

GETTING ORGANIZED

Mary Colak, CMC—June 2007

The most frequently cited “reasons” that I hear for overflowing filing baskets, in-baskets and e-mail inboxes is that “it’s not a priority,” “I’m too busy with other work,” or “IT has given me lots of space for my e-mail inbox, so I don’t see why I can’t keep storing all my e-mail there.” Puzzling for those of us who are behind the “organized” ball, but nonetheless troubling. I have, on occasion, tried to gently persuade people that purging their e-mail inbox will help them be more productive by decreasing their search and retrieval time for items. I have always been sympathetic to people’s personal work habits and tried not to tell people how to do their work. Sure, personal work styles do play a big role in how people organize their work and their lives, but there are ways to get organized—beyond the excuses!

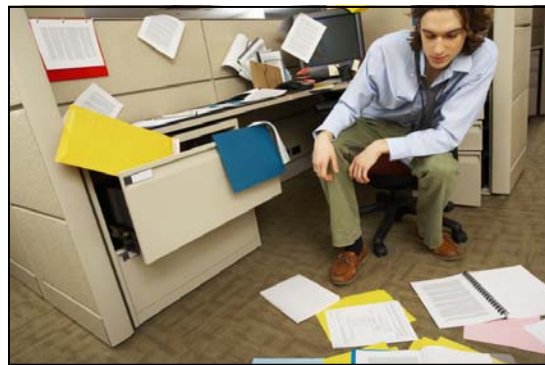
What does it mean to be “organized,” you ask? To organize and to become organized is not a one-time occurrence. According to Jocelyn Coverdale of Ballantrae Solutions, being organized is a process. Of course, as those of use who are organized know, this does not occur overnight and it also involves a dedicated mindset. Ms. Coverdale offers several strategies to eliminate timewasters and self-defeating behaviours and obstacles to personal productivity. Let’s explore some of these strategies.

Organizing Your Workspace

Consider your workspace to be comprised of five zones:

- ◆ Zone 1—this is your immediate work area such as your desktop including your telephone, computer, printer and anything else that happens to be within arm’s reach.
- ◆ Zone 2—this is the area in your workspace that you can reach by swiveling around in your chair—for instance, reaching for a filing cabinet behind you.
- ◆ Zone 3—this zone is still in your office, but in order to get to it, you need to get out of your chair (perhaps walking over to a bookcase on the other side of your desk).
- ◆ Zone 4—this is shared office space such as a supply closet on your floor.
- ◆ Zone 5—this is offsite such as the archives.

In order to use these zones effectively, it is recommended that you *organize* your work within the zones based on how frequently you access or need that item (e.g., if you use a paper cutter only once a month, there is no need for it to be in Zone 1—maybe it should reside in Zone 4). By moving as many items out of Zone 1 to more appropriate zones based on their frequency of use, you will achieve a more aesthetically-pleasing office as well as improve your overall productivity.



Processing Incoming Items

Once you’ve organized your physical workspace, you will need to develop a *habit* of reviewing your work daily and allocating your work to certain “buckets.” Two indispensable buckets will be Trash and the In-basket. If you consider that up to 80 percent of the information that we receive is never viewed again, then you know the importance of the recycle, trash or out-box (for filing).

Do you need an In-basket? Well, if you find that people leave things on your desk or your chair when you’re not around, you probably do need an in-basket to help organize your office space. However, be careful...your in-basket should not be used as a storage bin—it should be used as a processing station only! This applies to your e-mail inbox, also. The e-mail inbox is not a storage bin, “to do” list, or a reference resource.

Consider that there are five sources of incoming items: paper, e-mail, voice mail, external requests and your thoughts. For each one of them, you need to make a decision. The first decision (the hardest) is to decide whether you need to discard the item. How do you know? Well, ask yourself if you will ever need it again (be brutally honest!) and if you will need it again, can you get it from another source? If it isn't a document that you wrote and you can get it from another source, then chances are that you can discard it.

Other decisions to make when you are processing your incoming items is whether you can delegate the work, do you need to act on it (and if so, when—develop a follow-up system for doing so if required) and the final decision is whether you need to keep the item for reference purposes (in which case, if it's not a "to be filed" item, keep it in your own reference library/file in your office).

Managing Your Time

There are four big time wasters: meetings, interruptions, procrastination and lost stuff! How do we handle each of these? Well, not much we can do with meetings, but we can control the others. Did you know that YOU interrupt yourself the most? How? By allowing external items to break your concentration. Here are some strategies for handling interruptions:

- ◆ Arrange your office so that you don't notice external things so much (someone just walked by your office, caught your eye, and now you're in conversation).
- ◆ Set aside uninterrupted time each day to work on important tasks. Let people know that you are not to be interrupted.
- ◆ Monitor self-interruptions—if thoughts pop into your head, use a "parking lot" and jot the idea down or capture it in your PDA.

