March 14, 2012

How a PhD student uses Evernote to organize his life - with one notebook!

The number of ways that people organize their lives in Evernote seems to be almost endless. This is a wonderful testament to the flexibility that Evernote offers its users. One such person, Christopher Mayo, a PhD candidate in East Asian Studies at Princeton University, is a prime example.

Christopher is a frequent poster on the Evernote forums, where he goes by the moniker, Grumpy Monkey (more on that below). This is where I first learned about him and his very unique way of organizing his notes in Evernote. I found it so interesting, in fact, that I interviewed him for my blog. Call it a nod to his doctoral degree in East Asian studies. Whatever it might be, I hope you enjoy this post as much as I enjoyed my interview with him.

Christopher uses Evernote everywhere.
• Mac
• PC
• iPhone
• iPad

When he first started using Evernote

Several years ago, Christopher began using OneNote to help him stay organized and study for exams. He had seen Evernote, and had given it a try, but felt it was a bit too much. It was an open field and he almost didn't know what to do with it the program. In addition, he did not realize that Evernote offered premium users offline notebooks so that they could use the application without an Internet connection. He wanted something that would be everywhere he needed the app to be, and because neither of them seemed to offer this, he looked around for something else.

He went on and tried blade WIKI, which helped him take and manage his notes. What appealed to him was that he could have it with him at home or on the go. In fact, he could save information right onto a USB drive and it was very simple for him.

Of course, like all of us, Christopher had one of those "Evernote moments" that changed everything for him. He was having lunch with a colleague of his who had Evernote on his iPhone. Christopher said his colleague was doing so many incredible things with that right in front of him, that he just couldn't keep up. For example, his colleague took a photo of a document on the table in front of him with his iPhone, cropped it with JotNot, turned it into a note in Evernote, and then shared it in a notebook with him. Christopher logged into his old Evernote account, and of course, the note was there. The whole process of getting that paper into Evernote only took a few seconds. Moreover, he was told that Premium members receive up to one gigabyte of uploads per month, and this was cumulative, so he could potentially end up with as much as 12 gigabytes of data stored in the service each year to be accessible for download anytime, anywhere. He realized the reason why Evernote is so powerful is because you can leverage it across multiple platforms, easily share the content, and manage it any way you want.

His searching methodology

Christopher is a minimalist. He doesn't want to spend a lot of time on the front-end doing the organization. His mantra is that he stays organized without organizing. It did not start out that way, however. Like so many of us, Christopher had lots of notebooks and lots of tags. He felt as if he were tagging things as a safety net and it just became too complex. He needed something that required very little work. It didn't make sense to organize your organizational system.

To him, the process of setting up multiple notebooks, nesting those notebooks and then setting up tags and then nested tags in various hierarchical structures and taxonomies was too much. It expended unnecessary mental bandwidth to figure out where a note should go after it was created. The "thinking" about whether a note should be classified as work or home, which tag it gets, and which notebook it should be in was too complex.

The goal, therefore, was to create a system that was both simple and uniform. In other words, if he decided to export all of his notes out of one application into another, like he had done when he moved from OneNote to bLADE Wiki, he wanted them to maintain their organizational structure, and for it to be a smooth process. His basic aim was to create a system which he calls, "future resistant" notes. It's not quite "future proof," but gets as close as possible to it.

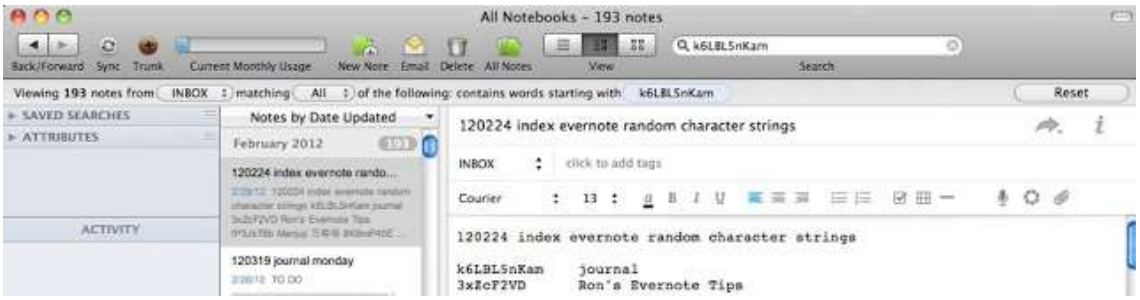
The system he created needed to have unique file names, and those file names needed to organize themselves. His solution begins with how he titles each of his notes.

