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How to Organize

By Paul Holstein

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Highly effective people are organized people. They seemingly handle many tasks at the same time and do not lose track of their progress. They don't miss appointments or lose things as often as the rest of us do. They always have their work done on time or early and they have more free time. Organization is the key to productivity. It allows us to keep an eye on things and instantly recognize when something is wrong.

Picture in your mind the ideal organized mechanic's workshop. There is no grease or oil on the floor, all the tools are organized and hung on peg boards with an outline painted behind each tool. The only vehicles in the shop are the ones actively being worked on. Each mechanic follows a scientific method for analyzing the problem and then goes about replacing or repairing the defective parts. They carefully disassemble all parts necessary to get to their target and label the things they have to disconnect. They put the reusable parts into a bin and they throw away or separate the non-reusable parts so that they don't put them back in. After they have reached the target and replaced the defective parts, they carefully reassemble the vehicle and check that everything is tight and working. At the end, they test drive the vehicle and fill out all the invoice information.

The benefits of this organization are enormous. Since each tool is put away in its place at all times, it is easy to find any necessary tool. If a tool is missing, it is easy to spot which tool is missing and find it. Having no grease or oil on the floor helps ensure the safety of the mechanics and customers. Only taking out the tools they need minimizes the risk of tripping on a tool and gives the mechanics more room to work. Having a clean and organized work area keeps the mechanic's mind focused on the task at hand. I could go on but I think you can see how much better off the organized workshop is than the non-organized workshop.

Organizing our environment keeps our brains from overloading and allows us to focus on our work. When some of us are surrounded by a mess, we tend to despair and feel overwhelmed and distracted. Ironically, not everyone feels this way. If you've spent any time around kids, you know what I mean. The problem with clutter is that it distracts our attention. When we are surrounded by extra stuff, our eye seems to catch them and distract us. You can almost hear the clutter screaming "Do me, take care

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of me."

OK, so how do you get organized? First of all you need the right tools, then you need the time and commitment. Let's start with the tools. First of all you need plenty of appropriate storage.

If you deal in plenty of small parts, bins may be ideal for you. If you work in an office you need file cabinets. If you work in a kitchen, perhaps drawers and cabinets are more appropriate. Whatever the working environment, make sure you have plenty of storage space. Keep in mind that there are actually three ways of obtaining space. You can increase the amount of storage space (e.g. build a garage), use the space you have more efficiently (by adding a bookshelf or overhead cabinets) or reduce the amount of things you store.

Whatever the work environment, you must analyze your storage needs first and have the proper tools and storage available. That will probably mean a trip to the local mega home center for cabinets and peg boards or the mega office supply shop for file organizers. This step is critical. Without proper storage, you will be locked in your tracks with nowhere to put away the stuff you want to keep. It will sit out in the open and you won't really be able to organize it.

Once you have the proper storage, you will also need the right tools and accessories. If you are organizing a garage or warehouse, that probably means bins, dividers, Velcro straps, peg board accessories and stackable boxes. If you are cleaning up an office that means file folders, hanging folders, book ends, drawer organizers and labels. Here's a tip: buy more than you need. Buy every little interesting accessory you can find at the store and bring it back with you. Use the ones that work and return the ones that don't. It is better to have extra storage materials on hand and not need them than vice versa.

Now you are ready to begin the clean up effort. The first thing you need to do is clear everything out of the area. That means you need to empty out all your drawers, desktop, file cabinets, bookshelves, etc. On an initial clean up, everything must temporarily be moved out of the area. Don't panic, we'll put it back; but for now, it must go. Next, you need to setup your cabinets and files or add your additional storage.

At this point, you should have a clean work area with storage space available and no clutter. Now comes the fun part. You need to bring in everything you took out and think about each thing individually.

There are only four basic things you can do with any given item:

1. Handle it
2. File it
3. Delegate it
4. Get rid of it

It doesn't sound like a lot of options does it? However, these are your only options. By limiting your choices, it will help you focus without spinning your wheels. I'll go through the list and explain each

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one:

Handle it – This is the preferred thing to do with most stuff. For example, if the item in your hand is a registration form you've been meaning to fill out, take the 2 minutes and fill out the form, attach a check, record the check, put it in an envelope and drop it in the mail box. I say this is the best option because it does two great things, 1) it eliminates the item, giving you one less thing to worry about and it gives you an immediate sense of satisfaction. If you have an item that needs your attention, you need to determine if you can handle it quickly or if you need to file it. Obviously, handling it, is the best approach because then you only have to touch it once; however, you will find some items in your stack that would take too long to handle on the spot. For instance, you may find notes and an introduction to a book you've been meaning to write. It would clearly take more than five minutes to write your book so your next choice would be to file it.