In order to better manage our time, Coverdale suggests the "96-Minute Technique." This is based on the Pareto Principle (80/20 Rule—20 percent of our efforts produce 80 percent of our results) and simply says that 20 percent of an 8-hour day is 96 minutes. Use that 96 minutes as

On average, Americans spend:

- ◆ 11 years watching television
- ◆ 5 years standing in line
- ◆ 2 years returning phone calls
- ◆ 8 months opening direct mail
- ◆ 6 years eating
- ◆ 4 years on major household chores
- ◆ 1 year searching for misplaced items

your "uninterrupted" time to work on your most important tasks—turn off the e-mail, telephone, visitors, etc. By doing this on a daily basis, you'll be amazed at how much more productive you can be.

Mindset

Now, here's something that may come as a surprise: multi-tasking, perfectionism, workaholic behavior and procrastination are self-defeating behaviours. "Multi-tasking" is a buzzword of the 80's and 90's and even though some of us think it's good to do many things at once because we can get more done ... surprise! It's counterproductive.

Research suggests that multi-tasking contributes to:

- ◆ Shoddy work
- ◆ Mismanaged time
- ◆ Rote, non-creative solutions
- ◆ Reduced productivity
- ◆ Stress, anxiety and depression
- ◆ Forgetfulness
- ◆ Damage to short-term memory
- ◆ Car wrecks and kitchen fires!

Also, multi-tasking can reduce IQ by 10 points (wow!) and the work can actually take longer to do because you are shifting gears constantly.

Don't multi-task. Instead, create dedicated time for dedicated tasks and stick to it. Remove distractions and get into the flow of the task at hand. Try using the 96 Minute Technique to manage your time.

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Use the "96-Minute Technique" to manage your time. Based on the Pareto Principle (80/20 Rule), it helps you focus 20 percent of your day (or 96 minutes) to accomplish 80 percent of your important work.

While perfectionism is not quite so dramatic in its negative contribution, it does have some serious drawbacks. These include:

- ◆ Poor job performance
- ◆ Decreased productivity
- ◆ Stress, depression and illness
- ◆ Alienated colleagues
- ◆ Accidents

Ways to get over perfectionism—first, fire your inner critic. (We really are our own worst critics!). Next, recognize that there are degrees of excellence. Perfectionists hate anything that’s not excellent, but as long as you’re in the range, that will make it easier to take. Above all, Coverdale says that you should allow rational thinking to prevail—after all, perfectionism is an illusion and good enough sometimes really is good enough.

Now, the workaholic. Unfortunately, while the workaholic might think that it’s “cool” to be a workaholic, they are, in fact, sending out negative messages about themselves. The following are cited to be causes of workaholic behaviours:

- ◆ Setting unrealistic timeframes and deadlines
- ◆ Procrastination to get the job done
- ◆ Spending too much time on things that don’t matter
- ◆ Over-promising
- ◆ Lack of profound knowledge about how to handle the task

And, last, but certainly not least, procrastination. Do you procrastinate? Here are some underlying causes for procrastination:

- ◆ Fear of failure—because you think you won’t succeed, you put off starting the task
- ◆ Fear of success—if you succeed, change will inevitably follow and change can be scary
- ◆ Dodging discomfort—you don’t like the task
- ◆ Lacking skills—perhaps some training is required, but you don’t know who to ask
- ◆ The “later will be better” habit—this does not always work in your favour.
- ◆ Moods and emotions—just simply not feeling like doing it right now.

So how can we overcome procrastination? Well, there are a few things that Coverdale suggests would be beneficial. The following table outlines some strategies for overcoming procrastination.

Try replacing procrastination “self-talk” with productive thinking:

Procrastinating ...	Productive ...
I must (or) have to (or something awful will happen...)	I’d like to (or) choose to ...
I’ve gotta finish ...	When can I get started on ...
This job is enormous ...	Where is the best place to start?
I must do well (fantastic, perfect)	I’ll do okay; I’ll give it time
I have no time to play	It’s important to play one hour
I see life and work as a grind	Life and work can be fun
I can’t succeed	I have a better chance of succeeding if I ...

In summary, get a handle on three aspects of your productivity: your physical workspace, your time and your brain (how you approach work). Organizing and being organized is not a one-off—it’s a process that needs to be practiced over and over in order to become more productive, more efficient, and, generally, more centered.

If you are not organized and have difficulty getting organized, start first with your workspace and work out from there (next is your time schedule followed by your approach). Soon, you’ll discover that you’ll be more productive and have time on your hands that you didn’t have before. ■

