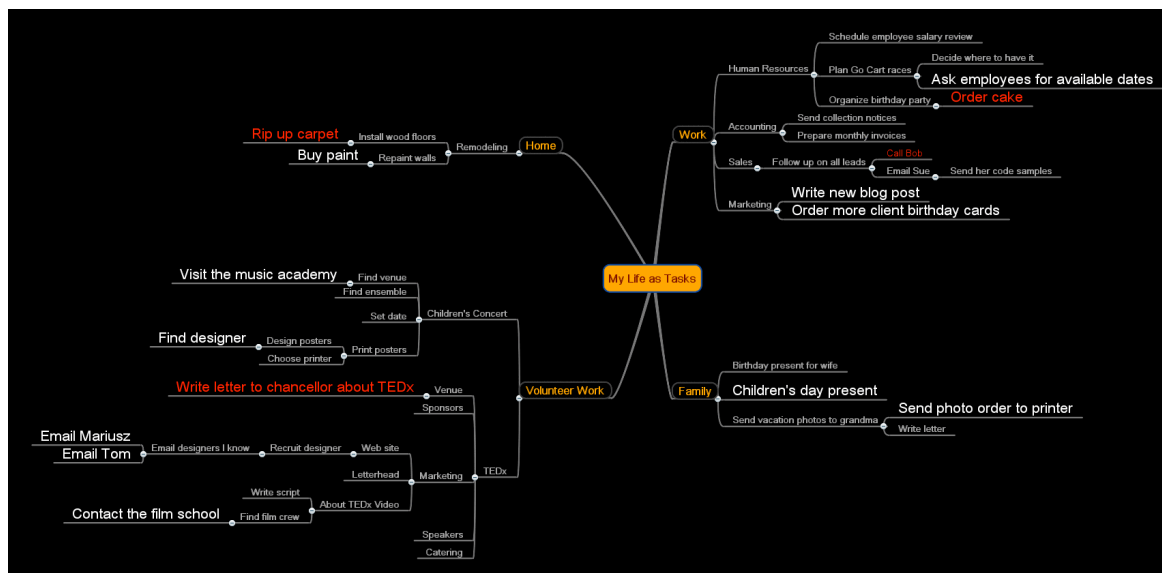
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consulting and speak at software conferences. I've founded the Krakow Ruby User Group, The ITSBA OpenCoffee Club as well as the IT Small Business Alliance, and I'm starting a local chapter of the Limited WIP Society. I'm also a father, and I value my time with my family. That's a lot, I think, and it means keeping every one of those projects moving forward against a backdrop of the normal daily chores that any business owner must perform, such as employee motivation, recruiting, marketing, accounting and the like. To make matters worse, I'm a morning person. By 3:00PM my brain shuts down and I'm useless for mental work. I'm also a family man. I'm home by 5:00 every day and I don't work at home. Essentially, that means that I do almost everything that must be done in about 30 hours a week. This article is about how I pull it off.

Step one involves emptying my mind and ensuring that I capture everything I can think of. I use a mind map styled after the approach presented in Todoodlist. The first time I did it, I used paper. However, once I had it all sorted out like I liked it, I started using an online mind mapping tool, mindmeister.com, for this. I like using a software tool for two reasons. One is that it's easy to change frequently without lots of eraser marks and scratch outs. The other is that it isn't convenient to check. I don't want the whole complexity of my life right in my face all the time. That would drive me nuts. All I want to know at any moment is what I should be doing right now.

