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STEVER ROBBINS:
Stever Robbins here. Welcome to the *Get It Done Guy's Quick and Dirty Tips to Work Less and Do More.* Jane writes in, "I'm a grad student. I do a lot of online research. How do I keep track of all the links and material I find when researching? Pasting it into one massive word processing document doesn't seem like the best idea. And my internet bookmarks are out of control." Jane, I feel you.

The information revolution is wonderful. Isn't it? I have so much information, I'm soaking in it. We need a tool, a tool to collect facts and links and notes, one tool. Yes, one tool to rule them all. One tool to find them. One tool to bring them all, organize, and bind them.

[EVIL LAUGHTER]

First, we'll identify our needs and then specific tools. You need a free-form bucket. You'll need to put the info you collect into a general purpose information holding tool, something where you can have notes, pictures, web links, bookmarks, fine arts, incriminating information about your political opponents, et cetera. A database won't do because databases only store stuff where you know the kind of stuff and what it's like in advance. It's also a pain to set up and use a database.

But what will work is a tool that lets you put everything into one document. That way, as you find relevant stuff, you can just toss it into the document for future reference. The same goes for bookmarks. You want to toss the bookmarks and maybe even a snapshot of the web page itself into one big bucket kind of like the mystery stew that your local diner serves when it's been a long time since the last food delivery.

You need free form retrieval. Pulling things out of a bucket can be harder than putting them in. Anyone who's accidentally dropped a wedding ring into a bucket of raw chicken parts knows this. Tags are the answer. A tag is a word you associate with an item. When you put an item in your bucket, give it a tag for every way you can conceive of wanting to find it later.

For example, if you're researching original American cuisine, you might find a recipe for beefy salsa macaroni and Velveeta cheese. Yum. You could give it the tags main course, beef, macaroni, cheese food by-product, bingo-- it's good bingo food-- bridge, mahjong, Midwest,

comfort food, long shelf life, Kraft, and Super Bowl appropriate. Later, you may be investigating the relationship between North American sports behavior and Kraft corporation's quest for world dominance. You search your database for tags Super Bowl and Kraft, and voila-- that's French-- up pops your amazing recipe.

Lastly, you need organization. Once you have all the information, you need to be able to group it in multiple ways to find patterns, themes, and different ways of organizing it. You'd like to be able to copy items easily, so you can try putting them in different places in your developing understanding of your subject. You can find all the tools on the internet. Sadly, there is no one tool that stores tags and organizes, but some come close.

Closest is Evernote. It lets you capture notes, images, links, and web pages in a completely free-form database. You can tag each entry, organize items into notebooks, and search for tags or text. You can even search for text that appears in images. I don't know how they do that. It's magic. Evernote is free and has a version for the Mac, PC, Windows Mobile, and the iPhone. It also has a Firefox plug-in to snapshot web pages.

Mind mapping software like MindManager lets you enter free-form ideas, save and follow bookmarks, and annotate your ideas. It doesn't support tags directly, but you can enter tags as part of the text on a branch and then filter out branches containing that tag word. If you're collecting just bookmarks, delicious.com gives you a place to store them, tag them, search for them, and share them with friends or the world.

It also has a Firefox plug-in for quick bookmarking. Just be careful since your bookmarks are public by default. You don't want your kids seeing your link to George Carlin's *Seven Words You Can't Say on TV* skit. Firefox helps store research data on your machine. If you like keeping your info on your own machine, Firefox has plug-ins called ScrapBook and TagSifter.

Scrapbook snapshots web pages you like and stores them on your hard drive. It's great for storage, but only provides retrieval by title. TagSifter lets you bookmark web pages and tag the bookmarks, so you can find web pages by clicking through a tag cloud. Of course, your bookmarks stay on your computer, so you can't access them when traveling.

Armed with this suite of tools, you can't go wrong. One tool to store them all-- Evernote online or ScrapBook offline. One tool to find them-- tags in Evernote, Delicious, and TagSifter. And one tool to bring them all, organize, and bind them, that's mind mapping software, which I

talked about in the *Streamline Your Writing* episode.

Visit this episode's transcript at getitdone.quickanddirtytips.com for links to all the software I've discussed in this episode. And thank you to JRR Tolkien and to George Carlin. This is Stever Robbins. Follow me on Twitter by doing follow @getitdoneguy. Email questions to getitdone @quickanddirtytips.com. And give me and other great Quick and Dirty Tips shows streamed to your iPhone with Stitcher. Download it free from stitcher.com. Work less. Do more. And have a great life.

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