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Building a Second Brain

A Proven Method to Organize Your Digital Life and Unlock Your Creative Potential

Tiago Forte • Profile Books © 2022 • 272 pages

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Take-Aways

- Don't rely solely on your brain to keep track of information; create a digital system.
- Harness the power of technology to turn information into knowledge.
- Capture knowledge assets, following your intuition and curiosity.
- Organize information to support your flow and make ideas actionable.
- Distill information to highlight the most valuable insights and information.
- Express your ideas, experiment on a small scale and solicit feedback.
- When your creativity dries up, build momentum by collecting ideas, leveraging yesterday's momentum and starting small.
- Effective digital organizers maintain good habits.

Recommendation

In today's Information Age, you can't rely on your brain alone to remember facts and retain information, says productivity expert Tiago Forte. Trying to keep abreast of the nonstop flow of information will overwhelm you. When Forte suffered a chronic, debilitating illness that damaged his working memory, he developed a smart note-taking system to help him function. He outsourced the cognitive demands of remembering to intelligent machines, so he could focus on creative work. Forte shares actionable insights to help you create your own personal knowledge management system – your "Second Brain."

Summary

Don't rely solely on your brain to keep track of information; create a digital system.

People face a deluge of information every day. This onslaught isn't empowering but overwhelming. It leads to anxiety and "information exhaustion" – that constant niggling feeling that you've forgotten something. The average US employee wastes 76 hours annually searching for mislaid files, items and notes, according to research from Microsoft. Knowledge workers spend 26% of a typical workday searching for information across various systems, then consolidating it, and they end up tracking down only 56% of the information they seek, according to research from the International Data Corporation.

> *"To be able to make use of information we value, we need a way to package it up and send it through time to our future self... [thus, giving us] access to the wisdom we need to make good decisions and take the most effective action. It all begins with the simple act of writing things down."*

To stay abreast of the torrent of information, create a personal knowledge management (PKM) system. This "Second Brain" can help you keep track of the most important insights and ideas you encounter when consuming information. The system easily retrieves what you've stored away; organizes your accumulating knowledge so you can leverage it to achieve your goals; saves your best ideas; shares information easily with others; connects disparate ideas and identifies patterns; frees up mental capacity for creative work; and allows you to waste less time trying to find information. Once you adopt this system, you'll start to see technology as more than just a storage device but as an assistant to support and enhance your thinking. Your Second Brain – "the world's best personal assistant" – will enable you to unleash your full potential.

Harness the power of technology to turn information into knowledge.

Historically, only intellectual elites, such as philosophers, writers and scientists, needed to keep track of their notes. Great thinkers, including Leonardo da Vinci, Virginia Woolf and Octavia Butler, were known to carry around a "commonplace book," in which they jotted down interesting ideas and factoids.

According to *The New York Times,* the average person consumes the equivalent of 174 newspapers' – or 34 gigabytes' – worth of information daily. Given that people encounter more information than they can effectively manage otherwise, everyone needs a personal, digital commonplace book – a Second Brain. Once your notes are digital, you can search them, organize them, sync them across devices and

save them in the cloud. You are, essentially, creating a "knowledge vault" for your thoughts and ideas. Recording your thoughts helps you solidify your ideas, uncover unusual or unexpected associations between concepts, cultivate your ideas over time and sharpen your perspective.

> *"Those who learn how to leverage technology and master the flow of information through their lives will be empowered to accomplish anything they set their minds to. At the same time, those who continue to rely on their fragile biological brains will become ever more overwhelmed by the explosive growth in the complexity of our lives."*

Your Second Brain is a collection of tools – a to-do list, a digital calendar, a reading app, and more. But the "neural center" of your Second Brain is a note-taking app. Choose a note-taking app that best serves your needs: Notion, Evernote, Apple Notes, Microsoft OneNote or Google Keep, for example. The best note-taking apps are capable of storing media in various formats. They are messy and informal idea boards that allow your thoughts to incubate, bloom and grow. They act as open and unrestricted spaces for free-flowing ideas. Their goal is not to deliver any output. They aren't exact, polished or precise; rather, they are tools to help hone your focus.