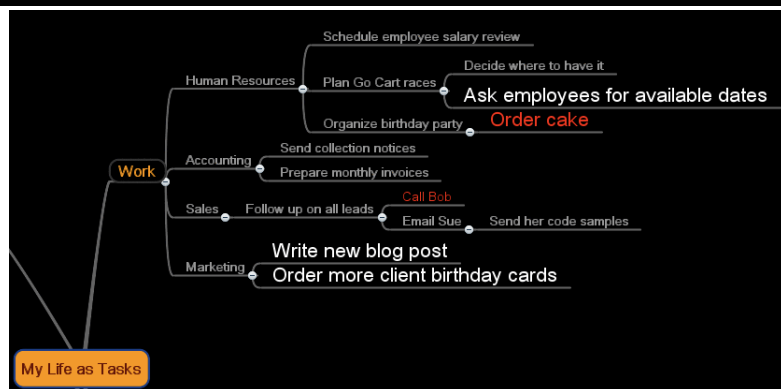
Each top-level node is a project. Outcomes are linked to projects. For each outcome, there are linked tasks to accomplish it. This approach lets me focus on one project at a time, and then on one outcome for that project so that I can discover all the tasks required to arrive at the desired outcome. I can do this without losing sight of the big picture, because I just have to broaden my focus a movement and see all the outcomes for a project and all the projects in my life in one place.

It took me about an hour to build this document the first time. Now I spend fifteen minutes every Monday morning reviewing and updating it. I add new projects, new tasks, and delete tasks that were completed the week before. If something is urgent, I'll change the text color to red. If it's very important, I will make the font larger. This practice makes it easy to see at a glance what I ought to be doing and what I must do.



Here is a detail from the mind map:

(this is not my real mindmap; it's just a sample. Mine is about twice this size)



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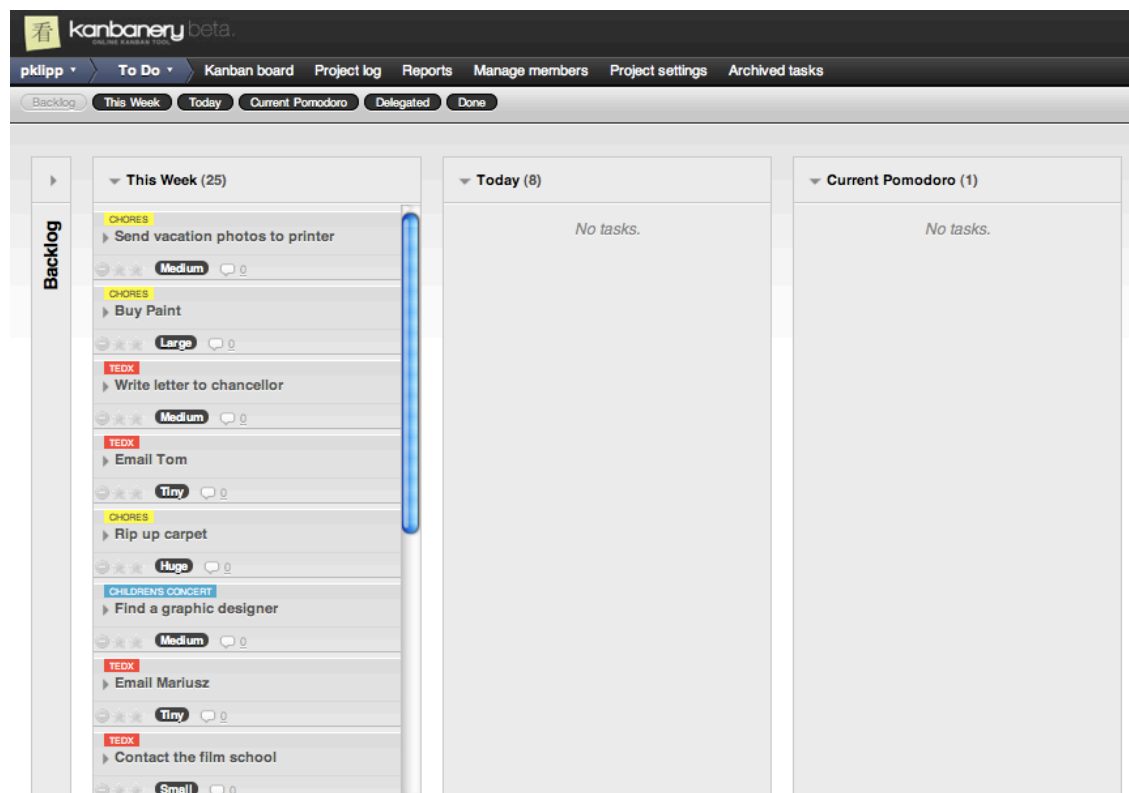
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Once this mind map is updated, I move all of the urgent and important tasks into a kanban board. My kanban board uses the following workflow:

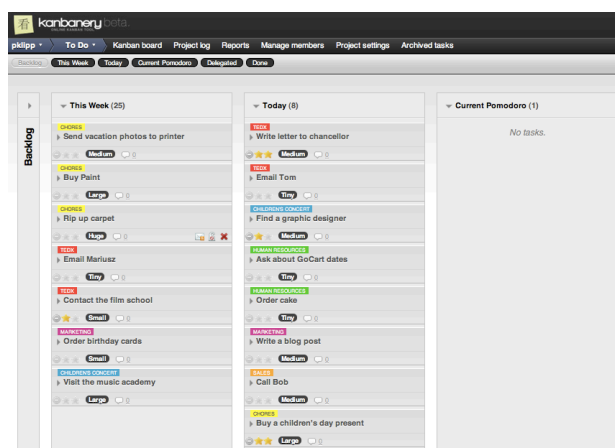
- Backlog (where I stick anything I think of whenever it occurs to me)
- This week (where I put the 25 things I intend to do this week)
- Today (Where I put the 8 things I intend to do today)
- Current Pomodoro (where I put the one thing I'm focussing on now)
- Delegated (Where I put the things I've asked someone else to do)
- Done (this should be clear enough)

So after updating my mind map, I move everything I intend to do this week into the "This Week" column. I set priorities as needed using three states: normal, one star, two stars. For me, two stars means nothing else matters until it is done. One star means I absolutely must do it today. I also add estimates. I use: tiny, small, medium, large and huge. Tiny is for things like my daily reminder to do 50 pushups. Small is for things I can do in 15 minutes. Medium for me is half an hour. Large is an hour or so. Huge tasks I try to avoid, but they are the kind of things I lock the door and unplug the phone for, like tediously typing up 160 invoices because my accounting software mangled a month's data.

By now, I've spent about 20 minutes and I have a very clear view of my goals for the week.



I then pull eight tasks into "Today" and I may sort them by priority or by size, depending on how I feel about them. My planning for the week is done. It's half an hour into Monday, and I know that I'm doing just what needs to be done to advance all of my projects satisfactorily this week. Everything else on my massive to do list (the whole mind map) I can safely forget about until next Monday.



