

Where Did I Put That Proposal?

Simple organizing techniques to alleviate stress and increase your effectiveness

By Jeanine Baron

It's 7:30 Monday morning. You arrive at the office early today, determined to stay ahead of your workload this week. More than a dozen new e-mails await you, having arrived since you left the office Friday at 6:00 p.m. By 7:50 a.m., your largest client has called your office twice to see if the proposal he needs for a 10:00 a.m. meeting is ready. You know the information is somewhere in the piles on your desk, but can't seem to get your hands on it. The agenda for your 8:30 a.m. planning meeting isn't finalized, and you're still looking for that proposal...

As a business owner, you continually work under stressful conditions and manage large workloads in a business environment that seems to be operating at warp speed. The stress that is related to working harder and faster is reaching epidemic proportions, as stress-related illnesses cost the nation \$300 billion per year.

As reported in *The Overworked American*, Americans are working 164 more hours per year than we did 20 years ago, the equivalent of one extra working month each year. For many, being organized can help reduce stress, save time and encourage efficiency. While you probably have little control over the hectic nature of operating a business, you can make a significant difference in your life by getting organized.

Assess Your Office Ergonomics

Evaluate your office for proper design to promote a healthier work environment. Are your eyes really tired at the end of the day? If so, you may need to adjust your

lighting or computer screen height in your work area. The eyes should be 24-36 inches from the screen, where the neck is bent within a 15-degree angle, up or down. The top of the screen should be just below the eye level.

Do you feel exhausted at the end of the day? If so, assess your lifestyle habits for possible contributing factors: good nutrition, exercise, rest, and stress reduction. Good ergonomics at home and micro-breaks at work can improve your health and comfort on and off the job.

Improve Your Record Management System

The average U.S. executive wastes six weeks per year retrieving misplaced information from messy desks and files. Poor record management leads to inefficiency, poor customer service, increased costs, additional space requirements, potential for litigation, and other problems.

When creating any type of file system, remember to keep it simple. Paper folders and electronic folders should mirror one another, so that your electronic information "feels" the same as your paper files. When creating or organizing a file system, segregate active files from archival files. Use a "destroy date" on as many archive boxes as possible. Consider investing your effort, time and money to improve this area of your business – you'll see significant and positive returns on those investments.

