

CLEARING OUT CLUTTER - New Year a Good Time to Get Rid of Useless Paperwork and Computer Files, and Organize What You Keep

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Throwing pieces of paper away. Deleting old e-mail. . . . If not among life's great pleasures, perhaps they are the joys of January.

Outside, it's cold. Inside, it's paper -- piles of paper, paper in the kitchen drawer, in every file drawer, in every shoebox. Everywhere there's paper. You do have file folders, don't you? And if you do have file folders, have you heard of emptying them once in a while? Your hard drive, meanwhile, is so cluttered that if you store one more photo of the kids, it will crash for all time.

Here is the joy part. You take a morning (knowing that maybe this really will take an entire day), and you throw stuff out. You fill big grocery bags with paper you do not need. You go into your computer, and you purge it of the digital arteriosclerosis that is clogging the works -- zillions of useless files plastered all over the hard drive.

There! You feel good about yourself. You have self-worth again. You have rehabbed your organizational id.

"Just seeing things going out the door, the clutter, the stuff you no longer need, is like a weight being lifted," said Faith Manierre of Glastonbury, president of the Connecticut chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers and owner of Busy Bees Professional Organizing.

Manierre, of course, took note of a recent incident in New York City in which a man was trapped in his apartment for two days when his massive stacks of old newspapers, which he could not bear to part with, collapsed on him.

"This is real. I deal with people who are in that situation," Manierre said.

Once she asked a client in desperate need of organization why she kept a newspaper that was three years old.

"I haven't read it yet," the woman replied.

So, it is January; the clock is reset; time for a fresh start. It is a time when there actually may be time. It is a wonderful time of the year. January is a good time to sit back and reflect. A little nesting time, a little quiet time.

"You are not preparing for the holidays," Manierre said.

Likewise, Jim Smith, president of the BPMUG computer user group and owner of BlarneyStone Internet services, likes to celebrate the New Year with the digital version of housecleaning (or shall we call it "mousecleaning"?). He likes to blip from his hard drive all the now-useless files,

the scores of temporary files and cookies, and the ancient e-mail, especially those festooned with space-gobbling attachments.

Filing System

A first step, whether removing paper or cyberdigits, is a filing system. A pile of papers at one end of the kitchen counter does not qualify as a filing system. Nor does a chest-high pile of papers in the corner of a bedroom.

A lot of problems come along with lack of decision-making abilities," Manierre said. "For example, if you get a promotional flier for new windows, and you can't decide on the spot whether you actually have any need for new windows, then you can't throw that paper away."

Onto the pile it goes, when, in all likelihood, it ought to be dispatched to the recycling bin. The problem comes when you need to find something. It's in one of those stacks of paper. But perhaps you do not even know which pile of paper. For the deeply disorganized, it can be overwhelming.

"It is painful; it is stressful. They waste tremendous amounts of time. There are lots of feelings of incompetence," Manierre said. One client used to scoop up piles of paper before hosting a party and hide them under a bed.

Manierre said it is a growing problem fueling a growing industry; there are now about 50 organizers in Connecticut affiliated with the National Association of Professional Organizers.

For household management, even for single people, some sort of file folder system is an essential first step.

"The average homeowner has a two-drawer filing system," Manierre said. Whether it is used effectively or not is another matter. Many people organize files alphabetically, but there are many variations, and people should think about their needs when fashioning a system," Manierre said.

Basically, she says, the best system is the one that makes sense for you, but it should be carefully thought out. A suggestion: Put heavily used files in the top drawer, little used files, such as product warranties, in the bottom drawer.

Before filing something, ask, "Why do I need it?" Once a sensible working file system is created, the trick then is to sternly police what gets in there. Even then, "you have to understand that 80 percent of what goes in will never be accessed again," Manierre said. "The problem is, we don't know the 20 percent we are going to want."

Even the best filing system needs to be purged, however, and the new year is ideal. Income tax preparation time is looming, and it can be an occasion to pull together needed documents while shedding others that now have no value.

Manierre knows people who have their monthly electric bills from 1986, thinking that if they ever go to sell their house, it will be helpful to explain to potential buyers what energy costs are. Toss' em, she says. That can be done with a phone call. Receipts? Manierre suggests reconciling credit card receipts with the monthly statement, and stapling the two together before filing them. Now would be a good time to go back and look at statements from recent years, tossing out receipts that no longer need be kept, such as the one for the boombox that was thrown away a year ago.

Computer Clean-Up

Smith uses the arrival of the New Year as a reminder to clean out computers. He suggests searching through directories for any word processing or other files that are no longer needed and deleting them. E-mail should be cleaned out. Temporary files should be cleaned out. He suggests using disk cleanup in Windows and, once files are cleaned up, defragmenting the hard drive.

"That is one of the most overlooked and helpful things you can do for your computer," he said.

Another way to deal with digital clutter is organizational. While it is simple to create folders to hold certain kinds of documents -- a folder for letters you have sent, a folder for your seventh-grader's homework -- most people let all files pile up in the default folder called "My Documents." It becomes a big, unwieldy mess.

"Think of your hard drive as being your file cabinet," Smith said. "Set up folders within your cabinet."