

Organize Your Office – Strategies for Working Effectively

Let's admit we spend more time than we want to in our offices, both at work and at home. It would be great to think that all those hours are spent on productive, engaging activities designed to advance our personal and career goals. The reality is that many of us spend several hours each week searching for papers and files we need, on our desks or in our computer. Many of us avoid our offices altogether for reasons of dislike or inconvenience, and end up spread out on the conference room or dining room table.

Our workflow is disrupted by distractions around us, many of which can be eliminated by simplifying and streamlining our space, and by utilizing organizing tools to enhance our productivity. Being organized is not just about being tidy, but about re-engineering our space to bring about greater function. When we function better, we embrace the creative process so critical to the success of our pursuits and endeavors. Now isn't that worth all those hours?

Assess What You Do

If your office needs to function better, start with a simple assessment of the activities you perform daily. Think about how your office should perform for you. Take a few minutes to evaluate your space, with pen and paper, and map out what you do, where you do it, and what you need to support those activities. This process helps visualize what support systems are missing or not currently working for you in your space.

Typically, most people perform one or more of the following activities in their office:

- Computer/Electronic Work
 - Writing/Project Work
 - Reading/Research
 - Filing
 - Conduct Meetings
- ▶ Do you have equipment placed effectively?
 - ▶ Do you have a suitable desk?
 - ▶ Is there proper lighting and reference storage?
 - ▶ Do you have a system that works?
 - ▶ Can you accommodate others comfortably?

Consider what support systems you need to improve function and focus on one "zone" at a time. For example, if electronic equipment is taking up valuable desktop space, consider a printer stand placed below or next to your desk to house these items. Also, keep in mind your working style as you evaluate what you do and how well your office works. Do you routinely put things away? (No? What gets in the way?) Do ideas come to you more easily while on your feet, moving about? (If so, consider a new layout.) Is it easier to remember your tasks with a visual cue? (Utilize wallboards or other visual helpers.)

If you hate to file papers or are intimidated by traditional filing systems (thereby causing piles to multiply), consider alternatives that create order and promote efficiency but work with your style. Some examples include subject binders, literature sorters, open shelving with trays or magazine files. One person I read about who was dealing with a major paper backlog implemented a "system" of two boxes, one labeled "super duper important" and the other "not so important." That may be an extreme case, and not one I would encourage for

everyone, but it worked for her! By assessing your office with your habits, behaviors, and preferences in mind, you can create a functional space suited just for you.

Remove anything from your space that is unrelated to what you do now

Once you assess what you really do (and how you work) in your office, achieve greater function by removing materials (including furniture) that do not meet your needs or support your active projects and goals. Is your filing cabinet bulging with papers from past years? Is your active bookshelf cluttered with knick-knacks and unused office supplies? If you have a home office, do other family members consistently store unrelated items there? Papers, files, books and other materials that are not relevant to current work projects should be moved out of the space, or at least out of your active drawers, shelves and surfaces. A simplified, streamlined space will improve your productivity and be easier to maintain organizing systems.

To tame the paper animal that resides in most of our offices, routinely engage in these tasks:

- ✓ Weed out papers that are no longer relevant;
- ✓ Purge unused or outdated papers and reference material (old notes, drafts);
- ✓ Archive old files in separate storage file boxes (labeled) and move out;
- ✓ Keep only current year documents and projects in your active file drawers.

Equip your space with the essentials to make it functional

Now that you've streamlined your office by ridding it of unnecessary things, the next step is to implement your ideal office arrangement. Revisit your written office plan (assessment, see above) and focus on one activity area at a time. Evaluate what is missing or dysfunctional in your space and fix it. For example, are you working on a folding table or at a desk that was inherited from your son's bedroom? Be sure you have a proper desk that works for you, and accommodates necessary items. The traditional desk layout with a standard file drawer, keyboard tray, and utility drawer is a good match for most users. Do you have essential supplies and active papers within reach? Is there a comfortable chair and good lighting? When your environment is comfortable and pleasing, it's more likely you will spend time there, even if it's only to pay the bills!

If your office is home to both personal and business files and projects, be sure to designate separate locations for each. Examples include file drawers, or desktop organizers such as a desktop file, large sorter, or an incline step file to locate multiple folders for at-a-glance accessibility. This allows you to easily file or locate action items that are distinct from one another. When you are ready to switch gears, you accomplish tasks more quickly because you know exactly where to locate what you need.

Below are some other tips for transforming your office into a better-functioning space:

- ✓ Use a separate cart or surface for electronic equipment and printers, not your desk;
- ✓ Use stacking inbox trays for paper supplies and stationary used regularly and store at point of use;
- ✓ Actively use a shredder, and locate a recycling container near your desk;



- ✓ Use vertical space wisely with a desk hutch or riser, to locate more items within reach;
- ✓ Actively use a bookshelf or storage shelves for supporting materials:
 - Reference books and binders
 - Magazines, journals, soft bound reports, and directories
 - Excess supplies (contained on shelf, or in cupboard/closet)
 - CD's and software (stored in media containers)

Tailor your office to work how you think

Traditional organizing systems are not geared to every personality type and personal work style, but you can adapt your environment to support how you work best.

Not the type to use a file drawer? Consider an open, mobile file cart; wall pockets or some of the desktop file solutions mentioned above.

Do you have trouble keeping track of multiple assignments and due dates? Track progress visually by using wallboard solutions such as whiteboards, bulletin boards or large calendars, or use a portable notebook to keep these reminders in one place.

Do you constantly battle piles on and around your desk? Employ products designed for paper management, such as clear-view, tabbed pocket folders or expandable project files. Another solution for tackling piles is to use desktop products such as incline step files and dividers, designed to keep papers vertical (i.e., visual). Also, using colored folders to code projects and subjects allows for easier retrieval. One client developed a successful system using this method: green/financial; blue/company files; orange/special projects; yellow/marketing; red/reference. The more creative the organizing system, the more it reflects your style – a sure bet for success.

If you would like to discuss specific office organizing goals or need help to get started, contact Clearing House to schedule an organizing session. We will help you design and implement a system that meets individual needs.