

# organize today!

Ideas and tips to help you live  
an organized, simpler life at work and home

## Productivity Tips for Work

According to *The Overload Syndrome* by Richard Swenson, the average desk worker has 36 hours of work on his or her desk. If that sounds like you, fear not! This issue of *Organize Today* features some simple yet effective tips to increase productivity at work by being more organized.

By becoming more organized, you'll not only help your business run better, but you'll reap multiple personal rewards as well. When you can find what you need, are on top of your to-do's, and make good use of your time, you'll feel calmer and have more peace of mind.

## Get time on your side



One great way to increase productivity is to better manage your time. **To begin, get an accurate gauge of the *real time* it takes to accomplish a variety of routine responsibilities.** Use a kitchen timer to measure time spent on your work activities. You'll likely discover that most unpleasant tasks don't take as long as you think they will. And most pleasant things tend to drag out a bit longer than you'd expect. Then, use this information to help schedule future tasks. If checking and returning phone messages takes an hour each day (who knew?), then block off that amount of time for phone calls. Clearing off your desk by filing papers may seem like an unending job, but in reality, it may take only ten minutes. Now it seems more manageable!

**Then, become more productive by avoiding interruptions.** Did you know that the average office worker is interrupted 73 times every day? Be prepared for these obstacles by setting aside time each day for "open office hours," and let your colleagues know they can drop by during this time for assistance. Use your lower-energy hours as your open office hours so you don't waste peak productivity periods. That way, you can devote time when your energy is highest to plow through your absolutely-must-do tasks. Close your door or consider putting up a "do not disturb" sign outside your doorway to let office mates know when you need privacy. Of course, emergencies will pop up occasionally, but by following these guidelines, your productivity will soar.

# Email efficiency

According to The Radicati Group, business email users spend an average of 19% of their workday using email. That can be up to two hours every day, so learn to use it effectively!

## Stop scanning emails and leaving them to deal with

**“later.”** Instead, schedule time just twice each day to check and manage emails. Checking once at noon and again in the mid-afternoon work well, because at these times you’ll likely have received replies to your previously sent messages. Also, shut off the auto-check function so you’re not tempted to open emails as they arrive.

**Read each message thoroughly, then act, file, delete, or pass along.** Act on it if it's a quick response (less than two minutes). Create and use files in your email program for your individual projects, committees, or people with whom you interact. Immediately delete emails that were simply informative but do not require any action from you and forward (delegate) emails that you don’t need to handle, and then delete.

**Use your email’s auto-responder to get people quick answers.** Let them know when you’re returning messages for the day and whom they can

contact if they need immediate assistance while you’re away.

**Try using the “filters” or “rules” function to set up automatic email filing.** This will sort your emails based on your specified guidelines, placing them in separate folders. You might send all the informative monthly e-newsletters you receive into one folder, or all emails for select clients or colleagues into another. And make use of your “junk” or “spam” filter!

**Short cut by creating automatic signatures.** There’s no need to type your name, title, and phone number at the bottom of each email. Set it up once and let your computer automatically attach your signature to all outgoing emails.

**Save time by writing succinctly.** Both you and your email recipients will benefit if you get to the point quickly! (But always take time to use proper punctuation, grammar, and spelling.) If it would be easier to reply to an email in person or over the phone, do it.

**From here on out, promise to keep your inbox clean.** It is not a holding bin!



## Increase productivity with an effective work area

The average office worker spends 2000 hours per year at her desk. Make that space easy to use by gathering items that you use most frequently and storing them within easy reach of your usual seated position. Items that you use less frequently can be placed outside this area so they don’t clutter your work area, but they should still be easily accessible. For things you rarely use, consider getting rid of them, storing them outside your office, or stashing them farther away from your desk, saving your “prime real estate” for the most-used supplies. Past projects (or those far off into the future) should be neatly filed away. Remember to get rid of anything outdated or unneeded. Clutter breeds chaos. If you’re short on space, discover more by looking up, down, and inside: Stash supplies in a plastic storage bin under your desk, install shelving above your desk for 3-ring binders and literature boxes, and/or corral (and hide) clutter in attractive boxes and baskets.



