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Supporting a Healthy Organization

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GETTING ORGANIZED: MANAGING YOUR STUFF, MANAGING YOUR TIME

In the last issue of the Messenger, we looked at the challenge of maintaining a healthy work-life balance. It's not easy: our schedules burst at the seams with professional and family responsibilities; electronic devices keep us tethered to a ceaseless flow of information and obligation. And Americans put in longer hours with fewer vacation days than workers in any other industrialized nation.

How can we capture some breathing room to make our days a little less hectic and have a little more time to relax and pursue activities we enjoy? In the late 1990's, a cultural trend emerged toward "downshifting" to slower-paced careers and adopting "simple living" approaches that de-emphasized material possessions. But there is also a much less radical strategy for gaining a greater sense of freedom and control: getting organized!

According to professional organizer Julie Morgenstern, "Most studies show that we lose an average of one to two hours per day searching for missing items in messy files, closets and stacks." Getting rid of excess clutter would eliminate 40% of the housework in an average home. Disorganization causes "crisis purchases" - buying duplicates of misplaced items, paying late fees on lost bills - that may add 15-20% to the family budget.

We know that mess causes stress, but conquering it seems burdensome, overwhelming, even hopeless. Morgenstern argues that the process is empowering, even fun, "because it produces a gratifying sense of clarity, focus and accomplishment."


She lays out a three-step method for organizing anything, from a small closet to a busy schedule. First, analyze the current situation: look at where you are now; decide what is working and what needs fixing; and, most importantly, be ruthlessly honest in assessing your practical and psychological obstacles to change. Second, strategize: develop an action plan and realistic timetable for doing the work. Finally, attack the problem: dive in and create visible change that reflects your values and priorities.

Purging physical clutter is a great place to start, because it frees up space and time. Start small. Little changes help you work up to bigger ones, and successfully completing a small project builds momentum for tackling larger tasks. Organizational consultant Marcia Ramsland says that even her busiest clients can manage her 52-week simplifying technique: reorganize just one drawer or shelf per week.

There is a wealth of expert advice to guide you. The key is putting a system into place



that feels right for you. Keep what works and change what doesn't. And enjoy the feeling of taking charge of your stuff and your schedule. No more desperate hunts for lost items or frantic last-minute errands. What will you do with all the extra time?



6 Second Summary:

- ❶ Any organizing system - whether for managing paper at the office, clearing clutter around the house, or fitting tasks into the daily schedule - must reflect your personality and match your needs.
- ❷ Successful time management helps you maintain physical and emotional stamina by building "white space" into every day: breathing room both as a cushion for the unexpected and as time to regroup.
- ❸ The excessive connectivity of modern technology can actually become a drain on productivity. Establishing guidelines on when and how often you can be reached creates a smoother and saner pace to daily life.

TIME MANAGEMENT: BREATHING ROOM ON THE SCHEDULE

"Calendar overload exacts a heavy price," warns organizer Marcia Ramsland. "The 'big push' to attend everything and please everyone" is exhausting and ultimately self-defeating.

Fatigue and sleep deprivation are epidemic in our 24/7 world. Some people see a hectic schedule as a mark of their importance, a "busyness badge of courage." But most people are aware of the serious health consequences, and would gladly trade their overloaded days for some much-needed down time and a few extra ZZZ's.

Even if you can't cut back work hours or other major commitments, simple time management strategies can help you maintain a more balanced schedule. The central principle, according to Ramsland: "Guard your calendar to reflect the pace of life that you can personally handle."

Build "white space" into every day. At maximum, 70% of the day should be reserved for planned activities; a 30% cushion allows for unexpected events - traffic, an emergency, last-minute assignment, forgotten errand, or meeting that runs long. Remember that every

day requires some down time, if only to regroup and prepare for tomorrow.

Plan both vertically - sequencing tasks efficiently during the day - and horizontally - looking at the week and month ahead, and pacing your schedule realistically. Say 'no' promptly and firmly to activities that would overcommit you. And keep in mind that multi-tasking is a myth. To do anything well, we can only do one thing at a time. And we do things best when we are relaxed, focused and well rested: all qualities that better time management can help us achieve.

TAMING THE E-MAIL TIGER

A decade ago, e-mail barely existed. Today, many of us feel like we are drowning in it. We are barely able to keep our heads above the torrential flow of messages flooding our inboxes faster than we can empty them.

Processing e-mail has begun to devour huge chunks of time: purging spam; deciphering hastily written, typo-laden notes; wading through unnecessarily CC'ed memos; trying to compose appropriate responses - thoughtful, witty or compassionate - tailored to whatever each situation requires.

E-mail has tremendous advantages. It's free, it's fast and it saves forests full of trees. But used indiscriminately, it is a productivity tool turned on its head: a terrible drain on your time, focus and energy. Here are some tips for using e-mail more efficiently:

- ☞ Insist that your office or workgroup develop an e-mail policy to cut down on excess correspondence. It should cover topics like forwarding, CC'ing, mailing lists and e-mail etiquette.
- ☞ Before writing an e-mail, decide if phoning or dropping by a colleague's desk would resolve the issue more speedily. A three-minute conversation might replace 30 minutes of back-and-forth typing time.
- ☞ If at all possible, limit the number of times per day you check your inbox and process e-mail. Advise clients and colleagues to pick up the phone if they have an urgent need to reach you.
- ☞ Take every available avenue to minimize spam. Place filters at the most restrictive settings. Choose long user names combining letters and numbers. Get a free web-based e-mail address (like Hotmail or Yahoo) to use when registering at websites so you NEVER receive website junk mail at your work or home inbox.
- ☞ Give out your e-mail address sparingly. Politely ask associates to use the "blind carbon copy" (BCC) address line when sending you an e-mail that goes to a list of recipients. That way, your address won't end up with dozens (or hundreds!) of people who don't need it.
- ☞ Write clear, concise e-mails and keep your responses brief and to the point. Don't respond to a message that doesn't require an answer.
- ☞ Take action the first time you read a message: respond, file or delete.
- ☞ If possible, don't process e-mail at the beginning of the work day. It can delay you from tackling more urgent tasks, and facing a jammed inbox can feel overwhelming, even depressing.

As electronic connectivity continues to grow, we have to make conscious choices about what role e-devices will play in our lives. Will they be tools or tethers? E-mail is a powerful animal - a tiger that requires us to keep a firm grip on its leash.

RESOURCES

Julie Morgenstern, Organizing from the Inside Out. [New York: Henry Holt, 1998.]

A comprehensive, step-by-step approach to developing organizing strategies that suit your individual style. Emphasizes analyzing and overcoming roadblocks that prevent you from becoming more organized.

Julie Morgenstern, Time Management from the Inside Out. [New York: Henry Holt, 2000.]

Applies her commonsense advice on organizing stuff to managing time.

Marcia Ramsland, Simplify Your Life: Get Organized and Stay That Way! [Nashville: W Publishing, 2003.]

Focuses on easy-to-apply techniques for streamlining schedules and clutter at home and at work.

Debra A. Dinnocenzo and Richard B. Swegan, Dot Calm: The Search for Sanity in a Wired World. [San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2001.]

A must-have manual for understanding how the hyperconnectivity of information technology has changed the way we work and live. Provides practical survival strategies for using e-devices wisely.



Employee Assistance Program

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