Applications for getting things done

IDEA ORGANIZER

Task managers can help you get things done, but the first task is to choose the application that meets your needs. We take a closer look at iKog, Thinking Rock, and MonkeyGTD and recommend a few other GTD managers you might want to take for a spin. **BY DMITRI POPOV**

O f the many ways to manage daily tasks, some people prefer "paper" tools like Moleskine notebooks or Hipster PDA [1]. Other people rely on desktop or web-based applications like Mozilla Sunbird or Google Calendar. When choosing a task manager tool, deciding whether it should be a notebook, a desktop application, or a web-based solution is only part of the deal. Arguably, a more important factor

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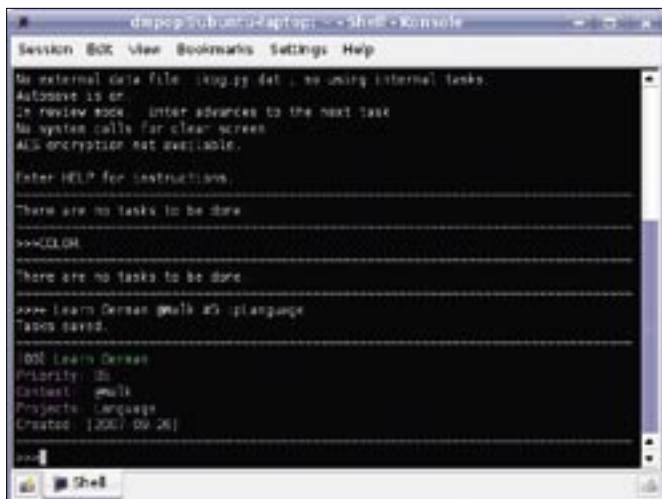
is the underlying system on which the task manager is based.

GTD

Many task managers are based on the Getting Things Done (GTD) methodology popularized by David Allen in his book *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* [2]

If you are looking for a GTD-based application, this article will help you choose the right one for the job. Before you decide which application to choose, you should familiarize yourself with the basic ideas behind the GTD method. At the very least, take a look at Wikipedia's article about GTD, which provides a good introduction to the topic [3].

iKog

iKog [4] (Figure 1) is a basic text-based task manager that implements some of the most basic principles of GTD. It's

written in Python, and the entire application consists of a single *.py* file, which requires no installation or configuration. Simply download the latest ZIP or GZ archive, unpack it, and start iKog in the Terminal with the *python path/to/ikon.py* command.

To add a task to iKog, enter the name of the task preceded by a plus (+) and a space and press Enter. iKog allows you to specify several important parameters for each task, including priority (from 1 to 10) and due date. Of course, you can specify these values when adding a task. For example, the following task has the highest priority, 1, and is due December 31, 2007:

```
+ Read Wikis for Dummies⤷
#1 :d2007-12-31
```

As a GTD-enabled tool, iKog lets you to assign a context and project to each task.

Figure 1: iKog is a command-line task manager that has a few GTD features.

Figure 2: The flow diagram in Thinking Rock will help you to process your thoughts.

For example, you can assign an @*Writing* context to all writing-related tasks:

```
+ Finish the iKog article ⮐
@Writing
+Review OpenOffice.org 2.3 ⮐
@Writing
```

iKog also lets you group tasks by project. For example, when installing Ubuntu, you can group all the related tasks to the appropriate project:

```
+ Partition hard disk ⮐
p:InstallUbuntu
+ Install Ubuntu⮐
p:InstallUbuntu
+ Install latest updates and⮐
drivers p:InstallUbuntu
```

Managing existing tasks in iKog is rather straightforward. The *LIST* command displays all your tasks in iKog.

To browse through tasks, you can use the *NEXT* and *PREV* (or *N* and *P*) commands. To list the tasks in a specific context, you can use the *LIST* command; for example, *LIST @Writing*. In a similar manner, you can view all the tasks in a particular project, for example, *LIST : pInstallUbuntu*.

The *KILL* command followed by the task number allows you to delete a specific task, whereas the *CLEAR* command deletes all the tasks in iKog in one go. iKog also offers a few commands that you can use to modify (*MOD*), replace (*REP*), and substitute (*SUB*) the tasks.

