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Stressed? Organize (Or Reorganize) Your Work Space, Part 1

By Robin Fay

For librarians, stress comes from many sources: building renovations and other changes in physical spaces; interactions with colleagues; changes and problems with technology and systems; new or outdated policies and procedures; more demanding workplaces; multitasking; institutional culture; and family, health, and life situations. Even managing stress can itself be a stressor.

Stress not only impacts productivity and morale, but getting out from under the avalanche of work may seem impossible. Although there are a variety of methods to manage stress, one powerful tool for managing stress is organization. Organizing your workspace, both physical and virtual, can help you not only de-stress, but the act of organizing provides an opportunity for evaluation and reflection, which can bring about new ideas or even new approaches to old problems and workflow.

Sorting and reorganizing can literally encourage “thinking out of the box,” since outdated organizational systems are being evaluated and analyzed. Clearing clutter can help clear your mind.

Organizing and reorganizing should not be a stressful activity in itself. However, for many, finding time to organize, file, sort, review, evaluate, note, and follow up can seem monumental.

If you are struggling to keep up, how can you possibly find time for organizing? Where and how to start? If you want to organize, de-clutter, find new ideas and inspiration, and uncover some breathing space so that you can de-stress and have a better work to life balance, you will have to deal with the time management aspect, too.

Finding the time to organize can be challenging. Time management is a crucial component to finding time in a busy work day for organizing, which in turn will make work time more efficient and less stressful. The investment in organizing will be long lasting, paying dividends in terms of less stress, more efficiency, and more productivity.

How do you begin to find time to organize and tackle all of the bits of stuff that we collect in the course of a work day?

Evaluate your workspace and time. Do you receive lots of paperwork, printed mail, or emails? What do you find the most challenging to keep up with? Do you use social media, mobile, or other communication technology? Do you keep up with professional readings, networking, and continuing education?

Consider everything that you do and interact with as a resource. What do you spend most of your time on and how do you use that time? What would you like to be able to do if you had “extra” time in a day?

Evaluate your priorities. If you do not already have priorities, work with your supervisor to set a realistic priority list. If you already have a priorities list, evaluate the average amount of time for an overall completion rate. Are you able to meet most of your priorities within the designated time frame? If not, why not, and what can be done to address the lack of success? If you only have yearly priorities, consider breaking them up into monthly, weekly, and finally, daily priorities.

Cultivate your support network. Depending on how much organizing you do already, you may be making considerable changes to how you work. Talking to your colleagues and/or

supervisor may help identify ways of organizing. Additionally, they may be willing to help you or provide guidance in terms of handling some of the “unresolvable” problems on your desk.

Learn to multitask effectively. Not every type of work lends itself well to multitasking. It may be that work needs to be sorted out as to the amount of energy, focus, and time it takes. If you have a labor or mentally intensive project, it may be necessary to stop multitasking for a set amount of time. Switching back and forth between email, mobile, databases, professional readings, face to face communications, or social media while trying to do mentally demanding work may mean that the work either takes longer or suffers from quality due to a lack of focus. Work towards efficiency in everything that you do. Efficiency is not necessarily about speed or cutting corners—it is about successfully achieving a particular goal with the least amount of work.

Date and put a version on everything. Adding a date in a procedures document can help establish what is current and what is outdated (and perhaps should be deleted, recycled, or shredded). Unless your desk or computer is the archive for documents or emails, it is likely that you only need the latest version of a document or email.

Do make sure that items are archived as needed. Perhaps a master list or repository for procedures, including archives on an intranet, would be useful. If your documents are housed in a central location, creating a link to the document versus printing out a paper copy or making a copy on your computer can be useful. Using a shared link will mean that you always have the latest version in an easily accessible place. Additionally, you will not have papers cluttering up your desk or documents that need to be filed on your computer, alleviating yet another worry and potential source of stress.

Strive to minimize what you keep (within reason). Do you really need to keep that email or document? If yes, then would it be better to have it on an intranet or shared space? Do you need to keep it for personnel reasons or for record retention? If not, then handle it appropriately. Do make sure to shred all personal documents.

Manage people resources. Is your open-door policy so open that you rarely get work done until your colleagues go home? If you have too many interruptions from colleagues, can you schedule office hours or use a shared e-calendar system to set up meetings? Or, is it possible to schedule “quiet” time? Post signs or block out time so that you are not interrupted except in cases of extreme importance. If you work in public services, do you have scheduled desk hours with enough notice so that you can plan your work week (excluding emergency situations)?

Schedule, schedule, schedule! Although you may not be able to plan for emergencies, you should be able to build in some time to tackle lower priority projects, read a professional journal or article, organize, or network with a colleague. Having a little bit of flexible time in your day or week will also minimize the impact of emergencies and crises when they arise.

Evaluate your day. What would be an “average” day? Are there times that are generally better for dealing with certain types of work (e.g., the mail is delivered or sent out at a certain time; email discussions increase after lunch; standing meetings occur on certain days of the week; news and other information is posted on websites in the morning). Look for logical flows in work so that you maximize your time.

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