



Vanguard Scotland Interview Transcript



**Stuart Corrigan, Managing Director of Vanguard Scotland Ltd
Interviews
Ed Lamont, Founding Director of Next Action Associates (EU)
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S: Hi this is Stuart Corrigan from Vanguard and tonight I'm with Ed Lamont, who's the founding Director of Next Action Associates in the UK and Germany. Now Ed is a Master Practitioner of 'Getting Things Done' which is going to help - if you're a manager - it's going to help you be more productive, get more stuff done and if you want, spend more time in the work.

So let me start by asking you Ed, tell us a little bit about 'Getting Things Done' and what it is you do?

E: Thank you Stuart and thanks for the introduction. What GTD is, or Getting Things Done is, is you say it there, for me it's a way to get more done with less stress. Initially it was a lot about getting more things done, and then as I stuck with it over time it's allowed me to get either the same amount done, or more done, with less stress. So that's what we offer to our clients. We, either through coaching or through seminars, are working with them to give them the best practices, the tips the tricks and the principles of productivity so they can adapt that for themselves to use it in their own life and their own work to achieve the results that are possible.

S: So if I'm a manager, and I'm listening to this and I'm saying, 'well I'm already working 15-16 hours a day and I use my to-do list and I'm doing my time management I just couldn't possibly see how I'm going to get more things done.' What would your response to those guys be?

E: Well it would be really to just go back into my own history because 10 years ago when I first discovered this material I was pretty good. I was convinced that I was working at the limits of my possibilities. And someone gave me the book and I didn't even bother to read it - the original 'Getting Things Done' book. They said here you really should read this book and I said well I don't have time to read the book. I left it for at least 6 months before I finally picked it up. When I first looked through it there were 3 ideas that for me were paradigm shifts and I did change the way I thought about my work and what was possible in that work. When I actually got around to implementing it I think in the first few days I was seeing dozens of percent improvement in the amount of things that I was able to get done. I thought I was good and I knew I was working hard, but working hard is not anything like working efficiently, and I really wasn't working efficiently.

S: So you said there were three things that you immediately started doing. Can you tell us a little bit about what those three things were?

E: Well one of the key concepts in what we talk about in the work is the idea of the next action - so what are you actually going to do next? And getting clear on what that is for all the things that you have going on your life. That idea in and of itself was a huge shift for me because it took it from procrastination, which is what I was doing with a lot of things, into action.

One of the other things we suggest is that you cluster those actions by - where you are, by the tool you need or the person you need to move forward with those things and that too was a huge thing.

And then there's a very simple concept of - if you can do it quickly then you might as well do it now. And that idea as well was just a - it shifted my idea around how to do the work that was in front of me.

I mean one of the other ideas - there were quite a number of them but those were the three that kind of stuck with me the most - but the other one was you can operate out of a zero inbox. So you can operate day to day with nothing in your inbox, at least temporarily. And that was just a - that opened a huge door for me because I was living in a world where everybody lived with somewhere between 700 and 7,000 mails? And that was normal. And I had discovered this possibility that no actually you can clear it up. You don't need to do everything that's in you inbox, but it is useful to have decided about what you're going to do.

S: Okay, you know that's interesting, I can imagine managers listening to this and going 'wow the concept of getting my inbox to zero - that's kind of living on another planet', but it is possible as you say if you think about it as a place that you collect stuff until you're ready to do it and put it somewhere, as opposed to them just sitting there forever and a day right?

E: Well we're basically suggesting you stop using your inbox as a to-do list and use it as a place to collect things until you're ready to think about them. Once you've thought about them then we suggest you put them on a to-do list and then go work off of the to-do list rather than work off of your inbox. Because what most people are doing in their inbox is that they're trying to work on some of the strategic things but they keep bouncing back up to handle the last thing that came in. And the probability that the last thing that landed in your inbox is the strategically most important thing to be doing is almost zero. It's just very, very unlikely that that last thing is what you should be doing right now. But because we're all drawn to novelty we keep being pulled back up to look at that last thing. And we're suggesting get the heck out of there, at least part of the day, so you can be working on a complete list of things that you have to do, rather than just working on the latest and loudest.

S: Yes and I guess certainly something I was familiar with, before I got a bit of support and help from you guys, which was inbox roulette, which is picking something up and going 'hmm' and putting it down again and picking something else up and going, 'nah I'll get to that tomorrow', and literally looking at the same thing 10-15 times before I could even figure out what it was I needed to do with it. What's your advice there for the person that's doing that?

E: Well, we suggest a fairly systematic approach to dealing with that. It's not wrong, there's nothing morally wrong with wasting time looking at things over and over again in your inbox, but there is a better way, there is a simpler way, a very structured way to handle those things and our suggestion is not only - touch it once - but it is really to think hard about it once.

So we see there are two different things you can be doing in your inbox. One is what we call emergency scanning and emergency scanning is the way most people simply live. They come in and they scan down, they check what's there, they'll mark things in red that they want to come back to and they are kind of looking for things that are exploding - and then they'll kind of pick something and go to work.

What we call 'clarifying what's in there' is a slightly different process. And we really suggest just go one by one. I mean do emergency scanning if you want to, to make sure that there's nothing blown up, but at a certain stage you really are going to just need to go through those things one by one and work out what they mean for you. It takes a certain amount of time but it's not new time that you're going to need to use, it's time that you're going to have to use at some point anyway to deal with that thing. My suggestion is simply to deal with it more on the front end than once it's starting to blow up on you. Because once it's starting to blow up on you your thinking process is not going to be quite as elegant, reflective and strategic as if you've created some time in order to think about those things that have arrived.

