



A PERSONAL SUCCESS STORY

A Productivity Revival in the Hamster-Wheel World of Tech

Rich Sheridan, CEO, Chief Storyteller & Co-founder Menlo Innovations

Eighteen years ago, Rich Sheridan left his high-profile gig in software development to start something new. Fed up with the bureaucracy and culture of tech that drained the intrigue and enjoyment from his work, Sheridan was determined to hit re-do on his career and co-founded Menlo Innovations.

Sometimes referred to as the “Amish of software development”, Menlo operates on a unique set of practices that include partnered work, complete transparency, paper and pencil project management, open-office workspace, and other revolutionary ideas designed to create joy in the workplace and solve human suffering through software development.

And to say he succeeded is an understatement. *Forbes* magazine, *Inc.* magazine, and *The Wall Street Journal*, among others, have recognized Menlo for its unique and successful culture. And the awards have poured in as well, including a spot on the *Inc.* 500 List of Fastest Growing Private Companies in America.

While many ingredients are key to the Menlo secret sauce, Sheridan attributes the way work gets done as mission critical. And, he says there couldn't be a better description of how Menlo works than what David Allen outlines in his book, *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*.

“The GTD® skills we rely on most are capturing, organizing, and reviewing. For the past 16 years, our system has eliminated hallway project management discussions that can drive teams crazy. Unless and until a project or task is captured in our system, it will not get done. No hallway project discussion, no phone call, no text message, can derail work at Menlo.”

Menlo Meets GTD

Menlo's GTD process starts by outlining a project on a foam core board. The team then identifies critical tasks and captures them on a story cards (handwritten 5x7-inch index cards). The project team then clarifies and organizes the project by estimating the scope of each task and assigning the tasks to a partnership. Work can't begin until they have an idea of how long it will take and who will do the work. Next, they prioritize the tasks by most urgent and important. Finally, the highest priority tasks and assignments are displayed in a simple wallboard display for everyone to see.

This system ensures employees are productive. They can walk in on a Monday morning, look at the board, and see what project they are on, who their partner is, and what is expected of them for the week. They simply have to start working. They don't have to wonder if they are

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working on the right stuff or should do something else. As a result, Sheridan says they have eliminated fire-fighting as a method of management at Menlo.

“What I saw in the past is that emergencies and firefighting arise not because there are actual emergencies but because most people are taught that the only way to get things done in their organization is to light them on fire,” says Sheridan. “At Menlo, we understand that you don’t have to light things on fire, shout, or bang your fist, you just have to use our trusted system.”

RESULTS

How do employees respond? Sheridan, and his employees, say they thrive in a system where they know what’s asked of them and have the time and space to get it done.

“Compared to other places I have worked, I feel much more productive at Menlo because my work is laid out for me and I don’t wait on a manager to tell me what to do,” says Kealy, a software engineer.

Tracy, another employee, jokes that employees call it “freedom through tyranny.”

“We have a strict structure, but within that structure we have absolute freedom,” says Tracy. “Our story card outlines what we need to accomplish. We don’t have the ‘how’ to accomplish it—we can make that decision. It’s up to me and my partner on how to get it done.”

“Within every team I’ve ever been a part of, there was no question that the people working for me were busy,” says Sheridan. “They were always busy. They worked long days, weekends, and sometimes pulled all-nighters. The question was if they were working on things that matter. When my employees grab a card, there is no doubt in their mind that they are doing something meaningful because the customer picked it.”

Critics also wonder if this system squashes creativity. In reality, Sheridan says they have more creative discussions at Menlo than typical organizations because creativity can’t derail the plan.

“At my previous organizations, leaders actually stifled creativity because it created more work,” says Sheridan. “In our world, because our capture system is so well understood, there’s freedom to advocate for new ideas. Our motto is to make mistakes faster and run the experiment.”

Sheridan also reflects on the common and time-wasting behaviors he has stopped doing in favor of a more productive system. Since implementing these GTD skills, he has abandoned hallway project management, Monday morning status meetings, status reports, quarterly reports to the executive team, pointless meetings, software development lifecycle process manuals, percentage assignment of employees, fact-free planning, and more.

Looking back, Sheridan has once again found joy in his chosen career. Learning a new way of working and implementing these processes across the organization has not only produced results, it has reduced stress and increased joy in the workplace.

“We’ve run this system for 18 years now and I’ve never looked back,” says Sheridan. “While it may be unconventional, it’s produced results others are envious of. We’re not just focused on getting things done—we’re focused on getting the *right* things done.

Getting Things Done® Training is evolved from the original work of David Allen. Combining decades of David’s research with VitalSmarts’ powerful and proven instructional design, Getting Things Done Training brings practical productivity skills to life for the modern learner—yielding improved individual effectiveness, project efficiency, meaningful productivity, team innovation, and relationships.

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vitalsmarts.com/gtdtraining or call us at 1-800-449-5989.

Menlo’s Go-To GTD Skills

CAPTURING

“If I look at how we run projects here, capturing is very clear. It’s our story cards. No work gets done here unless it’s first written down on an index card. We use this system to set priorities and determine the next tasks. There is no ambiguity about it, no secondary input that could confuse or disrupt the project.”

CLARIFY & ORGANIZE

“Project teams meet with clients weekly to review the project and priorities. If something new comes up, then it gets captured in a story card and estimated. The client decides if they want it to be a new, higher priority task under the caveat that the lowest priority assignment may fall off the display. As a team, they can agree or adjust the project as necessary.”

REVIEW

“We call it show and tell and it involves going back and reflecting on the work we’ve done the past five days with the client. After the client leaves, we also have a show and tell with the team and ask how can we do the project better.”