

# The Clutter Fairy\*

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## A Short Plan for Organizing Your Desk

After you've been in your job for a while, there comes a time when you need to revamp your workspace. Even the most organized person lets things accumulate when there's tons of work to do. No matter where you're starting from—cleaning up an office organized long ago or clearing out an office never organized—the plan is the same. Even if you have to spend time at night or on a weekend, it'll be well worth it if it makes your work life easier. You spend a LOT of time in that office—taking the time to make it work better for you is time you spend helping yourself.

Clutter can be overwhelming and frustrating at home. But at the office, not only does it make your life harder; it makes an impression on others, not the least of whom is your boss. That office reflects you and is part of defining your professional image. A cluttered office makes it look like you have a cluttered mind, regardless of the truth. Your clutter at home affects others, but they still love you. At the office it makes people nervous about you—it makes them worry you can't do your job effectively. So, think of the time spent organizing your office as time invested in your professional career.

### Purge the Piles

1. **Create a “sort and purge” area**—Set up a card table or clear some floor space.
2. **Set up five empty boxes or bags**—Label them *Relocate*, *Trash*, *Shred*, *File*, and *Office Supplies*.
3. **Take everything out of the desk and sort it**—Put everything in one of the boxes. (If you want, you can make more boxes for broad topics (e.g., *Décor Items*), but don't try to sort the *File* basket into smaller pieces yet.)
  - a. *Relocate*—Collect things that have ended up on or in the desk but don't belong there—like dishes, newspapers, or things from home! When sorting is done, move these items to a new place in the office, or take home your forgotten personal items.
  - b. *Trash* and *Shred*—For the obvious things. When sorting is done, shred the contents of the *Shred* box, then take it and the trash out to the trash!
  - c. *File*—Use this box for all the paper that you need to keep.
  - d. *Office Supplies*—For your stapler, Post-Its, and paper clips. Don't keep multiples!
4. **Move the desk if needed**—Now is the time to move the desk around to be closer to the file cabinets or to face a prettier view when working. Consider that you need to be able to easily reach the things you use often, and don't forget that vertical space can easily become part of your desk. Get the computer hard drive, monitor and keyboard placed for easy use. Don't forget the lighting!

5. **Dress your desk**—Use the top and the drawers both. Add back on top the office supplies that you grab ALL THE TIME—if you don't use it often, put it in a nearby drawer. Put excess supplies elsewhere—in another storage space. The five extra rolls of adding machine tape don't have to stay in the desk. The goal here is to clear usable space that you can work on.
6. **Work on your files**— If you have existing files that got emptied from the desk, purge their contents before they go back in. File everything you put in the *File* basket. Evaluate a file itself for ALL THE TIME use, also. If you use it often, put it in the desk files. If not consider storing it another way. Desk file drawers are valuable space and usually not abundant. Save only what you must, keep those files you use often in the desk, and store things you have to keep but not use often elsewhere—like a separate file cabinet or labeled boxes in a closet or on a shelf.

## Prevent New Piles

1. **Papers go into files in storage or work zones**—All the paper you generate should be tossed, shredded or filed, right away. Remember the OHIO rule—only handle it once. Test yourself by holding a red felt tip pen while you go through paper. Dot the upper corner each time you pick it up. Once it starts to look like it has the chicken pox that is your sign it's way past time to dispose of that paper somehow.
2. **Edit Stuffed Files**—Whenever a file folder gets stuffed again, it's time to purge the file contents to make room. There should be flex room in the file cabinet so you don't have to jam things in there and can close the file drawers easily.
3. **Create Zones**—Make a zone for your daily tasks, your month-end tasks, for projects. Whatever tasks you do at the desk, make a zone area for it on or in the desk. Use closed storage ideas for less used items (so they can hide when not in use) and use open storage for things you use all the time.
4. **Separate Personal from Professional**—This applies if you are working from home and your desk is dual purpose. If the desk is used as a home office and as a work office, then keep personal and professional separate. You need separate desk areas, separate files, separate zones. It will be easier to manage that way.
5. **Create Incoming Stations**—Everyone has an inbox on their desk, and it probably stays full all the time. For repetitive incoming items—things you get over and over every day, consider making an inbox specifically for that type of item. Maybe you review Payables every day, or get daily progress reports on a project. Let the person who puts things in your inbox do some of the sorting for you! Give repetitive incoming mail its own box. Then you can get to those items when it is time for you to perform that task each day without digging things out of the inbox.
6. **Create Outgoing Stations**—Maybe a finished project has to be delivered somewhere. One outgoing station can be a portable file box to carry files to meetings. Another might be an outgoing basket or hanging wall basket for things that need to leave the office regularly. Use the same principal as incoming stations. Make a place for repetitive outgoing items so they can be easily relocated. Someone picks up those Payables you review every day, or you need to remember to take something to a meeting. You can have a series of outboxes for yourself for things that you need to take to other offices or meetings.