

The Clutter Fairy*

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Secrets for Conquering Clutter and Organizing Your Workspace

Opening Comments

This is not a discussion about time management, e-mail management, or process flow, but a discussion of space and stuff management instead. Your *space* affects your efficiency just as much as time management does.

I've been in lots of homes awash in stuff where I navigated through the rooms along a narrow pathway amongst the piles. I've seen lots of offices in the same shape, with no space from the door to the desk, and no clear desk space to work on.

The funny thing is people defend their messes. They tell me they know just where everything is, and moving it around means they will lose it. They tell me they have no time to straighten it up.

I'm going to let you in on a secret—everything you own, or keep in your space has a maintenance time attached to it. If it exists in your universe, you are allotting time to manage it whether you realize it or not. This truth applies to paper as well as boxes and desks and office supplies.

You have to spend time handling it when you get it, file it, store it, or retrieve it. You move it around and out of the way to get to something under it. You move it out of the chair so someone can sit down. You search for 45 minutes to find it because you need it again. Whatever it is, if it exists in your space, it comes with a handling time that runs for as long as you keep that item.

The more things with a handling time in your life, the fuller your day is. If you have to do today's tasks around the five prior years of stuff in your office, you are spending the time needed for today's task plus the time to wade through all the stuff in your office.

We are blind to how much time we waste that way. In an eight-hour day, if you waste five minutes looking for something three times each hour, you've lost two hours of your productive time. That's the difference between going home at 5:00 versus going home at 7:00.

I tell you this to sell you on one point. It always seems like a big waste of time you don't want to give up to come in on the weekend or stay late at night to organize the stuff in your office—you're hungry and you want dinner. But the truth is if you're willing to spend a concentrated amount of time organizing your space, you're really shortening the time it takes to accomplish your regular tasks during the day.

Clearing your space can have a huge impact on productivity, and also a huge impact on the perception of you as efficient and professional. You may be supremely professional and efficient at what you do, but if your office space doesn't reflect that, you're leaving the wrong impression with the people you work with, including the person responsible for raises.

Misperceptions in Office Organizing

The office environment has a unique set of issues when it comes to organizing the space, in contrast to organizing at home.

- ❑ First, it's very hard to throw away work related paper. It all seems so important, but the truth is the papers that must be kept already have systems to do so—say accounts payables checks. They have their own set of files because the expense information is valuable and necessary to keep, so you don't need to keep those papers at your desk.
- ❑ Paper that doesn't already have a filing system in your office may not be as important to keep as you think. Consider the paper you file away every day—is it really needed in paper form? Is there an email saved or a file saved somewhere? If it's a repetitive task every month, could it be saved to an electronic format to prevent loss instead of being printed and filed?
- ❑ When we're in the middle of a project, all the communication and receipts and timelines and budgets etc are all very important. We use them in the production of the project. The *minute* the project is over, that paper becomes mostly worthless. I hear the gasps! But truly, if you save the final budget, the final timeline, the receipts for high dollar or specialty items, and some summarizing emails, all the rest can go!
- ❑ A project has the imbued value of all your hard work and time spent. That can make anything seem very valuable indeed. However, the minute the project is done, the value of your hard work is a memory and if you keep all the mess from the project you are just enshrining the memory of your time spent. The result is you have to keep up with it and make space for it and move around it forever.
- ❑ Offices accumulate stacks of old junk because no one feels like they can throw out the business's stuff. All offices have files that haven't been opened in years, or closets with stuff that hasn't been unpacked in living memory. Think about the kitchen cabinets in your office—what is all that junk anyway? All you need is the boss' permission to clear out a space like that and reclaim room in your office. Personally I have made my own executive decisions on more than one occasion that something was no longer needed and thrown it out. So far, I haven't been busted for tossing something!
- ❑ If you've been at the job a long time, it gathers stuff just like living in a house for many years. You put off a million keep or toss decisions and accumulate things that just slowly fill up your space and choke the life out of you. Offices never have garage sales to clear it out. You could wait for your office to move locations, but that happens much less frequently than you move houses. Your best option is to spend a day or evening cleaning up and tossing out.

Six Simple Organizing Strategies for Your Office

So how can you help yourself at the office? Here are six ideas to get you started. Before you begin, try this exercise. Look at your office with a stranger's eyes. Truly, you no longer see the space truly—you've been staring at it for too long. Imagine what the office looks like to a visiting dignitary in your field—someone whom you would meet once in a lifetime. When that person gets escorted into your office to be introduced, what do they see? Everyone else sees you from the back of the desk, not the front. What do they see when they come in? Why not let that vision help you get a new perspective on your office space.

1. **Take stock of equipment and supplies on your desk**—If you have tons of office supplies and equipment on your desk, ask yourself how often you use these items. If they're needed less than twice a day, put them in a desk drawer. Only leave on top of the desk the items that you need frequently—many times in a day.
2. **Evaluate the contents of your desk file drawers**—Actual drawer space in a desk is usually very limited—maybe four drawers total, two of which can hold files, and sometimes less than that. This is valuable real estate and needs to be treated as such. Put files that you access every day in these two drawers—if you don't use that file every day, store it in your next filing location. You should have within reach only the files you need all the time. The rest are not important enough to store at your fingertips. They may contain very valuable information, but if you only access it once a month, it shouldn't be in your desk files.
3. **Focus on the large items in your office**—Get a big bang for your organizing buck by dealing with large items in the office. Remove unused chairs, desks, credenzas, and file cabinets. Empty old boxes and thin out your office supplies. Just because it has always been there doesn't mean it needs to stay there forever. These tasks can help you feel like you made a big dent in a short amount of time.
4. **Deal with the paper in small bites**—Paper is very labor intensive to sort through—It's better done in smaller increments. The rewards with paper sorting are more subtle. Start with the oldest files first—work in a file cabinet that you know has ancient files in it and get a taste for throwing out old documents. That way you can have a higher volume of successful purging and clear some space easily and quickly. Then you can tackle the more current things.
5. **Consider moving your furniture around**—Maybe you have access problems that make it hard to file, or open a drawer, or use that wall space. You can often make yourself more efficient just by rearranging the furniture. Rearrange your desk area so that it gives you file space at your desk and immediately to your side or behind. The less you have to walk away from your desk the better.
6. **Create “zones” for your various tasks**—“Zones” is the new buzzword in my field. But the buzz is useful. Creating a zone for all info related to one specific task helps you each time that task needs to be done. If you store all files and incoming data and supplies needed for a specific task in one zone, they're right there when you start the task—no need to wander around looking for all the parts before you can start. That zone could be a box, a file drawer, a shelf, a cubbyhole, or a tray on your desk. As long as you use that zone for storing all items related to a project and nothing else goes there, you can get started right away.

In Conclusion...

We've hardly scratched the surface in this short time, but hopefully I've given you some new ways to look at organizing your office and shown you the value in doing it.

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Thanks so much for letting me talk to you today!