



How to turn off your brain and ski to Thailand: Douglas Merrill's *Organizing in the Age of Google*©

Douglas Merrill, author of [Getting Organized in the Google Era](#), has creds. He has a PhD in cognitive science, he's the former CIO at Google, the former President of EMI Music's digital unit and current CEO & co-founder of [ZestCash.com](#). Equally important the approach he takes in his book is funny, funky and surprisingly tender (the latter as he shares his learnings from watching his partner pass away from cancer).

After seeing him speak I picked up a copy of his book and reviewed it. **I'll share 4 X 4 of the top takeaways, including how to ski to Thailand.**

So strap on your skis, as Douglas lets us in on the 'crazy attic' that is his brain.

He shares with us, that while knowledge may have been power in the past, now power is all about the sharing of knowledge. And while the desire for work-life balance is very real, it doesn't exist (don't lose hope, he's a fan of integration instead). Douglas bases his book on two key principles ~

A) The world is a mess when it comes to organization:

Most of how the world is structured is wrong for how our brains work and, to make matters worse, how our world is organized is based on outdated notions from the Industrial Revolution. Our 9-5 Monday to Friday workweek evolved from assembly line workers and the need for standardization.

B) Our brains aren't as mighty as we think they are:

We tend to make choices based on the fear of losing something (versus a more wholehearted, analytical approach) and our brains are crappy at remembering (we forget most things before we even know it).

Depressed yet? Hang on, Douglas gives us hope.



Corporate Entertainment

comedy creations
e! ce@rpsinc.ca
a! 204-4120 Main St.
Vancouver, BC V5V 3P7
p! 604-730-9596
f! 604-730-9586

Laughing Matters

corporate training
e! lm@rpsinc.ca
a! 9018 Lyra Place
Burnaby, BC V3J 1B1
p! 604-420-7703
f! 604-420-7704

Community Works

community-based training
e! cw@rpsinc.ca
a! 9018 Lyra Place
Burnaby, BC V3J 1B1
p! 604-420-7703
f! 604-420-7704

Here are the **first of four main takeaways from his book**, for how you can overcome oppressive, outdated organizational structures and work with how the brain works as opposed to against it.

1. Get stuff out of your head ASAP

Our brains can only hold 5-9 things in short term memory so get stuff out of your head and into a notebook, the cloud, an email etc. Just get it out and down (written, emailed, noted etc). Repeat after me... out and down ... out and down.

Douglas tells an unverified story of a reporter, who after interviewing Einstein asks him for his phone number in case he needed to do follow-up. Einstein goes to a phone booth (remember those?) and tears out his phone number from the directory, expressing surprise that the reporter would expect him to know his number when it was listed in the directory.

I'm not suggesting you forget your phone number but it is a great example of analyzing the flotsam and jetsam that's floating around in our head and turfing what doesn't need to be there.

Bonus tip: if you really need to remember something, Douglas says attach a story to it. While our short-term memories are good at rote memory our long-term memories encode very differently, and that's through the use of stories. Stories are how we remember.

2. Organize around actual not assumed constraints

Douglas suggests we "*uncover patterns of behavior that cause us to 'get in our own way'.*" He says to pay particular attention to what scares, stresses, frustrates and angers us. I was so taken by this concept that I grabbed a sticky and made a list under each of those 4.

"*If you don't know what the problem is you can't solve it*" he says and then goes on to say we also need to figure out what we do and don't have control over. Insert favourite saying here: If you can't fight and you can't flee ... flow (from [As Above So Below](#)).

3. Have clear goals

Clear goals are the flip side of constraints. If you are really clear about your goals (and keep coming back to them to make sure you're on track) things tend to flow from there.

4. Search

If you only keep in your head what you truly need then what do you do with the rest? "*Don't file information search for it,*" are perhaps the wisest words in the book. "*Search sets us free from the clutter of our imperfect minds.*" Amen and high five to that!

Point 4 is so impressive and has such potential to change the way we work that I've added the **second set of 4 takeaways** related directly to search.

