



Of the Importance of Organizing

By Karin Vibe-Rheymer-Stewart

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Spring is the time to get your equipment out of storage and prepare it for the upcoming golfing season. As an amateur golfer, I am sure that you prepared, cleaned and repaired before storing your equipment for the winter, and that you will make sure that everything is still in order when you take it out. Will you do the same with your office? Do you regularly make sure that what you file (store) is ready and still up-to-date (i.e. in working condition) when you need it again? Do you inspect your office for problems on a regular basis?

Today, the typical businessperson sees 190 pieces of information crossing his or her desk; a misplaced document takes on average one hour to find; and executives spend about an hour each day looking for things they need – on top of the time spent by their assistant on the same type of task. This translates into 4 to 6 weeks out of the year spent just looking for something.

A generation ago, this kind of wasted time did not overly matter. Our parents received in one week the amount of mail we now receive in one day; we were not expected to make near-instant decisions; we were not expected to answer every query we receive within 24 hours, or return a document within the same time frame. The speed of things being slower, a little bit of disorganization did not drastically impact the bottom line. Today, we live in the era of the information age and instant communication. This new landscape makes personal and company-wide paper and time management crucial tools in wrestling every bit of productivity to make a difference. At the individual level, mastering those skills can make the difference between being overwhelmed or being able to go home at a decent hour at the end of the day.

For instance, the owner of a small business told me that he estimated the time wasted looking for things at 6 man-hours a day. A retailer who hired me to set up a filing system for the back office of her store – she had none – found out at the end of the exercise that she had missed information to give to her accountant, and thus that the store accounting was not accurate.

The art of organizing is unfortunately not taught in school or in college, but is a necessary skill to have in today's workplace – or home. Some early trend-setters recognized that need about 30 years ago, and started consulting in the area of physical organization and time management. Books have been written on the subject for at least 20 years, with increasing success. In 1985, a new professional association – and a new profession – were created when 16 individuals founded the National Association of Professional Organizers (www.napo.net). In the past 10 years, the



need for more advanced organizing tools has been recognized both by individuals and companies, and both book publications on the subject and NAPO membership have exploded.

All the books and professional organizers will start with the same basic principles:

- Get rid of the clutter: We tend to accumulate over the years, and not get rid of things that have outlasted their use, or never had one to begin with. On a desk, that can mean reducing a stack of 200 pens to a more manageable 20. In a filing system, it is tossing all the outdated files, all the reference information that is outdated or that you know you won't use again. In a kitchen, it's getting rid of those specialty pots and pans that you never use, for instance.
- Organize your workspace and keep everything and everyone that relates to this activity in that zone: On a desk, this translates in having your phone, your address book, a notebook and a pen all close to each other, for instance. In a filing system, this can mean putting all the clients files in the same drawer. In a kitchen, keeping the pots and pans together and close to the stove, where you will use them.
- Place things according to how often to access them, keeping the most used items within easy range, and least used ones farther away: Again, on a desk that can mean having the computer and the phone on the main surface within hand's reach, while the office supplies can be relegated to a shelf in a closet. In a filing system, it translates into having a "hot files" system on or in your desk, while your historical files are stored in a filing cabinet in the company filing area. In the kitchen, items you use often are between hip and shoulder level, those used only rarely on the highest and lowest cabinet shelves.
- Organize your time as well as your space: The rules above also apply to time organization. Getting rid of clutter is getting rid of all the tasks on our To Do lists that could be done by someone else, or that are not really worth our time. Organizing our workspace becomes organizing our day, deciding what we will do that day and when. Organizing in zones translates in grouping similar tasks together – it saves time to group phone calls or trips to the fax machine, for instance.

There are several ways of organizing yourself and your company. One is to just sit down with what I wrote, plan and do it. Another one is to look for ideas, advice and information in some of the books written on the subject. *Organizing Your Home Business Made E-Z*, by Lisa Kanarek is a good starting point for a home office or a self-employed professional. *Order from Chaos*, by Liz Davenport, is another very good resource for individuals; it has the advantage of keeping things simple. Very useful for corporate offices and a classic is Kiplinger's *Taming the Paper Tiger at Work*, by Barbara Hemphill. If you are a creative person who hates files, *Organizing for the Creative Person*, by Dorothy Lehmkuhl and Dolores Cotter Lamping is a good solution. If you have tried several systems and none worked, *It's Hard to Make a Difference when You Can't Find Your Keys*, by Marilyn Paul, is a good starting point.

The downside of a book is that the author usually presents the organizing system that he or she likes most, and it may or may not correspond to the way you work and think. If it does not, this system is a dysfunctional system that will not serve its purpose. Alternatively, it may work for you, but not answer some of the more specific organizing details you need. A way to sidestep this



trail-and-error process is to hire a professional organizer. A professional organizer will collaborate with and assist you in finding the system that works for you and your specific needs. An organizer can also find your true need – I had the case of a client who called me for a paper issue, but her paper clutter was the result of a time management problem and, when we solved this one, the paper management issue disappeared on its own.

Whichever method you choose to get organized, your office can be just as organized as - or even better organized than – your golf equipment.

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