To build your Second Brain, follow the four-step CODE method: capture, organize, distill and express.

Capture knowledge assets, following your intuition and curiosity.

When sifting through information online – be it watching videos or scrolling through social media – see yourself as a curator of a personal library. Just as a lawyer maintains a case file or a marketer assembles a swipe book, capture anything you deem noteworthy. Nourish your mind by consciously choosing your "information diet" – that is, being mindful of the content you consume. Plant a "knowledge garden" by collecting valuable "knowledge assets," including thought-provoking passages from articles or books, quotes from podcasts or audiobooks, links to interesting online content, voice memos, meeting notes, images that grab your attention or inspire you, highlights from conferences and courses you've attended, and so on. Collecting these external sources of information may inspire you to create stories, spark epiphanies, and help you recall memories, think deeply and daydream. You should file these thoughts and ideas in your Second Brain, too.

> *"Just as with the food we put into our bodies, it is our responsibility and right to choose our information diet. It's up to us to decide what information is good for us, what we want more of and less of, and ultimately, what we do with it. You are what you consume, and that applies just as much to information as to nutrition."*

But how do you decide what information is relevant when you don't know how, when or if you will use it again? You'll need to rely on your intuition. Don't save entire book chapters, articles or interview transcripts, for example. You'll never reread them in their entirety, and they clutter up your notes. Use your note-taking app's tools, read-later apps or web clippers to extract the richest, most relevant parts of the information and save them as a pithy note. Jot down the title of the content, the name of the author and the date it was published. Follow your curiosity, paying attention to what resonates with you. To direct your quest for knowledge, consider tackling a specific problem, which could be concrete (for example, "What can I do to

make eating healthy easier?") or more abstract (for instance, "How do I live less in the past, and more in the present?") The information you capture should fit one or more of the following criteria: It inspires you; it's useful; it has personal relevance; or it prompts you to see the world differently.

Organize information to support your flow, and make ideas actionable.

Organizing your knowledge assets can help you boost your creativity and productivity. Just as you would keep a neat physical workspace, you should also carefully organize your digital workspace, treating your Second Brain like a "mind cathedral."

> *"One of the biggest temptations with organizing is to get too perfectionistic, treating the process of organizing as an end in itself."*

Organize your library into the PARA system – four broad categories arranged in order of decreasing urgency:

- **"Projects"** – File information that pertains to finite, short-term projects with clear goals in this folder. Create a subfolder for each work-related project, side hustle or personal project.
- **"Areas"** – Your areas folder contains information pertaining to ongoing long-term responsibilities. It could include a subfolder for each of your work responsibilities, such as, say, product development or account management, and for each personal matter, such as health, kids and finances.
- **"Resources"** – This category functions as a personal reference library and is home to the content about your hobbies and non-work topics that interest you.
- **"Archives"** – Transfer inactive items from the other three categories to this folder. An archive allows you to declutter your filing system while still retaining older information in case you need it again.

Store your PARA system in the cloud so you can access your treasure trove of information on all your devices. When you find some noteworthy content, consider where to file it. Ask, "In which project will this be most useful?" If the answer is none, ask, "In which area will this be most useful?" If the answer is none, ask, "Which resource does this belong to?" If the answer is none, file the content in your archives. Don't get bogged down in trying to perfect your system; file new items quickly and move on. Remember that the PARA system is dynamic, and it changes as frequently as your goals do.

Distill information to highlight the most valuable insights and information.

When you first come across a radical new idea, you may think you'll remember it forever. But after a few weeks, the details start to fade from your memory. However, if you take notes, you preserve that knowledge, carrying it with you to a future time when it becomes relevant. If you had to communicate to a busy CEO, you'd compress your message into pithy take-aways. Imagine your future self as that busy CEO. Distill the information for yourself.