S: Yes and of course then you can think about the concept of the next action that you talked about earlier. And again I have to say for somebody like me who's, compared to you, is a relative novice at getting things done I mean this just made a massive difference to me. Because suddenly I'm looking at one of my to-do lists and going 'I can do that one, I can do that one, I can do that one', whereas before what I would have on my to-do list actually would have been a huge project like, 'change all the measures in this bank that I'm working in' and I'd look at it and go, 'I can't do that' and no progress would have been made at all. Can you talk a little bit more about the next action concept just for a second?

E: Yes, I think it was your first question which was, 'what would you say to managers who are listening and they've got their to-do lists and they're working 15-16 hours a day'. One of things that I would do is go with them to the to-do list and just have a look at it and see how much of that to-do list is actually do-able. Because the example you just mentioned is perfect really, cos that's what a lot of people have on their to-do lists. They have 'massive project x' on the to-do list and what they haven't done yet is done the thinking beneath that which is 'well what am I actually doing about that? Am I sending an email about it? Am I making a phone call about it? Am I going to have to do a web search about that? Do I need to log on to some tool that we use in order to check out a Gantt chart?' and if that thinking is incomplete then what our brain tends to do is just skip over it and go to something where we know what to do. So 'massive project x' can kind of get stuck because I just don't know what the next action is. And what we do with people - what we encourage people to do - is to take the time to think about that. Think about 'okay well, what am I actually doing next with this project?' and then throw that on to a list where it's clustering with other things that are similar so - we suggest you have a calls list - and on that calls list you might have, you know, five to ten different projects that you're working on and you can move them all forwards, simply because you got stuck in traffic on the M1.

S: Okay I mean I can certainly attest to this as somebody who was, in my opinion, hugely productive but that came at a price in the sense that I was working every hour God sent. But also I was a massive procrastinator because what was on my to-do list was such big things that I just couldn't do them. Whereas now, I could be sitting in the airport and I've got 15 minutes waiting on a plane and before I know it I've knocked off 5 actions and I've made 2, 3, 4% movement forward in what would have looked like before - a huge project. I actually used the methodology to write and get a book published because my next action was 'write the title of the chapter'. Bang I've done that. 'Write the first paragraph'. And, you know, it was incredible.

So. So look, could you just briefly outline - there's five steps in this process - what are the five steps?

E: So the first one is simply to externalise the things that you need to do. It's called 'Capture' and you capture the things that you feel you either need to, want to, someday maybe want to do. We're not terribly concerned that you actually have to do them, our question is more like, 'is it on your mind, is it bothering you?'. If so then let's make sure that it's outside of your mind so that you can actually do something about it. Because what a lot of people are doing is simply holding those things and having them repeat, and repeat, and repeat in their brains rather than simply writing them down so that they could actually do something about them. So stuff is being captured for you in your email inbox, in your voicemail box, on Facebook; there are things that have been captured for you but this one is also about what's in your head and can you get that externalised.

Once you've got all those things externalised and you know which buckets you need to look at, then we suggest you take some time each day to think through those things in terms of 'well, where am I trying to get to with that thing? What does the finished product look like there? And what's the very next thing that I will do to move towards that?'

Those things - if you think those things - you will experience some relief. If you get clear on 'where am I trying to get to and what'll I do next about those things' your brain relaxes in a slightly different way than if those things are still undecided. But if you don't write them down someplace that you trust, then they will eventually just crawl back up in your brain again and start rattling around.

So the third thing that we suggest you do is organise those thoughts into some system that you trust. That can be on paper, that can be digital, that can be an app - we don't really care - but what we do suggest is that it is complete and that you keep it up to date. So that you trust it, so that you trust that that's the place that I need to go to look to see what I do next.

In order to keep it that way, every now and again you need to do step 4 which is review it. Reflect about what is there and make sure that it is up to date. Cross off things that you've done, add the things that you need to do.

So that stage 5 - you can engage with the list and go get some stuff done off of the list. Or. Equally important, know what you're not doing if you decide to do something that's not on the list. Cos it's not like slavishly 'I'm going to do what's on my list even though something really important just showed up in my life'. No. Some of the time things show up and we need to give them our attention. But it's much, much easier to give them our attention if we know what we're not doing and it's okay not to do it.

That's one of the reasons we suggest you keep the lists complete and up to date so that you can relax while you do things that aren't on the list.

S: Okay, excellent. And as somebody, again, who's had some personal coaching from you guys and been through the course a number of times, I mean the difference it made to me was really just phenomenal. And what's interesting for me is not only have I got more productive in terms of getting my own things done; I'm now doing it with much less stress. But what has really happened for me Ed is that has spilled over into my personal life in that suddenly my wife is saying 'I can suddenly rely on you again' you know as somebody who missed their son's first day at school 3 years in a row that was quite a massive thing to hear. So I guess if you're somebody who's listening to this and you're going, 'I'm hugely productive at work but really I could be doing with sorting out the rest of my life', then there's huge benefits here as well for you.

You guys have got a course coming up on the 19th of November is that right? If somebody wants more information what do they do next?

E: The course is on the 19th of November and if you wanted more information you could go to our website, that's www.next-action.eu and you can click through off the home page there is the Edinburgh seminar listed. Click through and it'll take you straight into how to register.

S: And that course is in Edinburgh is that right?

E: That's right yeah

S: Yeah, okay, excellent. Alright, any final advice? What would be your top productivity tip for anybody listening? What would it be?

E: The easiest place to start is with first aid. And that's to start externalising some of things that are rattling around in your head. It's simple, it's low tech (you can make it high tech) but just start externalising some of the things that are in your head, so that you can have a chance to see the scope of what you have on and start to make better decisions about what you do.

S: Ed thank you very much. Loads of value for people listening. Really appreciate your time, and thanks again for everything that you guys have done for me. Thank you Ed, cheers.

E: My pleasure. Take care.

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