File it – This is the choice many people resist. They reason that out of site means out of mind. This is true but there are ways to organize yourself so that you don't forget things. One of the best options is to keep a to-do list. Before you file your manuscript, you should make a notation on your to-do list that

says "finish manuscript." Then you should file your manuscript and go on to the next item. Filing things does not necessarily mean that it will sit in a file permanently. In fact, it's the opposite. If you are planning on filing something indefinitely, you should consider boxing it up and moving it to storage or throwing it away.

So how long should you keep things? This issue keeps many individuals and businesses from cleaning out their files. I don't have the expertise to answer every question but if you do a search on the Internet for "record retention", you may be able to answer those questions yourself. When it comes to tax returns, the IRS has 3 – 6 years to investigate your returns; therefore, you are probably safe throwing out your 1973 tax returns. On the other hand, if you've kept them that long, you may want to give them to a museum.

The only things you should file are the things you could reasonably be expected to look at again within the next few years. Otherwise, what's the point in keeping it? Filing something could also mean putting it in a temporary file. However, be careful about this. It is too easy to fill your temporary file and then it becomes a mess itself.

When you file things, you don't just stuff the item into a file and put it in the file cabinet. I recommend you label the file properly. The easiest way to do this is to buy a label maker. They run from \$25 – \$50.00 and are very neat and practical. Then you should sort your files alphabetically. Make sure your file cabinet doesn't get too stuffed. If it does, it will discourage you from filing additional items.

Delegate it – Option three is to delegate your item. If you have staff who report to you, this is often easier than if you are the "low man on the totem pole." However, even if no one reports to you, you can still delegate things to others. Perhaps the item doesn't belong to you – return it. If your lawnmower is sitting in a state of disrepair, hand it over to the mechanic to fix. In other words, if you don't have the time to handle something or don't have the ability to handle it, consider giving the item to someone else who can help you. Of course, you may also need to make a notation on your to-do list such as "pick up

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lawn mower." However, delegation can be a great way to get things done.

Get rid of it – There are three basic ways to get rid of something. You can give it away, sell it, or throw it away. Giving something away or throwing it away are the easiest things to do and should be done generously. If you have a four month old stack of newspapers, throw them away. You have to face reality here. If you haven't read the newspaper in four months, you aren't ever likely to read them. Simply throw them away and be done with it. If the item in question has some value, then you can give it away or sell it.

These days it is easier than ever to sell things. Simply visit ebay.com and list your item. Of course, you have now moved the category to the "handle it" category but, at least, you are on your way to getting rid of it.

The clean up process can take a lot of time. Obviously, the bigger the mess, the more effort will be involved in removing the items and applying the four options to each item. However, the reward at the end is well worth it.

At the end of the process, you should be left with a clean work area. The only things that should be left out are the things you are immediately working on. This is very important. At the end of the day, there should be nothing on the top of your desk except your monitor, telephone and minimal accessories such as two pens and two pencils in a holder. If you are cleaning up a shop area, there should be

nothing left on the work surfaces. The only thing that should ever be on top of a work space should be the one thing you are actively engaged in. Everything else that you are currently working on should be filed or delegated to someone else.

Paul Holstein is the developer of CableOrganizer.com, a site dedicated to providing all the products you need to eliminate your cable clutter. Please visit <http://cableorganizer.com> for more information.

How to Motivate Yourself to Organize

By Barbara Myers

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Organizing is probably not at the top of your list of fun things to do, is it? If your clutter is overwhelming, it's especially difficult to get started. Here are some easy tips to motivate yourself to organize.

1. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step." You don't have to organize your whole house today. Just work on one small area--

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a drawer or a cabinet.

2. Buy a good organizing book. Once you begin reading it, you'll feel compelled to start organizing.
3. Forget embarrassment. Invite an organized friend to help you. Hire a professional. It's easier to organize when you can talk through the clutter.
4. Set the mood. Put on some fun music. Open the windows. Choose a starting point and just do it.
5. "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence," said Calvin Coolidge. Keep trying. Do a little bit daily or weekly and you'll soon find that you are more organized than you ever thought possible!

Free time management tips booklet, meal planner, and daily organizing checklist at <http://www.ineedmoretime.com>.



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