How he uses Evernote

Christopher's magic lies in the way he names his notes. Every note has the same syntax:

`YYMMDD keyword keyword keyword`

No tags. No notebooks. Just the default one Evernote makes you create. In case your mouth is still open in awe, let me just read that back to you again: the date and two or three keywords. That's it. No tags. No notebooks. He currently has about 30 or 40 tags left over from the days when he used to tag everything just in case, but plans to eventually delete them.



It literally took me about five minutes to get off the floor after we spoke about this unique way of structuring his notes because - well, I just couldn't believe how much sense it really makes! Granted, what I am about to detail is not for everyone or for the faint of heart! However, I am positive, that each of you, just as I have, can take something out of what Christopher has done, and apply it to your own system.

Christopher argues that we naturally remember things chronologically. The idea comes from Noguchi Yukio's filing system. The theory being that you stuff everything from one day into an envelope and place the date and title of the contents on the outside of that envelope, and then stick it on your bookshelf. Since the belief is that we remember things by the date rather than by an artificial classification system (read: tags or notebooks), we're more likely to find the information quickly by remembering "when" we made the note.

Here's where Noguchi's filing system gets interesting. If you take that envelope out, instead of putting it back in chronological order, you put it all the way to the left of the shelf. Why? The idea is that over time, everything you need that you grab often is on the left. What you don't, is on the right. This allows for pruning of the content you don't need over time and can purge what you no longer need.

Christopher set up his Evernote account based on this theory. The "created" date that Evernote automatically assigns a note often doesn't have anything to do with the content, which might be a PDF scan of notes from years ago, or even old notes from bLADE Wiki that he transferred into Evernote, so each note received a date relevant to the content and keywords. Let's take Christopher's journal entries as a perfect example of how this works. The note is titled by the date and then followed by the word "journal." This way he can easily keep track of his notes. Web clippings is very much the same: date, and then a big category such as "clipping."

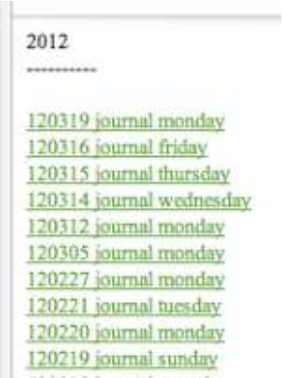
The notes I made for my interview with Christopher would be titled **`120224 blog mayo evernote`** (to maintain consistency and ensure backwards compatibility with his antiquated DOS

brain, he uses lowercase for everything in the titles). This idea of date keyword keyword keyword creates a “future resistant” system for him. If he were to move to another system, all of his notes are titled the same, and so he could be quickly up and running. The notes also organize themselves by appearing in chronological order, a sorting method that he says is much easier to use than an alphabetical one.

Because Evernote enables you to sort by “date updated,” he can basically recreate Noguchi’s method of having the most relevant notes at the top, and the least relevant ones (the ones that haven’t been accessed recently) on the bottom. However, because this is a digital world and there is no benefit to throwing things away, he rarely deletes any of the information.

The Index Card System

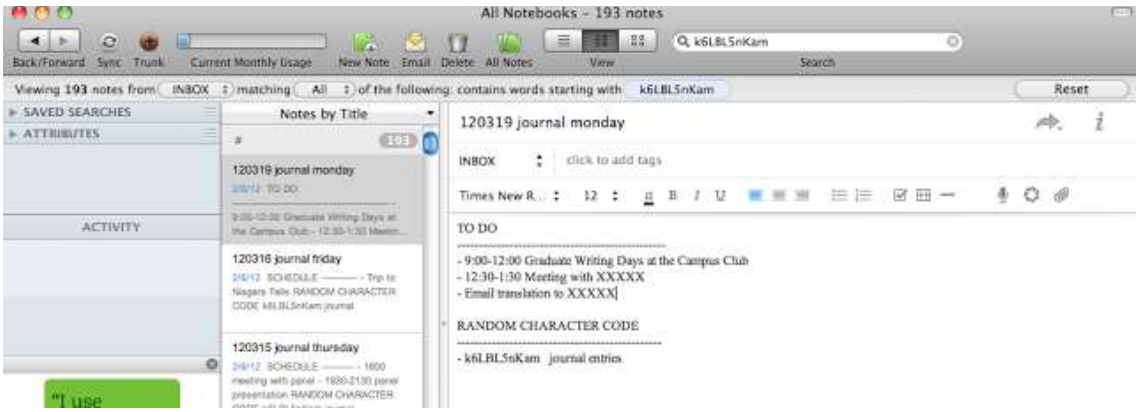
By far though, one of my favorite aspects of his system are the “index notes,” or “Index Cards.” Christopher uses my absolute favorite feature of Evernote to make these index cards - copy note linking.



