

Staying Organized In A Small Office

By Ramona Creel

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You don't have to be Fortune 500 CEO to need a functional office. But many things -- limited room, no support staff, and a tight budget -- can prevent home-based office workers from maintaining control over their space. However, you don't have to put up with inefficient and unproductive workspaces just because your office is in your back bedroom! With a little organization, you can have everything you need to work effectively from home.

YOUR OFFICE LAYOUT

Your workstation design should depend on what you plan to do while at your desk. What keeps you busy? Writing letters? Phone calls? Computer work? Keep these activities in mind as you plan your space. If you need room to spread out while you work, make sure to include a large flat surface. Do you have a lot of machinery -- scanner, fax, postage meter? You might want to bring in a printer stand or a bookshelf for your equipment. Do you plan to see clients in your home? Then you might need a separate "conference area" -- perhaps your dining room table can work double duty. Just give some thought to matching form with function before you go shopping for furniture.

Also take a look at how you move during the day. You should be able to get at everything you need without too much bending, squatting, or stretching. Make sure that all of your vital equipment and supplies -- the ones that you use daily -- are within arms reach. This is best accomplished with an "L" or "U" shaped desk. Put all of your equipment on one wing and leave the other(s) free for spreading out as you work. And as you sit at your desk, pay attention to what tend to need near you. If takes too much effort to reach something, move it closer!

STORAGE MADE SIMPLE

Many people who work at home find that they run low on storage space for supplies. But you actually have more room than you think, if you search in the right places. Start by looking up -- could we put in some bracket shelves above your desk or credenza? What about sitting a document sorter or some stacking trays on top of that file cabinet to hold paper and manila folders? And if you have a closet nearby, consider placing a bookshelf -- or an old dresser, end table, or plastic drawer system -- inside for organizing your supplies and extra equipment. Remember, your storage center does not have to be conventional -- it simply has to be functional.

One of the biggest mistakes you can make with your storage is creating "in-between" spots for your belongings. Rather than just sitting something down in the first place you see, make sure you have a set home for each item -- and a logical reason for putting it there. Then take some time at the end of

each day to put everything away. You should never have to guess where you left your stapler or hole punch -- they should always live in the same place. Finally, don't fill your drawers and cabinets to capacity. If you stuff your storage spaces to overflowing, where will you put future purchases? Of course, you can always adopt the "in-out" philosophy -- every time you bring a new item into your office, an old one has to go out! Either way, think about leaving some free space -- room to grow.

TAMING THE PAPER TIGER

How do you handle incoming paper? If you are like most people, you pile it on your desk to deal with later -- creating another stack that will distract you as you try to work. Now I don't believe that you can get away with only touching a piece of paper once -- but you can make a decision about what to do with each item once, the first time you touch it. Start by filling a hanging file box with 6-10 folders. Then, randomly pick up any piece of paper on your desk. Ask yourself, "What is the next thing I need to do with this paper to finish it up?" Whatever your answer is -- "pay this bill" or "write a letter" or "make a call" -- create a folder for that action item and put that piece of paper in it. Then move on to the next piece and do the same thing. When your desk is cleared, you should have a series of "to-do" folders -- "to read," "to call," "to file," "to give to accountant" -- in your box. Each time you bring a new piece of paper into your life, take a moment to go through this exercise and file that item in the appropriate folder.

Now that you have made a decision about what to do with your paper, all you have to do is set aside time in your calendar to empty those folders. For items that are date-sensitive, block off time before the deadline in your calendar and flag that document with a red post-it -- or place it in an "urgent" folder. But be careful that every item doesn't end up classified as "urgent!" I generally recommend that my clients try to block off some "administrative time" at least once a week for dealing with the more routine paperwork -- and that they simply go folder by folder by folder until it is all done. No more staring at a stack on your desk thinking, "What should I work on next?" The answer is right there in your box!

CREATING A "CLUTTER-FREE" ZONE

Organizing involves more than just moving your stuff around -- it's all about devoting your space to those objects you use most and clearing out the rest of the clutter. If you want your organizing experience to be a successful one, expect to make some hard decisions about what to keep and what to get rid of. This can be a real challenge -- you always think that you might need it later! But you can make the "de-cluttering" process a lot easier by asking yourself these five simple questions about every item in your office:

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU USED IT?

If you haven't touched something in the past 12 months, chances are that you're not going to use it in the next 12. And if you absolutely can't get rid of those outdated office machines and ancient client files, store them in your garage or attic or offsite -- just don't take up valuable space in your ACTIVE storage areas with items you don't use.

WILL I EVER NEED THIS AGAIN?

Be honest and realistic about this one! At what point will that article from 1973 or that old letterhead serve a purpose in your life? If you can picture a specific, concrete instance when you will need it in the foreseeable future, then by all means keep it. "I might need it someday" isn't a good enough rationale.

IS IT CURRENT AND RELEVANT TO MY WORK?

We business owners love our reference materials, even after the information has become hopelessly outdated. Go through your files and pull out every document that is past its prime -- keeping a list of items you need to replace with more current information. And while you're at it, let's also purge everything that you have been keeping because "someone else might need it someday." If you can't use it, let it go -- it's not your job to be the lending library!

IS IT REPLACEABLE?

So you're thinking about getting rid of your old textbooks, but you're afraid you might need them again someday. Ask yourself what would be required for you to replace each item before you pitch it. If we are talking about an expensive or hard-to-find item -- or information you can't get anywhere else -- you are certainly justified in thinking twice before tossing it. But you also have to consider cost versus benefit -- it may cost you more (in time, space, energy, or money) to keep the item than to replace it IF and WHEN you ever need it.

WHAT'S THE WORST THING THAT WOULD HAPPEN?

When my clients are anxious about discarding an item, they are really saying, "I'm afraid of what might happen if I get rid of it." This is simply fear of the unknown -- uncertainty about the consequences of their actions. So I ask my clients to let their apprehensions run wild, and to imagine the absolute worst-case scenario. Quite often, the worst-case scenario is not that bad. Will the world end if you toss out that ring binder you haven't used since college? Probably not. This knowledge helps dissipate the fear and makes letting go a little easier.

One final word of advice -- don't think that you are "done" just because you have set up your workspace, storage areas, and paper management center. You need to take some time at least once a year to examine your systems, make adjustments, sort through your belongings, and purge the things that you don't need -- pulling out anything that is broken, hasn't been used in the past 12 months, or has become obsolete. Mark it on your calendar and make organizing an annual event -- maybe at the first of the year or at tax time. Remember, organization only works if you allow it to evolve as your business changes and grows. But if you will care for your systems, they will serve you well for years to come!

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Ramona Creel is a Professional Organizer and the founder of [OnlineOrganizing.com](http://www.onlineorganizing.com) -- a web-based one-stop shop offering everything that you need to get organized at home or at work. At [OnlineOrganizing.com](http://www.onlineorganizing.com), you may get a referral to an organizer near you, shop for the latest organizing products, get tons of free tips, and even learn how to become a professional organizer or build your existing organizing business. And if you would like to read more articles about organizing your life or building your business, get a free subscription to the "Get Organized" and "Organized For A Living" newsletters. Please visit <http://www.onlineorganizing.com> or contact Ramona directly at <mailto:ramona@onlineorganizing.com> for more information.

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