Thinking Rock

Thinking Rock [5] is a Java-based cross-platform desktop application that closely follows the GTD methodology.

Thinking Rock's developers prefer to call it an "application for collecting and processing your thoughts," wherein each

task (or thought) belongs to a specified topic and context and is processed according to a specific GTD-based process flow (Figure 2).

Example

The following example shows how the process works in practice: OpenOffice. org has released version 2.3 of the office suite, and you'd like to learn more about its new features and write a wiki article on the subject.

Start by creating topics and contexts, which is relatively straightforward. To create a new context, switch to the Context window, press the *Add a new item* button, and give the created context a name (e.g., @*Writing*).

In a similar manner, you can create a desired topic (e.g., Wiki) in the Topic window. The next step is to add a new thought. Press the *Collect Thoughts* button and give your thought a descriptive
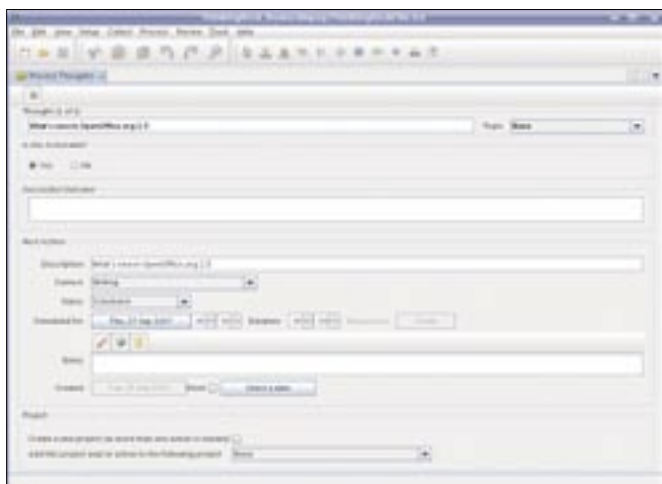

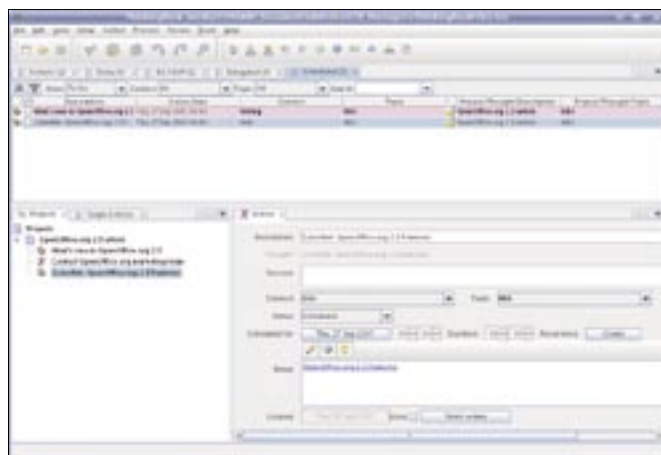**Figure 3: Processing thoughts in Thinking Rock.**

Figure 4: Processed thoughts are converted into actions, which you can manage in the Actions window.
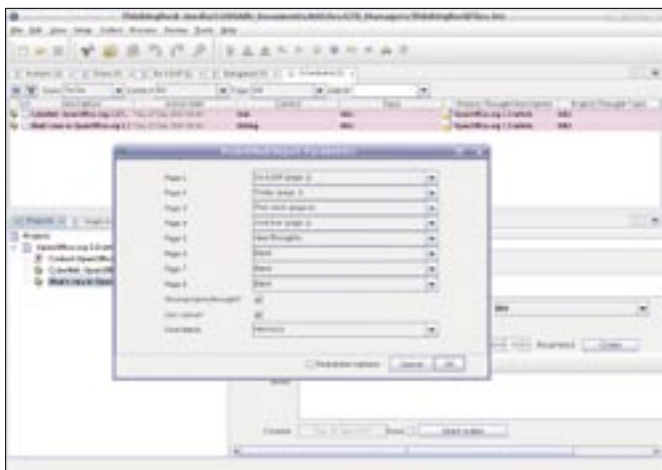
Figure 5: Thinking Rock allows you to print your actions and projects in the PocketMod format.

