



# Tips to Being and Staying Better Organized at Work

By Anna Miller

Having trouble paying attention to your computer screen or task at hand? It's difficult for employees to get organized at the office or even at home, when the workplace is so demanding; especially when you have a lot on your mind and your to-do list is a mile long. You are given so many projects and have deadlines for everything, making it hard to be able to take a step back and come up with the right system for getting things done. If you don't get organized, you will end up forgetting about things and it will end up making you look poorly. When your work life is organized, you're able to be more productive. But getting organized at work takes time and energy...papers pile up, meetings eat up large chunks of your day and phone calls, co-workers and e-mail

messages all compete for your time. Here are some tips for getting organized at work.

When getting started it's important to keep in mind that not all methods of being and staying organized work for everybody. The one that works best for you will depend on a number of factors, including your work style and the demands of your job as well as your personal life. Below, I'll outline ways that you can get your workplace and yourself organized for optimal working conditions.

## Chuck Your Junk

Purging is the best starting point to getting organized. When starting, think about whether you've needed something within the last year. Make a toss pile, a

store pile and a to-do pile. That magazine you've been saving for years because you just know you'll get around to reading it? Toss it. The budget report from 2008? Store it, but only one copy. A printout of the presentation you're giving this week? Keep it on hand.

Don't be afraid to use the recycling bin/trash basket. Organizing unnecessary items is wasted energy and takes time. It is amazing how much more in control you'll feel just by ridding yourself of outdated articles you'd like to read someday, or countless meeting notes from which action items have already been completed. Clutter can distract you, weigh you down, and in general it invites chaos into your life. Often times, however, tackling clutter can seem an overwhelming task if

you don't know where or how to start. By devoting a little of your time to getting rid of the junk and keeping things relatively clutter-free, you'll reap the rewards of a pleasing workplace, reduced stress and a more organized and productive work experience.

### De-Clutter Your Desk Top

A great way to begin ridding yourself of junk is to start small. If you don't know where to begin – start with your desk. Clear everything off the top of it (if you're really ambitious then take everything out of the drawers too). Assemble the items in piles on the floor. Clean and wipe down your desk, you'll be amazed and happy at how pretty and clean it looks. Sort through all the stuff that was both in and on your desk. Toss out as much as possible. Once you've weeded things out, it's time to sort through the remains. Set up a basic filing system with a folder or binder for each project, client or event. Keep your office supplies and other items in a designated drawer. Designate a spot for every item you've decided to keep and make sure that it stays there, or goes back there when you're done using it. Keep flat surfaces clear, and have an inbox for all incoming papers. When the papers come in, sort them each day – toss, delegate, take action or file. All you want on the surface of your desk is your phone, computer, inbox and maybe a special photo in addition to the documents you are working with at the moment. You'll be less distracted by the many items on your desk and will be able to stay better focused on the task at hand.

### Organize Your Paperwork

The most important part of organizing your paperwork is to create a filing system. To do so you'll need to decide what's important to keep and what you can throw away. Once you've done that, it's time to create a filing system that works for you, one that will help you quickly find documents you need to access. Next you'll want to decide how you'll organize your paperwork. Whatever it is, it must make sense for you and it should be something you'll keep up with. A few ways to organize your paperwork are:

- Alphabetical: This system is best when most of your files are going to be names of clients, patients or customers.
- Subject, Project or Event: Most file systems are organized this way.
- Numerical or Chronological: This is best when your files consist mainly of numbered or dated material.

Once you've determined which system works best for you, you'll want to determine how you'd like to file your paperwork. You can do so with binders,

manila folders, hanging folders, etc. Then it's time to begin sorting and filing away papers. Chances are you will have to add categories along the way, and you may look back and realize that you could have combined some of your categories. I personally use binders and categorize each by the event I work on throughout a given year. Within each binder I create tabs for different categories within that event (i.e. Meeting Notes, Operations, Budget, etc.).

If it is difficult for you to figure out a simple, effective filing system, consider talking with someone at work that seems to have created a good one. After you've set up your filing system – keep up with it. If something doesn't have a place – make one. Then simply put things back where they belong when you have finished using them. It's simple and effective, but hard at first to do consistently until you form the habit. The single, simplest thing I do to stay organized is to put whatever tool, item, report, etc. away immediately after using it. I always know where everything and anything is so I never waste time looking for something. I could tell a stranger where to find something in my office.

### Manage Communications

Managing all forms of communication is key to making it through the workday and getting work done. Checking and responding to e-mail messages and voice mails throughout the day can eat up valuable time, both in checking and responding to messages and in refocusing on what you were doing before the interruption. Here are ways to manage the flow of messages and other communications at work:

- Check e-mail messages just two or three times a day. Checking e-mail too frequently interrupts your work flow and eats into your productivity. Try checking e-mail when you arrive at work, at lunchtime and towards the end of the day.
- Prioritize e-mail messages. Respond to urgent messages right away or e-mails where you know the answer and can respond quickly. Create folders on your computer or in your e-mail program for all others. Categorize these messages according to the name of the project or person who sent the message, the follow-up required and the time frame for your reply.
- Don't use e-mail as a substitute for conversation. A brief phone call may accomplish what might take several rounds of e-mails, especially when a decision has to be made. This is an easy way to save time and energy.

- During busy times, let your voicemail pick up messages if possible.
- Check your voicemail two or three times each day and return calls.
- Manage interruptions from co-workers during busy times. If you have an office door and are in a work crunch, close the door to let others know that you are busy. If you don't have a door, post a sign outside your workspace indicating when you will be free. Or, you can simply let them know you are close to a deadline and would catch up with them when you had a moment.

### Ask for Help

If you need help getting organized, get your co-workers to help you out. They might be better organized than you and can give you pointers. You can also see how they arrange their desk or how they prioritize work and then mimic that. Take feedback from them as to how you're doing and what you can improve on. How your workplace is organized is very important because others may notice and it might not be a good representation of the company.

Sometimes it's impossible to complete all your tasks on your own. Don't be afraid to ask for help or to delegate work to your co-workers. This can help keep you from feeling bogged down and stressed out. Sharing 'to-dos' among your co-workers allows them to feel ownership while allowing you to stay organized and on top of your deadlines.

Once you find out what works for you and strive to implement good habits, you'll be plowing through your work with renewed energy in no time. If you aren't organized by nature, don't pretend like you can be. Instead of trying to wrestle your work duties into place, set realistic goals about what you can control and what you need to let go. Setting small, reasonable objectives for accomplishing job related tasks will allow you to stay on track while still maintaining a sense of accomplishment. It's also a great way for you to remind yourself what you can do, as opposed to what you need to do. And finally, you don't have to conquer everything at once. Choose a small chunk... maybe the top of your desk or a drawer, and organize that. It's easy to put things off for another day, but it'll save you headaches in the long-run if you deal with things immediately. Throw it out, donate it or keep it and put it in a designated area.

**Anna Miller** is an Event Manager for the Kentucky Derby Festival Inc. She can be reached at [amiller@kdf.org](mailto:amiller@kdf.org).