

Getting Organized at Work

Overview

Organizing yourself at work.

- Getting started
- Organizing your paperwork
- Managing e-mail and other communications
- Organizing your time
- Staying organized

When your work life is organized, you're able to be more productive. But getting organized at work takes time and energy. Papers pile up; meetings and deadlines eat up large chunks of your day; and phone calls, co-workers, and e-mail messages all compete for your time. Here are some tips on managing your time and on getting and staying organized at work.

Getting started

It's important to keep in mind that not all time-management approaches work for everybody. The one that works best for you will depend on a number of factors, including your work style and the demands of your job and of your personal life.

- *List your top three goals* in your current position, in the longer-term, and in your personal life. Writing these down will help you identify where to invest your time and allow you to create daily, weekly, and monthly goals.
- *Create an activity log.* Write down everything that you do during a typical workweek. This will help you identify time wasters and take steps to eliminate them. It will also help you refocus your work to meet the goals you identified and see what you're already doing that will bring you closer to your goals.
- *Determine when you're most productive.* Do you do your best work in the morning? In the late afternoon? Knowing when you are most productive will help you organize your time so that you do your most important work when you have the most energy and you save less important tasks for other times.

Organizing your paperwork

- *Keep your desk clear of all but current projects and the items you use everyday.* For some people, a desk clear of all but a few essentials helps them feel in control of their space and makes it easier for them to focus on the task at hand. If you work best with a neat desk, use nearby shelf or cabinet space to display plants, knickknacks, and photographs.
- *Get help setting up an organizational and filing system.* If it is difficult for you to figure out a simple, effective organizational system, consider talking with someone at work who seems to have created a good one. Or read a reference book such as David Allen's bestseller, *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*, for tips that you think will work well for you. If you really feel stuck, you can hire a professional organizer who will evaluate your professional needs and then work with you to develop an effective system.

- *Create a monthly and daily tickler file.* This will serve as an automatic reminder of upcoming tasks, while giving you a home for forms, schedules, correspondence, and other items that must be acted on at a later date.

Managing e-mail and other communications

Checking and responding to e-mails and voice mails throughout the day can eat up valuable time, both in checking and responding to messages and in refocusing on what you were doing before the interruption. Here are ways to manage the flow of messages and other communications at work.

- *Check e-mail just two or three times a day.* Checking e-mail too frequently interrupts your work flow and eats into your productivity. Try checking e-mail when you arrive at work, at lunchtime, and toward the end of the day.
- *Prioritize e-mail.* Respond to urgent messages right away, but create folders on your computer or in your e-mail program for all others. Categorize these messages according to the name of the project or person who sent the mail, the follow-up required, and the time frame for your reply.
- *During busy or rushed times, let your voice mail pick up messages if possible.* Check your voice mail two or three times each day and return calls.
- *Don't use e-mail as a substitute for conversation.* A brief phone call may accomplish what might take several rounds of e-mails, especially when a decision has to be made.
- *Manage interruptions from co-workers during busy times.* If you have an office door and are in a work crunch, close the door to let others know that you are busy. If you don't have a door, post a sign outside your workspace indicating when you will be free, if this is acceptable in your work culture. Or, with a smile and a friendly tone, tell your co-worker, "Bill, I'm looking forward to catching up later, but right now I am working flat-out on a report that is due."

Organizing your time

- *Set priorities and deadlines.* Determine which tasks are most important and do these first. Be sure to give yourself enough time to get the work done but not so much that you don't feel a sense of urgency about it. Be prepared to reprioritize tasks as circumstances change.
- *Arrive at work early or leave late.* If possible, arrange to get work done when others aren't around.
- *Avoid multitasking.* It may seem as though you're accomplishing more if you do two or three things at once, but you will be more productive and produce higher quality work if you give your undivided attention to one task at a time, especially if your tasks require thought or real problem solving.

3 • Getting Organized at Work

- *Do your part to keep meetings productive.* Be on time. Come to the meeting prepared for the topics at hand.
- *Confirm appointments the day before.* This will head off problems caused by miscommunications or scheduling conflicts.
- *Schedule in extra time each day.* Give yourself extra time traveling to and from work so that you don't feel rushed. Try to find a few extra minutes in your schedule each day to organize your thoughts and your things.
- *Set a time limit on tasks you dislike doing.* The task will seem less overwhelming if you know you will stop at a certain time. If it's not possible to set a time limit, break up the task into short chunks of time and do more interesting work in between.
- *Repeat instructions verbally.* Make sure you understand what someone is asking you to do before you actually start the work. Make sure others understand you when you are giving them instructions.
- *Designate a place in your home for items you need for work.* This may be a closet shelf or a drawer in the front-hall table. Leave your work-related items in one place when you come home and you'll know where to find them.
- *Lay out your work clothes the night before.* You'll save time in the morning and avoid last-minute surprises, such as missing buttons or a misplaced umbrella.
- *Pack your lunch the night before.*

Staying organized

- *Do quick tasks immediately.* If you notice that something needs to be picked up or returned to its place, do it right away.
- *Return items to their place when you're through using them.*
- *Keep your workspace supplied with the things you need to do your job.*
- *Use your free time wisely.* When on hold on the telephone, sort the papers on your desk. When waiting for an appointment, catch up on your reading or make your grocery list. Or use these free moments to take a mental break. Then you can get back to work feeling more refreshed and energetic.
- *Do a quick pickup each night before bed.* You'll feel better waking up to a clean and orderly home. And you'll feel more ready for work.

4 • Getting Organized at Work

When you organize your workspace and adopt efficient work habits, you'll find that over time the steps you take to maintain order will become second nature.

Written with the help of Elizabeth Bakken, B.A., M.A. Ms. Bakken has a certificate in organizational development and an extensive background in the fields of human resource development and career coaching. She writes a column, *CareerWise*, on executive career issues for the *Rochester Business Journal*.

© 2003, 2009 Ceridian Corporation. All rights reserved.

010709