# Task management

## Smart planning makes quick work of your to-do's



Your desk is piled high with to-do's. It's easy to stall out when you don't know where or how to begin. Follow these guidelines to increase productivity and tackle your projects big and small!

**DO THE HARDEST THING FIRST.** When you arrive at the office, you may be tempted to first check your messages, rifle through the day's mail, or plow through some easy administrative tasks. Instead, try doing the hardest, most challenging (or least enjoyable) thing earlier in the day. You'll be attacking it when your energy level is high and your mind is clear. By carving out a chunk of time each morning to tackle heavy-duty projects, you'll also avoid the procrastination often associated with large jobs. Then, save your easier tasks for later in the day, when your energy level is lower. Another way to look at this is to set your mind to "proactive" in the morning so you'll have time for the "reactive" moments that are sure to pop up throughout the day. For example, if you begin your day attending to your "must-do" tasks, you'll feel more comfortable stepping away from your desk when afternoon emergencies materialize. You'll know that your most pressing projects have been handled. Remember, it may not always be easy to start with the hard stuff, but you'll get the momentum going when you start it out right, and you'll feel accomplished all day long.

### **CLEAR THE CLUTTER OUT OF YOUR BRAIN.**

The average desk worker spends three hours per week sorting piles trying to find the project to work on next. Take the first step to getting your work under control — clear the clutter out of your brain

by taking pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) and allow to-do's and brilliant ideas to become more concrete. You'll relieve your brain of remembering tedious details, allowing new, creative thinking to develop. Free yourself from having to remember mundane but necessary tasks: Create a running list of phone calls to make, things to discuss with your assistant or coworkers, supplies to get, and other small-detail tasks. Create another list for brainstorming, creative planning, and "someday" ideas. Avoid storing lists in multiple areas, which will only confuse you. Centralize them in one place, such as your planner, in a spiral-bound notebook, or on your computer or PDA. Another benefit to making a list of all your responsibilities is that you may find some jobs that you could delegate to others. Are there any you hate doing, or do you know someone else who could do it quicker or better? Sometimes we say "yes" because we want to appear productive and energetic. But it's important to know how much work you can realistically handle.

### **PLAN FOR TOMORROW AT THE END OF TODAY.**

Take 15 minutes at the end of every day to create tomorrow's to-do list. This habit of planning will give you the gift of focus, allowing you to get a jump-start the next morning. In a sense, you're creating a map for the following day. By writing down everything that needs to be accomplished tomorrow, you can prioritize so urgent needs get done. When you walk in the door the next morning, you won't have to waste time shuffling papers and trying to figure out what to do first. The process of writing (or typing) down your thoughts will help you relax at home as well — you'll think about work a lot less knowing it's all down on paper. It's also a great exercise that allows you to reflect on the great work you accomplished today, so you can leave work feeling proud.



## Paper Productivity 101

Even with all the technology in our offices — computers, PDAs, email, internet — there is more paper being used these days than ever before. In fact, every year,

the average U.S. office employee generates nearly 10,000 sheets of paper. We're on paper overload!

Don't let it take over your office — keep only that which you truly need. (Remember, 80% of what we file is never looked at again.) Resolve to deal with your papers on a regular basis. Whether first thing in the morning, at the end of the day, or somewhere in between, set aside 30 minutes each day so you don't

end up with overwhelming piles. For every piece of paper that you encounter, make an immediate decision to either toss it, file it, or act on it. Then, make time each day to file your “keepers.” Although it may not be your favorite task, filing as you go will probably take only a few minutes and will make your office life much less stressful and more productive. If you can't act on the simpler papers right away, keep them in a “quick-task to-do” file, and deal with them regularly so they don't pile up. For larger, long-term projects, put each one into a separate file folder. To minimize future paper clutter, don't hit “print” unless absolutely necessary. Keep electronic files rather than hard copies. Then, don't forget to categorize and contain these files for easy retrieval later. E-file clutter is nearly as bad as paper clutter!



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