

Why Clutter Hurts Your Leadership & What to Do About It

Getting a handle on clutter isn't a trivial matter. It can be revolutionary.

By Barbara Hemphill

It's a simple fact: Clutter is postponed decisions. And a delayed decision can lead to confusion, chaos, and even, sometimes, disaster.

Many organizational leaders have cluttered offices. Leaders think "big picture," and following through on details can be a struggle. They like to start things, but finishing them can be a challenge. Often the more brilliant a person is, the messier their office. Sorting and filing seem like low priorities to someone who's trying to change the world. But are they? It's easy for observers to wonder, "If someone can't manage their own office, how can they manage an organization?"

Studies show that people spend between 25% and 35% of their time every day finding the information they need. Research also tells us that 80% of what we keep we never use, and the more we keep the less we use — because we don't know we even have it, or we simply can't find it.

What Is the Problem?

Staying organized isn't easy. If it were, there wouldn't be so many intelligent, creative people who struggle with it. The combination of computers and a desire to reduce overhead expenses means fewer administrative assistants and, as a result, messier offices. Unfortunately, organizational skills aren't taught in school, so unless you were born organized or had a good role model, you're out of luck.

Take the First Step

There are numerous ways an office can be organized, but statistically, most offices simply have too much stuff. So the first step is to get rid of what's extraneous.

Look at each item in your office and ask the question, "Does this help me accomplish my work or enjoy my life?" If the answer is "No," but you're still reluctant to get rid of something, ask, "What's the worst possible thing that would happen if I didn't have this?" Then donate, recycle, or toss it.

Design Your System: The Magic Six

If organizing doesn't come naturally to you, it's unlikely that, with even the best system, you'll have a continuously neat desk, but cleaning it off at the end of the day, or at the very least, the end of the week, will be a cinch if you simply have a SYSTEM (Saving You Space Time Energy Money). Here are six tools you can use to control the clutter in your office, accomplish your work, and enjoy your life:

1. IN/OUT/FILE

Place three containers on your desk within reach of your chair:

- one for the items you haven't yet looked at
- one for items you need to take someplace else — another person's office, the post office, and so on
- one for items you need to file in a location within your own office that you can't reach from your chair.

2. WASTEBASKET/RECYCLE/SHRED

Make it easy to get rid of what you don't need. For example, if you can't reach your shredder from your chair, use a desk drawer or a box under your desk. Then develop a system for actually getting the paper shredded — whether you do it yourself or hire your child to do it.

3. CALENDAR

One of the biggest contributors to a messy desk is papers that serve as reminders to do something. Keeping an open calendar on your desk for making direct entries can eliminate this issue. While most of us are great at making appointments with other people, we're not so good at making appointments with ourselves. We need to care for ourselves in order to meet the needs of others.

4. CONTACT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Another big source of office clutter is papers (and electronic files) with contact information — names, addresses, phone numbers, e-mails, and the like. Use a software program to



store all such information, and get rid of the extra paper and superfluous files.

5. ACTION FILES

Action files should be located close to your desk. They contain the papers you need for your current projects. They can be sorted in three different ways:

- by date (files labeled 1-31 for the current month, and Jan-Dec for the current year)
- by type of action (for instance, “Data Entry,” “Expense Reimbursement,” “Waiting for Response”)
- by name of project, client, or event.

Most people have a combination of the three. For example, the August 15 file might remind you to write a new ezine, while the project file labeled “Ezine Ideas” contains the information you need to actually write it.

6. REFERENCE FILES

Reference files contain papers you may not need on a daily basis but don’t want to throw away. They can be located in or outside your office. Your “To File” box will serve as a place to hold the papers that need to be filed.

Some projects may have both an action and reference file. The action file will contain the papers you’re currently using on a project, while the reference file will contain the completed papers that you want to retain for historical or legal purposes.

Maintain Your Success


So here’s your challenge: Set aside four hours. Move everything on your desk into a box. Set up the “magic six” to stop future clutter, and provide a system to handle every new piece of paper that comes into your office.

If you don’t think you’ll be able to maintain your clutter-free office yourself, hire someone to help a few hours a

week. Your office will look better, you’ll feel better, and your leadership will shine.

Organize the Organization

Clutter can have an undermining effect on your entire organization, so be sure to spread the word. Here are four steps your organization can take now:

- 1. Identify someone in your organization** to take ownership of managing information.
- 2. Create a user-friendly records-retention program** for your organization.
- 3. Implement a training program** to teach employees how to make decisions about what information to keep and what to discard.
- 4. Empower employees to eliminate unnecessary clutter** by designating specific times for that purpose. 

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Keep Or Toss?

For more on keeping the right records, getting rid of the rest, and creating a productive work environment, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

Do You Need a Record-Saving Policy? (Vol. 19, No. 6)

Seven Questions You Must Address to Thrive in the Digital Age (Vol. 35, No. 1)

How to Get It Done (Vol. 25, No. 6)

If It’s Not in the Minutes, Did It Happen? (Vol. 14, No. 6)

How to Present Training Workshops that Educate and Inspire (Vol. 29, No. 4)

Three Things to Do with Old Marketing and Fundraising Materials (Vol. 29, No. 2)