

The Missing Half

YOUR SECOND BRAIN REMEMBERS · THIS IS THE PART THAT DELIVERS

You've seen the second-brain videos. Here's the half they skip: remembering was never the problem. A place for what you learn, a check on what's true, and a board that gets it out the door — in about thirty minutes. No experience assumed.

WHY THIS EXISTS

Your second brain needs hands

You've heard the pitch: build a second brain — capture everything, organise it beautifully, never lose an idea again. The videos are good. Some of the systems are, too. And here's the thing nobody in that genre says out loud: **a brain, on its own, doesn't do anything.** It remembers. Remembering was never your problem.

Meanwhile your actual AI use is one chat window — capable, tireless, and wired to nothing. Its output has nowhere to live, no check on whether it's true, and no path to becoming something another person receives. One brilliant component, no body.

You may also have seen — or been — the second-brain failure case: a weekend of enthusiastic organising, six months of drift, four hundred unconnected notes and three half-finished projects. Every system like this dies the same death, because every one assumes a human will do the maintenance, and humans don't. The fix is on the last page, and it's the reason AI changes this genre: for the first time, the maintenance can be someone else's job.

So this guide builds the full body — a brain, hands, and a reflex:

PART	ITS JOB	WHAT I USE
The record — <i>the brain</i>	Hold what's worth keeping, in your words, outliving the tool that made it	Obsidian
The gate — <i>the brain's filter</i>	Keep the record from filling with confident nonsense	One line per note
The board — <i>the hands</i>	Turn what you know into things that reach people	Notion
The loop — <i>the reflex</i>	Run the checks whether or not you feel like it	A scheduled AI brief

The tools are swappable; the jobs are not. If you already like your note app and your task app, keep them and read this for the jobs.

WHAT THIS GUIDE WILL NOT DO

It won't make you productive. It removes three failure points — forgetting, believing, and never shipping. The last one stays hard after the system is built: mine is weeks old and I still have a stack of finished things nobody has read.

The record

The job: hold what's worth keeping, in your words, in a form that survives the tool that produced it. This part *is* the second brain — the one the videos taught you — kept deliberately small, because it's one part of a body, not the whole project. A chat log fails the job by design: it's a transcript, organised by nothing, and the good idea from three weeks ago is sitting between a meal plan and a question about a rash.

Set it up — fifteen minutes

1. Install Obsidian (free, obsidian.md) and create one vault. A vault is just a folder of plain text files on your own disk — which is the reason to pick it: no company's product decisions can take your notes away.
2. Make four folders, no more: **Inbox** , **Notes** , **Projects** , **Archive** . You'll want an elaborate taxonomy. Resist until you have two hundred notes and know what you actually have.
3. Turn on the Daily Notes plugin. Today's note is your inbox — capture there, file later. One reliable capture point beats five clever ones.
4. When you're ready, point your AI at the folder so it can read and write your notes. If that's beyond today, skip it — the vault works alone and the AI can join later.

The rule that makes it work

Nothing enters the record in the AI's words. Rewrite every note in yours, even badly — it's the only reliable test of whether you understood the thing. If you can't restate it, you didn't learn it, and storing it will feel like learning while producing none of it.

The honest cost: capture gets slower and you keep less. That's the trade. A smaller record you can use beats a larger one you can't.

The gate

The job: keep the record from filling with confident nonsense. The model never says *I'm not sure* — and early in your career that's more dangerous for you than for anyone else, because catching wrong answers is what experience normally does, and you don't have it yet. So you substitute discipline for instinct.

Set it up — one line per note

At the bottom of anything you keep, say how far you trust it and why. Four grades cover almost everything:

GRADE	MEANS	YOU MAY
Solid	Well established, checked, uncontested	Cite it
Contested	Real debate among people who know	Cite it with the debate named
Busted	Tested and didn't hold up	Cite it only as a correction
Mine	Your own inference, unverified	Say so, every time

Ask the AI to grade its own claims — it does this reasonably well — and check the ones that matter. The habit outlives the tool, which is the real return: the person who can say *here's what's solid, here's what's contested, and here's what I'd do anyway* is valuable in every room, with or without a model.

THE TEST THAT CATCHES THE MOST

Ask for the source. Not a summary — the name, the year, the claim it actually made. Confident nonsense collapses at that question more reliably than at any other.

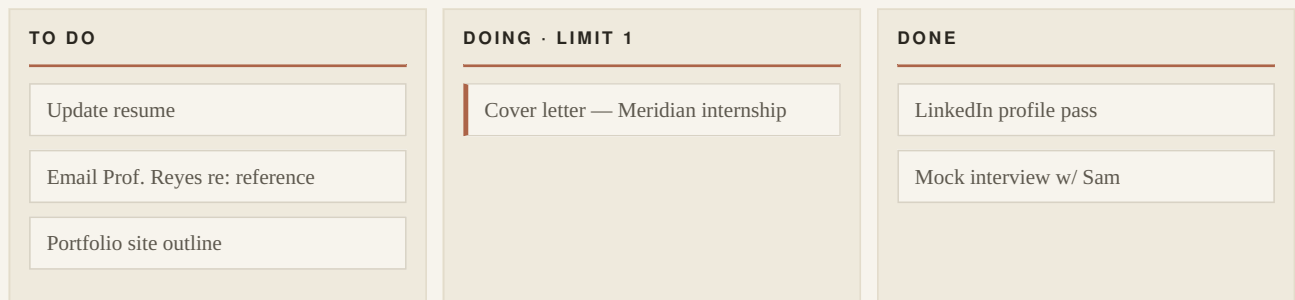
The board, from zero

The job: turn what you know into things that reach people. These are the hands — the part every second-brain guide skips, and the reason this one exists. Capture and organise everywhere, deliver nowhere: that's the genre. And it matters most, because insight doesn't become action on its own. Give someone an engine that manufactures insight on demand and the gap between what they know and what they do gets *wider*.