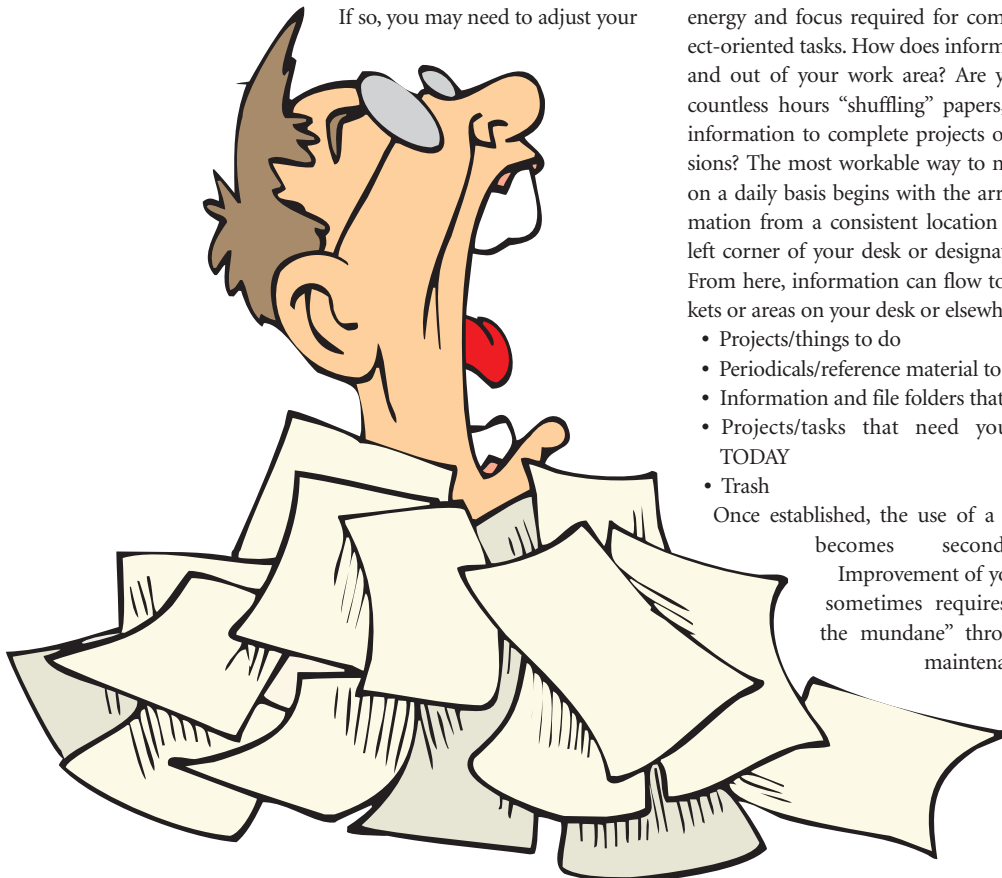
Organize Your Desk To Improve Workflow

For many, a cluttered desk drains the mental energy and focus required for completing project-oriented tasks. How does information flow in and out of your work area? Are you spending countless hours "shuffling" papers, looking for information to complete projects or make decisions? The most workable way to manage paper on a daily basis begins with the arrival of information from a consistent location (i.e., the top left corner of your desk or designated "Inbox"). From here, information can flow to labeled baskets or areas on your desk or elsewhere for:

- Projects/things to do
- Periodicals/reference material to read
- Information and file folders that need filed
- Projects/tasks that need your attention TODAY
- Trash

Once established, the use of a good system becomes second nature.

Improvement of your workflow sometimes requires "mastering the mundane" through desktop maintenance.





Remember that the payoff to having an organized work environment is being able to control the time spent on tasks and eliminate the potential for lost or misplaced information, thereby reducing stress.

Gain Control Over Processing Mail – Both Paper And Electronic

Designate a specific time of day to deal with processing your mail. Do you detest going through your mail? If so, you may need to schedule a high-energy time of the day when you can best concentrate on this task. The system you create for desktop management is a critical precursor to dealing with your paper mail.

Ask yourself, “Is this something I need to act on?” (TO DO basket); “Should I read this?” (TO READ basket or TRASH); “Will I need this later?” (TO FILE basket). Your diligence in sorting the mail DAILY is necessary to maintain your valuable workspace, and provide clarity for projects and tasks.

According to a recent survey, time spent on e-mail was estimated at two hours per day. To process e-mail more effectively, use your computer files and folders like a file cabinet. You wouldn’t consider filing your paper mail by “Incoming” or set up a filing system within your paper inbox, right? Electronic mail should be processed and filed according to subject, not method of delivery. Sorting e-mail into categories can help you keep

personal, professional and highly sensitive correspondence separate. If you get into the habit of keeping different work-related correspondence in different folders, it can help you keep closer track of continuing projects. Taking the time to organize your e-mail using the various options under the “Tools” menu can also provide a number of benefits, including tracking and follow-up of incoming and outgoing e-mails.

Improving Self-Management Skills


“Busyness” has not only become a way of life and a habit, but while we weren’t looking, it has become an addiction. It has also become a way we measure our self-worth. We continually invent new criteria to convince ourselves that we’re accomplishing a lot, confused about the difference between effectiveness and just staying busy. The fundamental guideline to managing your time is to involve yourself in activities that are aligned with your goals, not open slots in your schedule. View the time “spent” on a project or activity the same way you would spend money. Look for your return on investment.

Do You Have A Minute?

Tolerating interruptions in the workplace is one of the main causes for people working longer hours, taking unnecessary work home and spending less time with their families. There are, however, many ways to minimize interruptions and their negative impact on your day.

Where possible, forward your calls to voice mail when you need to finish a project uninterrupted. Deferring or delaying responses to e-mails and voice mail puts you in an action mode, as opposed to a reactive mode. Consider the statistics of the time spent on incoming calls that average 11 minutes, versus the average outgoing call that lasts an average of 7 minutes. That’s roughly eight outgoing calls vs. five incoming calls per hour, increasing your productivity by nearly 50 percent!

Outgoing calls are time savers for several reasons. You may have the option of leaving a detailed message on the recipient’s voice mail, eliminating the necessity of a long-winded conversation. You will also have an opportunity to assemble the information necessary to complete the call at your fingertips. Finally, you can better control the length and time of the call.

Pay close attention to your body language when at your desk. Sometimes, we may be unconsciously communicating an availability when we really have important business to attend to. Refrain from looking up at everyone that passes by your office. If you are interrupted, feel free to tell them that you need time to finish what you are working on. Let them know when it is a good time to get together, and choose a time to meet that best suits your schedule. 

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