The idea here is that you have one note that serves as a master note, or a table of contents. Or a wiki, really, for all of your previous notes. This allows you to quickly access all of the notes. As you can see from the screen shot, Christopher has an index for his journal entries. This index enables you to organize all of the related notes for this subject. The easiest way to do this is quite simply by selecting multiple notes, and then dragging them into the master note. The result is a beautiful index.

What about Todos and His Calendar?

Naturally, I was most curious on how he handles tasks and his calendar. If I haven’t amazed you yet with Christopher’s system, I might just do it now.



In each journal entry that he creates, he includes a list of “Todos” that must get done for that day. As you can tell from the screen capture, he lists his to do with an action verb, “Email translation to…” and prepends it with a simple en dash. When he completes his task, he replaces that en dash

with an “x”. If, for some reason, he did not get that task accomplished on the day, he’ll copy and paste it for the following day. That’s it. Really. When I took a pause to think about it this, there is some incredible beauty to it all. Whether or not you actually like it or think you can use it for yourself, it is beautiful in its simplicity. From its simplicity, I think there is something we can all benefit from with our own systems.

You might be asking yourself though about the times listed under his todos. That is his calendar. He has done away with Google Calendar and strictly uses Evernote. In Christopher’s stride to minimize, he has found a way to just use Evernote for everything. Since his habit is to look at his Evernote journal entry every single day, he leverages his journal note to know what must be done that day. What about something in the future? The way he does this is by future dating his notes. For example, let’s say that he has to do something on April 15, 2012. He would title a note **120415 journal sunday**. In the note would be 1:00 Pay Taxes.

By doing away with excess apps, he has found a way to stay organized with just Evernote. He stresses that the key to staying organized with a minimal amount of effort is to make sure that everything is in one place. Because he has gone paperless, with few exceptions, if he cannot find it (a task he needs to do or notes on a meeting from 2005) in Evernote, it doesn’t exist.

Searching

If you’re an Evernote search fiend, you know that one of the great benefits to the app is its incredible search taxonomy. For Christopher, it’s all about **“intitle:_____”**. For many of us, we’re searching by **“tag:_____”** or even **“notebook:_____”**. Some of us might even have a search that looks like this: **“tag:_____ notebook:_____ -tag:_____ todo:false resource:audio/* contains:pdf”**. Yes, it can get pretty complex. But for him, it is as easy as an in title search. The keywords he chooses are in effect, very similar to how many of use tags. A search for **“intitle:index”** pulls up all of his index cards, and he can scroll through them like you would a table of contents or the index for a book. Searching for an index or even all of the notes as it pertains to a project would be easier, Christopher says with this uniform titling system.

Pruning

One idea that I think we can all benefit from is Christopher's idea of pruning. He never deletes his notes, and so he has a memory that increases every month. He's up to about 6,000 notes and adds several hundred each month. He doesn't believe there is a benefit at all by destroying notes. In fact, he says, it is very liberating to not delete anything. However, he does like to prune his notes; go through them and graft things onto one another. This is really back-end work, but that can be done over time. The idea is to get everything into Evernote quickly and easily with his naming system, and because it is already automatically organized chronologically, he can spend all of the time and effort he would have spent "organizing" actually reading the notes, thinking about the content, making new connections, and generating ideas.

How can others apply it now?
If you have fallen in love with his system, you might be asking yourself, well how do I go backwards and apply this to 3,800 notes I already have in Evernote? The answer: that will take a lot of work that you really don't need to do yet. The last thing you need is yet another "system" to waste your time. He encourages you to keep the same system you have now, and just give a try to the date and keyword method. You don't have to delete a single tag or notebook. You can keep using them if you want, but you might find over time, as he did, that you do not need them anymore. Then, you can do some pruning of your own. The great thing about it is that a date and keyword title can be used in any system. You could stop using notebooks and tags today. By doing so, you could easily move out of Evernote and right into another system without any loss because all of your notes are titled in chronological order.

The Moniker, Grumpy Monkey

I couldn't end my interview without finally getting to ask him that other really important question: how did you come up with the moniker "Grumpy Monkey"? Well, as it turns out, the name Grumpy Monkey is a name of Christopher's favorite coffee, at the local coffee shop there in Princeton called, Small World Coffee!

Conclusion
If you'd like to find out more information on Christopher's thinking, I encourage you to visit his website and the Evernote forums where he is a frequent poster.