The tool for the job is a kanban board, and the term deserves a real explanation. A kanban board is the simplest honest picture of your work: **every task is a card, every card sits in a column, and work flows left to right.** That's the whole idea. The personal version is two rules, worked out by Jim Benson long before AI made them urgent:

Make the work visible. Everything you've agreed to do goes on the board — not most things, everything. Commitments that live only in your head are the ones that ambush you.

Limit your work in progress. "WIP" is the count of things you've started and not finished. Cap it — hard. This is the rule people resist and the rule that does all the work: every open task charges rent in attention whether or not you're touching it, and switching between five of them burns real time before any work happens. **Start less, finish more.** Three things finished beat seven at eighty percent, because nothing at eighty percent counts — nobody can read eighty percent of a cover letter.



A student's board, mid-week. One card in Doing — not because only one thing matters, but because only one thing is actually being worked. If you build nothing else from this guide: these three columns and that limit are a working system.

Two upgrades that earn their keep

Split "Done" in half

The most important distinction on the board: **Completed** means you finished it. **Accepted** means it reached the person it was for. The cover letter polished in your drafts folder is Completed; it's Accepted when it's *sent*. The gap between those two states is where work quietly dies, and a board that can't show the difference will hide your most expensive habit from you. Mine hid it for months.

COLUMN	THE QUESTION IT ANSWERS	THE COVER LETTER IS HERE WHEN...
Backlog	What have I agreed to, someday?	"I should apply to Meridian"
Defined	What's clear enough to start?	Post read, deadline known, plan made
In progress	What am I actually working? (limit: 1)	You're writing it
Completed	What's finished on my side?	Final draft, sitting in your folder
Accepted	What reached its person?	Submitted

Give work two honest exits

A board with no way out fills with zombies. **Parked** means on hold with a trigger — a condition that reawakens it ("when interviews start"), never a date you'll just move. **Killed** means you decided not to do it, with one line of reason. Killing a stale commitment on purpose isn't failure; carrying it silently for six months is. If your Killed column is empty after a quarter, you aren't deciding — you're accumulating.

Set it up — twenty minutes

1. One board in Notion (free) — or Trello, or paper. One, not a workspace of them.
2. Status columns: Backlog → Defined → In progress → Completed → Accepted, plus Parked and Killed.
3. Four more fields: Priority, Effort in hours, Due, Notes. Stop there until something breaks.
4. Load everything you're carrying — including what you've been avoiding. All of it, visible. Then hold the two limits: one card In progress, and a weekly hours cap where adding something means trading something out.

The loop

A brain and hands with no reflex are three good intentions — and this is the answer to the graveyard problem from page two. Organising systems die because they depend on a human remembering to check them. The fix isn't more discipline. It's making the checking someone else's job, and an AI is the first assistant that will actually do it daily without being managed.

Mine runs at two in the morning as a scheduled task. It reads the board and writes a short brief before I wake: what's overdue and *who is waiting on me*, whether I've broken the one-in-progress rule, and what's sitting in Completed — finished but never delivered, which is my specific failure and I told it so. It ends with two or three questions only I can answer.

Build yours — fifteen minutes

If your AI can run scheduled tasks and see your board, give it these five instructions. If it can't, a recurring reminder where you paste the board into a chat does the same job.

1. Read the board. Report what's overdue and **name who's waiting**.
2. Check the work-in-progress limit; say plainly when it's broken.
3. Count what reached another person this week — Accepted, not Completed. If zero past midweek, say so.
4. Pick **one thing** for today. A choice, not a list.
5. Ask: what shipped, what came back, what's being avoided that should be parked or killed?

THE MOVE MOST PEOPLE MISS

Everyone points AI at the half that was never the bottleneck — more ideas, more plans, more drafts. The same model that will generate infinite plans will, if you ask it, hold you to the three you already made.

Point one at the doing side.

START HERE

The thirty-minute version

A partial system beats a planned one. In order of return:

1. **The three-column board, limit one.** Ten minutes. The highest-leverage page in this guide.
2. **Split Done into Completed and Accepted.** Five minutes — it will show you something uncomfortable within a week.
3. **The loop.** A scheduled AI brief if you can; a recurring reminder with one question if you can't: *what reached another person this week?*

Build the record when the chat scroll loses its first good idea. Add the grades when the record grows past what you can remember.

What it costs

Setup, under an hour. Upkeep is real: minutes a day to file things in your own words, and a weekly review you'll skip and have to restart. The system doesn't create motivation and doesn't replace judgment. It removes excuses — which is less comfortable than it sounds, because once it's running, the reason something hasn't shipped is no longer that you forgot.

The words, in one place

Kanban board	Cards in columns; work flows left to right. The whole idea.
WIP limit	A hard cap on how many things you've started and not finished. The rule that does the work.
Completed	Finished on your side. Not the end of the board.
Accepted	Reached the person it was for. The only column that counts.
Parked / Killed	On hold with a trigger / deliberately dropped with a reason. Decisions, not failures.
The loop	The scheduled check that runs whether or not you feel like it.

ABOUT

Parker Sloan runs agile delivery at a large insurer and works on how the organisation adopts AI. Through Sloan Coaching & Consulting he works with students and early-career professionals on the distance between knowing and doing. He writes *The Architecture of Transformation*.

sloancoachingconsulting.com · sloanpk.substack.com