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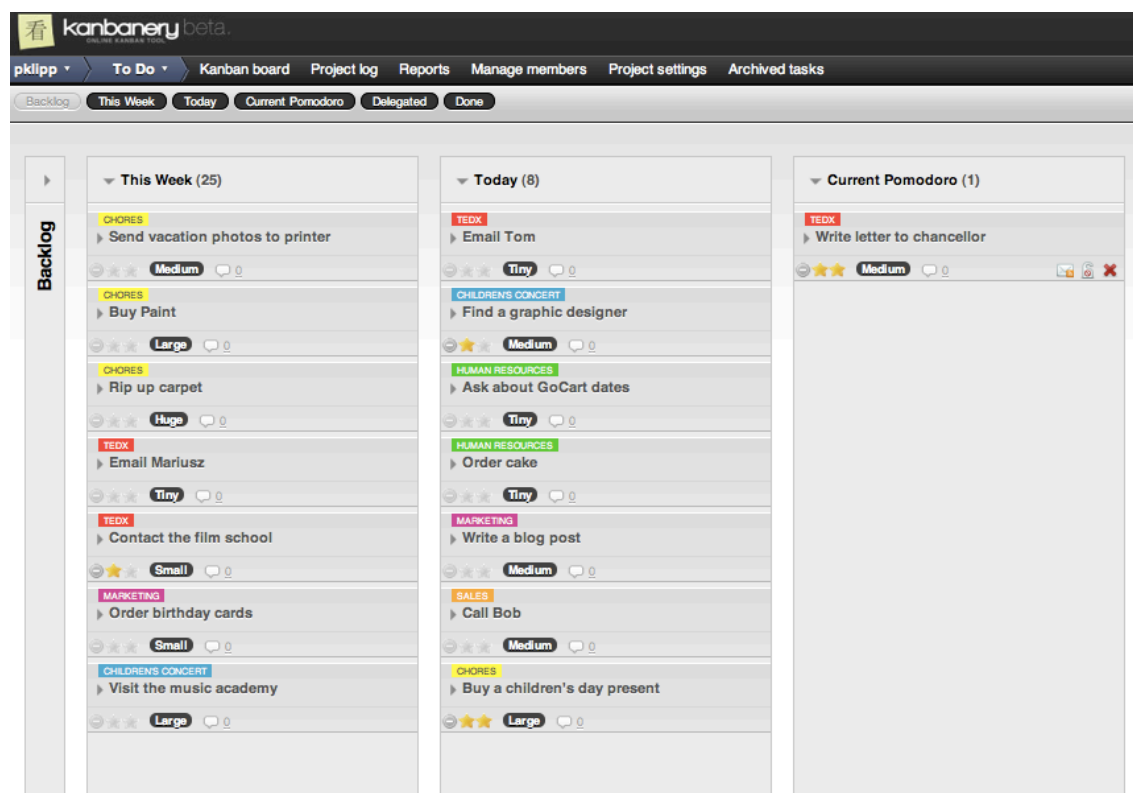
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Now is where the Pomodoro technique comes in to play. At the core of this approach is the value of focusing for short bursts of activity. Specifically, one chooses a task (or set of tasks) to be completed in 25 minutes, sets a timer for 25 minutes, closes the door, unplugs the phone, turns off IM notifications and closes their email software, and works, diligently, on only the task at hand, for 25 minutes. Then you can take a 5 minute break.

You might think that a person could do 16 of these cycles in a day. I'm lucky to get more than two in a day without interruptions. But in those 50 minutes I get more done than I do in the other seven hours of my work day, at least in terms of advancing the most important aspects of my most important projects.

I keep a calendar like a Seinfeld chart on the wall by my desk, and at the end of every day I write the number of completed Pomodoros that I did that day. It often looks like: 1,2,2,1,3,0,1,2,2... By making it visible, I motivate myself to get that number up, and it's embarrassing to write 0, so I work hard to avoid it.

Throughout the day, I pull items from Today into Current and then give them my full focus until they can be moved to Done. It's really as simple as that.