Figure 6: MonkeyGTD – GTD TiddlyWiki style.

name, for example, "What's new in OpenOffice.org 2.3." Select the Wiki topic from the Topic drop-down list.

Once you've added the thought, you must process it. Press the *Process Thoughts* button to switch to the thought-processing window (Figure 3). Assuming the thought is actionable, you need to specify three important options: Context (in this case, it's @*Writing*), Status (*Inactive*, *Do ASAP*, *Scheduled*, or *Delegated*), and Project.

If you tick the *Create a new project* checkbox, the system will automatically create a project for you. To process the thought, simply choose the *Process* command from the Process menu. This "converts" the thought to an action, which you can see and manage in the Action window (Figure 4).

Designed with power users in mind, Thinking Rock offers a few advanced features to help you manage your thoughts. The *Action* window, for example, contains powerful filtering and search features that make it easier to handle hundreds of actions.

Using Thinking Rock's import/export capabilities, you can import thoughts from text files and export actions either into plain text or XML format. Extensive report capabilities allow you to output your actions in the PDF format and even print them as PocketMod [6] notebooks (Figure 5).

MonkeyGTD

If iKog and Thinking Rock are too conventional for your taste, you might want to try MonkeyGTD [7], a TiddlyWiki-based GTD manager.

As you might know, TiddlyWiki [8] is a rather unique application consisting of a single HTML file that you run in your browser. Instead of separate pages, TiddlyWiki stores content in tiddlers, which you can show and hide at will.

MonkeyGTD works in a similar way, in which each tiddler represents a task or an action (Figure 6). In fact, all elements in MonkeyGTD are tiddlers, including projects, contexts, reminders, etc. To make it easier to keep tabs on all the information, MonkeyGTD has a Dashboard, which provides a quick overview of the existing contexts, projects, tasks, and reminders.

If you've never worked with Tiddly-Wiki, you might find MonkeyGTD a bit confusing, but once you've figured out the system behind it, you'll be surprised how effective it can be. For example, say you plan to learn German. Start with creating a project, which is just a tiddler with the *Project* tag.

If needed, create a new context (e.g., @*Walk* if you plan to listen to a German podcast when you are walking). MonkeyGTD automatically adds the new project and context to the Dashboard. Add a new task to the created project by clicking on the project and pressing the *New* button next to the appropriate context. Enter the task's name and description, and press *Done*. That's pretty much all there is to it.

Other GTD-Based Managers

Besides iKog, Thinking Rock, and MonkeyGTD, a few other GTD-based managers are out there that you might want to take for a spin before deciding which

suits you best. If you're using Gmail, try GTDinbox [9], a Firefox extension that turns your Gmail account into a nifty task manager.

What's Next [10] is a browser-based GTD manager written in Ruby, with a polished interface and support for keyboard shortcuts.

If you prefer a "classic" web-based application, you might want to try Task-Step [11], a web-based manager that runs on the PH/MySQL stack.

Finally, if you like the idea of using TiddlyWiki to manage your tasks, take a look at d3 [12]. ∎

INFO
[1] Hipster PDA: *http://en.wikipedia.org/ wiki/Hipster_PDA*
[2] David Allen. *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity.* Penguin, 2002.
[3] Wikipedia article on *Getting Things Done*: *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Getting_Things_Done*
[4] iKog: *http://www.henspace.co.uk/ikog/ index.html*
[5] Thinking Rock: *http://www.thinkingrock.com.au*
[6] PocketMod: *http://www.pocketmod.com*
[7] MonkeyGTD: *http://monkeygtd.tiddlyspot.com*
[8] TiddlyWiki: *http://www.tiddlywiki.com*
[9] GTDinbox: *http://www.gtdinbox.com*
[10] What's Next: *http://whatsnextapp.com*
[11] TaskStep: *http://cunningtitle.com/taskstep*
[12] d3: *http://www.dcubed.ca*