One More Thing...
Although the `YYMMDD keyword keyword keyword` method is his own, he has picked up a lot of other tips and tricks on the Evernote website, including this one about random codes, and you'll certainly want to give the forums a try, if you have not already. I know that Christopher will be more than happy to answer your questions in the comments below!
?Share on facebookShare on twitter
Posted by Daniel Gold
Labels: evernote, life management, lifehack, mind like water, productivity, Time management

Newer PostOlder PostHome

Subscribe to: Post Comments (Atom)

Read the Most Popular Posts!

- Springpad and Evernote - My Guide to Getting Things Done
-

How a PhD student uses Evernote to organize his life - with one notebook!

-

How to use Evernote and an iPad to Manage Projects

Sign-up for the DEG Consulting Mailing List today and never miss a productivity tip!!

Enter your email address here! Subscribe

9,101 Subscribers

Email marketing powered by MailChimp

Follow by Email

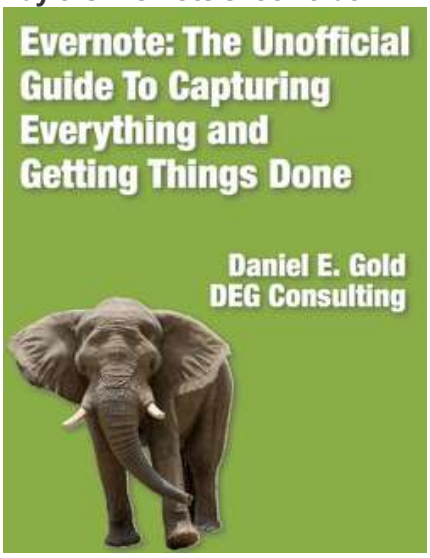
Submit

Recent Posts

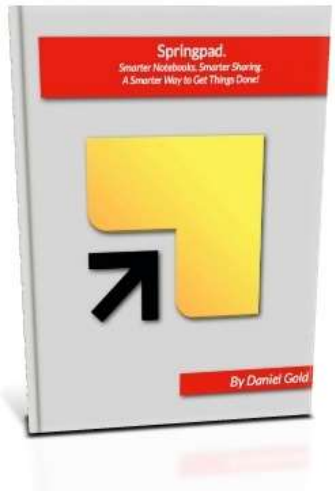
Topics

- efficiency
- evernote
- GTD
- inspiration
- Leadership
- lifehack
- presentation skills
- productivity
- springpad

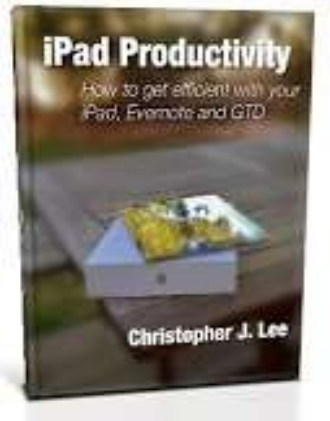
Buy the Evernote eBook that will revolutionize how you get things done!



Get the most out of the New Springpad with My Official Springpad eBook!



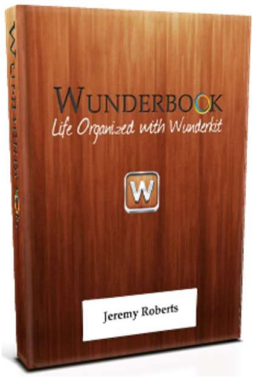
iPad Productivity: How to get efficient with your iPad, Evernote & GTD!



Evernote for Moms eBook!!

NEW! Evernote for Real Estate!

Wunderbook: Life Organized with Wunderkit

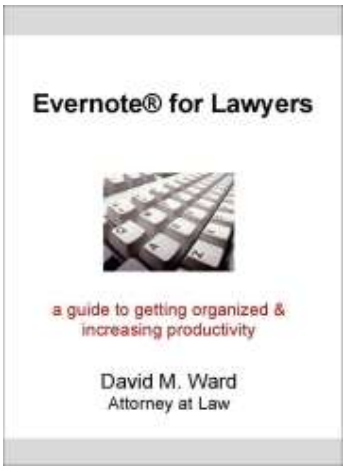


Got something to sell?
Use Digital Delivery App!

Learn Evernote. Learn the Essentials.

Go Paperless Today with DocumentSnap Solutions!

Get it done better. Evernote for Lawyers!



Blog Archive

Share

Disclosure of Material Connection

Some of the links in the post above are "affiliate links." This means if you click on the link and purchase the item, I will receive an affiliate commission. Regardless, I only recommend products or services I use personally and believe will add value to my readers. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255: "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising."

(c) 2012 DEG Consulting. Awesome Inc. template. Powered by Blogger.

GTD® VSG Hotline