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Stressed? Organize (Or Reorganize) Your Workspace, Part 2

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Stressed? Organize (Or Reorganize) Your Work Space, Part 2

By Robin Fay

As you begin to get a handle on organizing your day, the natural extension is to organize the "stuff"—all of the emails, papers, documents, procedures, etc. that come across our desks. Tackling the "stuff" first can certainly be rewarding, but without having a handle on your daily work time, you may find that there is little or no time for organizing. Additionally, you may find that you are repeatedly organizing/re-organizing without much success. Organizing needs to become a daily work habit so that it is part of your work, because that is exactly what it is!

Do what you can reasonably do and what feels comfortable. The goal of organizing your workspace is to get a handle on your work and all of its various bits—the emails, the documents, policies, and even people. Once you understand what your daily work actually entails (i.e., the reality is the perception), you can deal with items more efficiently. Getting started with reorganizing (or organizing) can either start with a major push to get everything in order or with smaller efforts at regular intervals to get everything sorted out.

Clean sweeps are a complete clean. All items are organized and filed appropriately, and items that need follow-up are sorted appropriately. If something is not resolved, a note is added to document progress and then tagged for follow-up. Items that should be deleted, recycled, or shredded are dealt with, and no item is left without a home.

Start small. If there is not time for a top-to-bottom organizing session, or the thought of tackling such a project is overwhelming, then break up the initial organizing effort into smaller units of time. However, the goal is to go through everything—all email, all paperwork, all calendar entries, etc.

Schedule an organizing time. You should already have time built into your schedule to read, respond to, and file email, paperwork, etc. If it helps to actually put organizing on your to-do list or calendar, then do that.

Develop a plan. How are you going to approach organizing? What system will you use? Will you file alphabetically or by importance? How will you label? How will you follow-up? What tools do you have at your disposal? How often will you organize?

Sort and touch items as little as possible. Once you decide on your organizational system, file and note appropriately. If you need to save all correspondences, use a "sent" folder or create a folder or archive for all resolved/completed items. Add labels, tags, or folder names as appropriate, and then file the items according to your organizational scheme. Make sure that your system includes some way to follow-up. For example, if you respond to an email and a follow-up may be needed, tag or note it for follow-up later.

If your system does not allow tagging or flagging, use your inbox as a storage place for only the items needing follow-up or create a folder just for follow-up items. Regardless of how you sort and tag items, it is important that the items get follow-up as needed. The goal is to spend as little time as necessary sorting, shuffling, and re-sorting through what needs follow-up and what has been completed.

Save, recycle, trash, or delete. What needs to be saved? What can be recycled or trashed? Do you have multiple versions/copies of an item? Keep only what you need; archive the rest, or pitch, recycle, trash, or delete it! Handle items with personal information with care and always dispose of them properly.

Label, tag, or create keywords (metadata). Many applications such as word processing software, PDF creators, and email systems, provide mechanisms to not only search within the document itself, but they have the ability to add descriptive metadata, via keywords, labels, subjects, or tags. These tags can be useful in organizing, but they are extremely important for searching. Using good metadata can make searching for documents and emails much more efficient, thus saving time.

Use appropriate tools. E-calendars can be extraordinarily powerful time management and organization tools. In addition to scheduling, they can be set to manage to-do lists, send reminders, and keep projects on track. Consider the best mechanism for a particular project or group and use it. If a face-to-face meeting is more efficient, make sure to take project notes for sharing through email, intranet, or web portal.

Using shared e-calendars to schedule groups and meetings can reduce the number of emails exchanged in the course of trying to set or reschedule meetings. Not only can you often see a colleague's availability, but some calendars will even suggest meeting times based upon individuals' availability. Many e-calendars contain to-do or task lists, which can not only be used for project management, but also as a personal to-do list.

While email can often be an extremely useful tool to disseminate information to a group, it may or may not be the best tool for project planning and discussion. Using email efficiently can often depend upon the particular features of an email system. However, most modern email systems and mailing lists do provide some built-in organizational tools.

Digests (all emails to a list within a particular time are mailed in one long email) can be useful in keeping up with emails without having to sort through individual emails. The archives/no mail option will allow you to read the archives

without actually receiving email; however, it is up to you to read the archives. "No mail" is also a useful option when travelling or on vacation.

Filters are a feature of many email systems to route or tag particular emails that fit certain criteria. If you need to read a particular list via each individual email, use a filter or tag to route those emails into a particular folder. When it is time to do your professional reading, you can read the mailing lists within that folder.

RSS readers can be useful for keeping up with professional reading without having excess clutter in an email box. Just about every blog and many journals now have an RSS component. Subscribing to the RSS feed via a reader, or even email, can be a useful way to keep up with readings. Subscribing through an RSS reader also provides a mechanism to search for particular topics, so you may be able to skim through readings more quickly.

Focus on minimizing what is on your virtual and physical work desk. When problems arise, if they cannot be addressed immediately, flag them for follow-up. Don't be afraid to forward a problem or question if there is a more appropriate person to answer the question. Delegate whenever possible. While it is perfectly okay to pitch in as needed and help out, it is often easy to take on the work of others without considering delegation. Delegating work, when appropriate, frees up your time to take on more complex work or to engage in professional development activities. Delegation can also provide training or cross-training experiences for other staff.

Organizing and reorganizing are essential parts of modern daily work. Considering how much information comes across our desks each day, it is no wonder that we struggle to keep up. However, the key to keeping up is to develop an organizational system, organize, and then work to stay organized. While "everything in its place" may seem like an outdated construct in

this digital world, nothing could be further from the truth.

In order to stay current, to stay focused, and to keep a healthy work-life balance, we all have to consciously spend time on de-cluttering our space, providing ourselves with space to breathe and think. Not only will our work lives be better, but over the long term, productivity will be positively impacted. Being able to quickly find what you need through a well-organized system is certainly a productivity enhancement. Organize and de-clutter for a better work day and a better overall life!

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