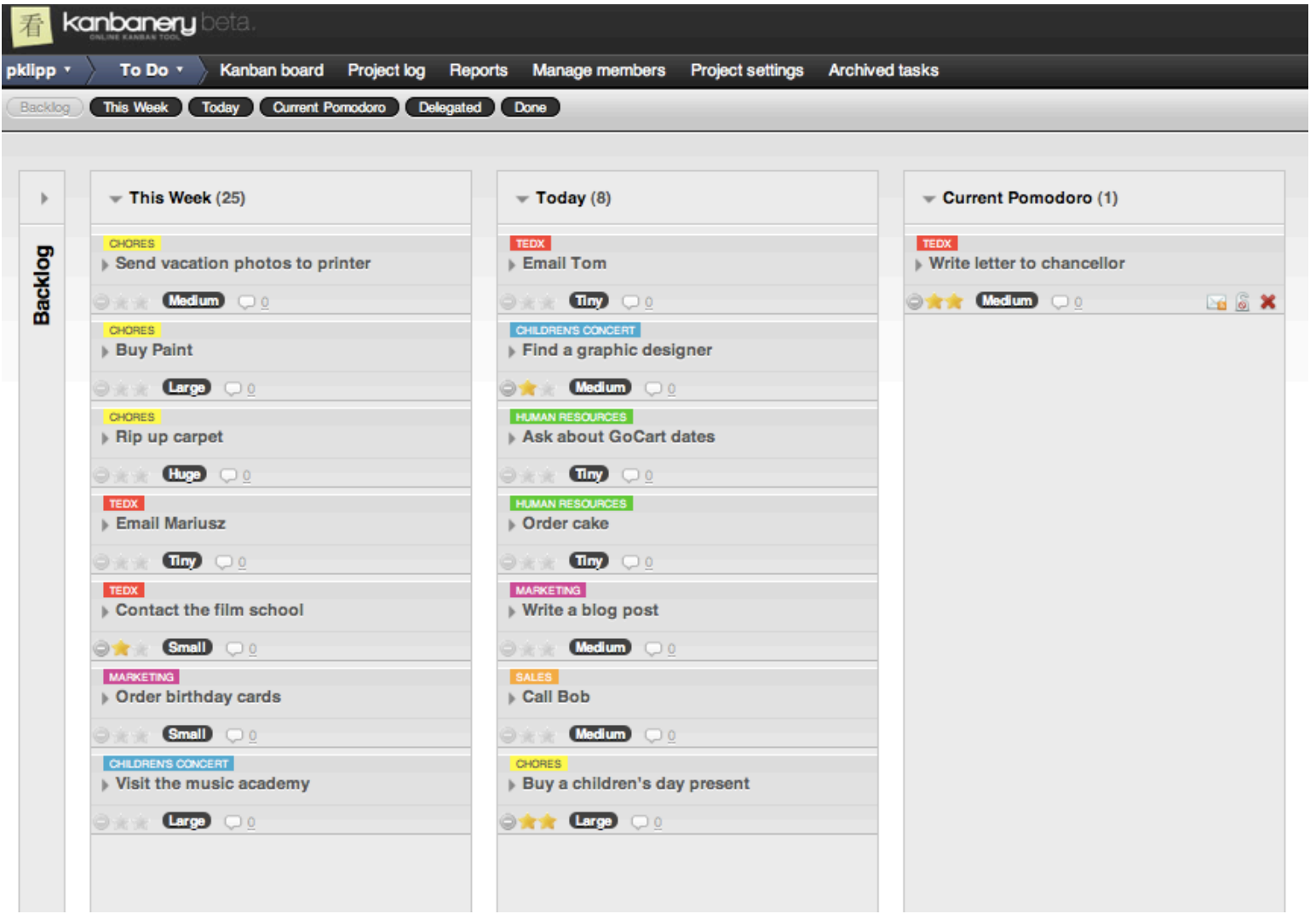
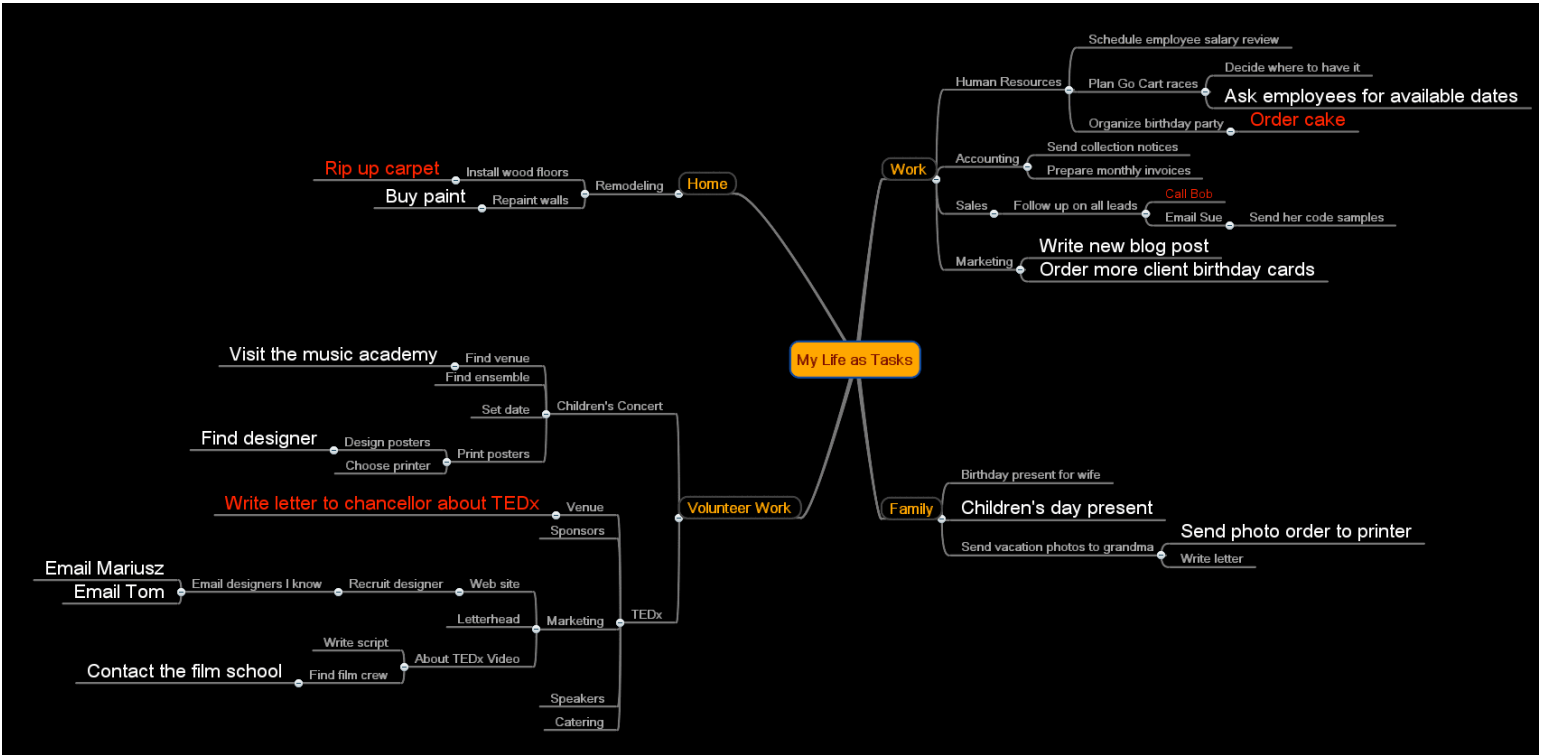
I should mention also that tasks which must be done on a certain day or time (renew tram pass on October first, Call John at 3:00 on Tuesday, TEDxKrakow planning meeting at 5PM Wednesday) just go in my Google calendar.

So my grand planning tool is a mind map. My weekly planning tool is a kanban board. My daily planning tool is a to do list (one column of the kanban board) and my calendar.

I've found this system keeps my head clear, keeps me sane, and is easily manageable in just half an hour a week.

Lastly, what to do with things that come up during the week? These fall into three categories: things to do now (answer the phone) I just do, things to do soon (get Ewelina a receipt she needs) I put into my kanban board either in Today or This Week, and things to do someday but not urgently I put in an inbox which I review while doing my weekly planning. Those things will either make it into next week's plan or will be added to the mind map.

The illustrations used in this article



Other Useful Resources

Getting Things Done

<http://www.davidco.com/>

Personal Kanban

<http://kanbanery.com/>

<http://personalkanban.com/>

Pomodoro Technique

<http://www.pomodrotechnique.com/resources.html>

Seinfeld Charts

<http://artofmanliness.com/2009/12/07/forging-habits-of-steel-7-tips-on-making-and-breaking-habits/>

Todoodlist

<http://www.squidoo.com/Todoodlist>

Steven Covey

<https://www.stephencovey.com/>

Mind Maps

<http://www.mindmeister.com/>