Search tip #1: keep as much in the cloud as possible

- When things are in the cloud (e.g. stored over the internet) they're automatically searchable
- Douglas uses Google docs (which, if you're not familiar with it, allows you to store information online and give access to whomever you choose) to take notes at meetings. He will even use a screen during the meeting that shows what he's writing so people can see.
- I use Google docs all the time, for example, to explain ongoing tasks to my VA (Virtual Assistant). I also back up all my data to the cloud using Mozy.com. Easy peasy. Plus searchable and retrievable, in case my plane goes down in the Hudson with my computer like what actually happened to a Mozy user.

Search tip #2: email yourself

- Douglas regularly emails himself to keep things searchable (he calls email just a *to-do list traveling incognito*)
- By including key words in the email, it becomes imminently findable
- Examples he includes are the location of his will (no he doesn't share the contents), a scanned copy of his will etc. If he can't remember where his will is, he simply pops a few key words into his email search and voila up it pops. Magic (and better yet, easy on the brain)!

Search tip #3: scratch powder puffs and get power pdf's

- Douglas isn't a fan of everything electronic. Paper definitely has it's place and a section in his book is devoted to how to choose between keeping information in electronic format or paper format
- The main benefit of electronic is that it becomes searchable and it's the same with pdf's.
- If you have key paper documents Douglas recommends scanning them into pdf's which (are you getting the rhythm yet?) are then searchable.
- I have a file of notes from conferences and workshops I've taken that I call my "Learning Well" file. It's now on the list to be scanned.

Search tip #4: Things

- Since the long ago days of the Apple Newton (an early PDA) I've yearned for a simple yet robust to-do list application and (can you hear the angels singing) Douglas delivers.
- Enter the [Things](#) desktop program (which I've yet to try as it's a bit pricey) and the app (which I have tried and I'm in love with).



**How to turn off your brain and ski to Thailand: Douglas Merrill's
Organizing in the Age of Google© June 2011**

- Whether you use Things or not, find something that works for you to make lists, is searchable and gets stuff out of your head so you can make room for the juicy, creative stuff.

There you have it, a 4X4 tip list. A delightful read, I highly recommend Douglas Merrill's of [Getting Organized in the Google Era](#). He ends the book with a story of learning how to ski and being at the top of an intimidating steep run. A friend skis buy and says, "*Turn off your brain and ski.*" Instead of trying to calculate every turn down he did just that and had one of the best runs of his life.

His story reminded me of visiting Thailand and getting into a bright red rental Jeep for the first time. Traveling overseas is the only time I drive a standard and yet again, the gears were staring at me rather menacingly and this time I was with my young family. I was stressed, until I decided to turn off my brain, rely on muscle memory and just drive. And that's just what I did, through Thai New Year's crowds no less.

And that my friend, is what I wish for you. Get organized using Douglas' tips and you'll not only be able to have room in your brain (and body) to ski but even ski on over to Thailand.

Lee-Anne Ragan, MEd, BSW, ITC, is President of Rock.Paper.Scissors Inc. (RPS), Vancouver's award winning corporate training & entertainment company. Email us to enquire about scheduling your own workshop (laragan@rpsinc.ca) or check out the **public workshops** below:

- [Facilitating Participation](#), June 16th, 2011, Langara College, Vancouver
- [Brainstorming for Business Innovation](#), June 21st, 2011, TRU, Vancouver
- **NEW!** [Transforming Workplace Learning Through Social Media](#) – November 14-15th, 2011, Justice Institute, New Westminster

Other resources:

- Receive Lee-Anne's [informative & entertaining training focused blog](#)
- Check out her [recommended reads](#) on creativity, teambuilding, intercultural issues, training trainers and more.
- Connect on Twitter: [@LeeAnneRagan](#) or on LinkedIn: [Lee-Anne Ragan](#)
- Follow her [Human Resources training twitter list](#) and/or her [Human Resources Training Daily](#)
- Are you ready to see clearly? Check out [Life Lenses™ an interactive, online self-assessment tool](#) & our [Life Lenses™ blog](#)