One technique is "progressive summarization": Save a text to your read-later app. Highlight the most interesting and relevant passages from the article. Your app disregards the remainder but retains a link to the original full text should you want to refer to it in the future. Distill the information further by bolding the main points, buzzwords and key phrases within the note. Finally, highlight important passages in

your notes app to illuminate the most important points. The highlighted passages will encapsulate the essence of the original text. If necessary, write a small, bullet-pointed executive summary at the top. When you're not using a read-later app (for instance, when you jot down notes at a meeting), you can use the progressive summarization approach manually. Simply make note of the most salient points. As you reread them, bold and highlight the most important phrases and sentences.

> *"When you first capture them, your notes are like unfinished pieces of raw material. They require a bit more refinement to turn them into truly valuable knowledge assets, like a chemist distilling only the purest compound."*

You're not trying to write down as much information as possible; instead, aim to cultivate the discernment to know what information to keep and what to discard, allowing the best ideas and insights to shine. Avoid three common mistakes: overhighlighting, highlighting indiscriminately without purpose, and overthinking your choices when highlighting. Simply use your intuition to choose what resonates.

Express your ideas, experiment on a small scale and solicit feedback.

Resist the temptation to wait until you know as much as possible before expressing or developing an idea. Getting started is more important than achieving perfection. Begin testing your ideas early and frequently, on a small scale. Solicit feedback from others about what works, as creativity is collaborative, and store this feedback in your Second Brain, using it as the starting point for your next iteration.

> *"Your Second Brain is the repository of things you are already creating and using anyway. All we are doing is adding a little bit of structure and intentionality to how we use them."*

Creative people break down large projects into numerous rough drafts – prototypes, pilots, betas or demos, depending on the industry – before making a final product. Start storing, organizing and reusing "intermediate packets" – such as distilled notes, outtakes that didn't make the final cut on a previous project, work-in-process, past deliverables and documents others have created – in your Second Brain, to help you create rough drafts. Collect samples you can emulate. For example, if you were planning a conference, accumulate a folder containing sample agendas, checklists, invitations, and so on. Your knowledge assets function much like LEGO blocks: The more you have, the easier it is to execute your ideas.

When your creativity dries up, build momentum by collecting ideas, leveraging yesterday's momentum and starting small.

Feelings of creative block can fester and grow, especially in the distilling and expressing phases of the four-stage CODE process.

> *"Note-taking is like time travel – you are sending packets of knowledge through time to your future self."*

Three strategies can help you overcome inertia and complete creative projects if you're having trouble getting started:

1. **"The archipelago of ideas"** – Collect a group of ideas, or stepping stones, that will form the skeleton of your creative project. Once you've gathered a "critical mass" of ideas, create an outline to connect them logically.

2. **"The Hemingway bridge"** – Novelist Ernest Hemingway famously finished a writing session only when he felt sure of the next plot point in the story. By building a bridge to his next writing session, he could begin that session with a burst of creativity. Maintain a similar momentum by clarifying the next steps for your next work session. Note your biggest challenge, any details you want to remember the next day, and your intention for your next work session.

3. **"Dial down the scope"** – If you have big, lofty goals, tackle something smaller and more feasible first. For example, if you want to write a book, perhaps start with a series of online articles.

Effective digital organizers maintain good habits.

The Second Brain strikes a healthy balance between order and creativity. But to make the system work for you, you must perform regular maintenance. Integrate the following good habits into your routine to keep your Second Brain functioning effectively:

1. **Project checklists** – Identify action steps to ensure consistent execution. Create checklists to support yourself in starting and finishing projects.

2. **Periodic reviews** – On a weekly and monthly basis, take time to review your life and career. Reflect on whether you'd like to improve or change anything.

3. **Noticing habits** – To support your projects, notice small opportunities to capture, better organize or share information, and act on them.

It's time to fire your biological brain from the job of managing and remembering every aspect of your life. Delegate those tasks to your Second Brain, and promote your biological brain to the role of CEO of your life, "orchestrating and managing the process of turning information into results." You'll feel less anxious and free up more time for the tasks that matter.

About the Author

Tiago Forte is a global productivity expert and the founder of Forte Labs. He wrote *The PARA Method: Simplify, Organize and Master Your Digital Life*.

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