

Nine Tips to Organize for Peak Productivity

by Deborah Gussoff

The cost of disorganization is tremendous—from lost business opportunities (*poor follow-up systems*) to wasted money (*late fees on bills, repurchasing items you own but can't find*)—from presenting a poor impression (*like it or not, people judge you based on your surroundings*) to showing up late for an appointment (*where are my keys?*). Following these tips will help you organize your environment, maximize your time, and enhance your overall productivity:

Tip 1: Purge Your Professional Workspace

Survey your office environment. Discard unnecessary papers and outdated office supplies you no longer use and that take up valuable space, such as floppy disks, ink cartridges from old printers, and outdated letterhead. As you're going through your desk drawers, filing cabinet, and supply area, ask yourself if you've used the item in the previous six months. If not, there may be little reason to keep it. Keep in mind that we tend to use 20 percent of what we own 80 percent of the time (while the other 80 percent rarely gets used at all). You'll free up space, reduce visual clutter, and save time when you no longer have unnecessary things in your way.

Tip 2: Evaluate Your Floor Plan

Once you've purged the excess from your office, examine the furniture and overall layout. Are the furnishings and the way the space is arranged consistent with how you work? Essential things should be kept at arm's reach, while seldom-used items should be kept elsewhere. Ask yourself: What is the simplest solution? If you have to get up and walk across the room every time you need to throw something away or replace a file, your desktop or floor can easily become a pile of trash or a stack of files. Search for smart designs and try different arrangements to find what works best.

Tip 3: Create Systems That Work for You

Successful changes of habit and behavior happen by making small tweaks rather than huge shifts all at once. You want to create systems that take into account what comes naturally to you. For example, are you a visual person? Does out of sight mean out of mind? Then

putting everything behind cabinet doors and in file drawers probably won't work for you; instead, you need a system that is visible, yet organized. Think desktop file organizers, see-through bins, and open baskets. Do you process information more easily when you write it down? You may want a paper-and-pen system rather than a technology-based one. Think legal pads and sticky notes instead of computer programs or electronic tablets.

Tip 4: Keep Like Items Together

Mom was right: socks belong with socks, shirts with other shirts. This organizing principle makes it easy to find things (no need to search multiple locations), saves you time, eliminates aggravation (you can find things easily rather than going on a treasure hunt), and saves you money (if you can see what you have, then you won't buy duplicates).

Tip 5: Block Distractions

Schedule set times and limits each day to check work-related email and texts; perhaps 15 minutes first thing in the morning, then again after lunch, and a final check at the end of the day. If you constantly stop to check/respond, your focus is pulled from the task at hand. Once you've designated specific times, turn off those distracting alerts. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that workers are interrupted every three minutes, either electronically or by others. Once distracted, it can take up to 23 minutes for a worker to return to the original task.¹ Finally, establish specific times and strict limits for social media. Five minutes on Facebook can easily turn into an hour and prevent you from completing your work. Instead, build 10 minutes into your day for it and set a timer on your phone.

Tip 6: Minimize Multitasking

Are you really getting more accomplished when trying to do three things at once? Unlikely. Not only is your attention divided, it's very likely that talking to a client on the phone while simultaneously drafting an email to a coworker will cause you to miss something important in both places, whether it's a subtle nuance or a key fact. Single-minded focus is more productive than backtracking later to fix an attention error.

Tip 7: Keep a Calendar/Planner, and Only One

The most neglected tool in time management is often the calendar. In more than 20 years working with clients to maximize their space and time, I'm still shocked that so many people do not keep an organized calendar. Some use a calendar only to plan important meetings and appointments, but not to schedule time to spend on work that must be done. Be sure the items on the paper, mental, or electronic to-do list find their way to a scheduled time on the calendar.

The other mistake is maintaining multiple calendars. For optimal organization, create one central calendar source for all events in your life—business, personal, volunteer. When you maintain multiple calendars, you may miss an event (it was on *some* calendar, just not the one you were looking at) or double-book a time slot.

Break larger projects on that to-do list into smaller steps and then calendar time to work on them. Be sure to allow time for the unexpected. If your calendar is jammed back-to-back with appointments all day, then there is no time to handle a crisis, take advantage of a sudden business opportunity, or even deal with a minor traffic delay. Make sure to calendar downtime. We are all so busy. We keep going and going and going, but it's

essential to schedule time for yourself to replenish and rejuvenate. Coffee with a friend, a workout at the gym, or a relaxing massage will help fuel you for your next business project.

Tip 8: Plan Your Week before It Begins

If you work a Monday to Friday schedule, on Sunday evening spend 10 minutes looking at your calendar/schedule for the upcoming week (or whenever it makes sense, given your industry). Identify that week's priorities and purposely calendar in time for them, scheduling the most important one first. Scheduling quiet time at your desk is essential for a small business owner; otherwise, it's easy to work six to seven days a week trying to keep up. Build in "slush time" in case a meeting runs late. An extra 10 minutes between appointments will help you stay on schedule and mentally prepare for what comes next. Finally, identify activities that eat up time and ask yourself how to eliminate or condense them.

Tip 9: Make Organization a Daily Practice

For business owners, organizing is not a "one-and-done" activity. To yield substantial results, it requires ongoing maintenance. Devote 15 minutes at the end




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of each day to update your to-do list, check/edit your calendar, file completed projects, and return in-progress items to their proper place. If you're stopping in the middle of a task, make a notation for the next morning about where you left off and what the next step is. Think ahead. Change your voice mail if you'll be out of the office the next day. Be sure to deal with paper and mail daily to avoid a backlog. That will give you a clean, organized start the next morning.

References

1. Silverman, Rachel, Workplace Distractions: Here's Why You Won't Finish This Article, *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2012.

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Since 1994 Certified Professional Organizer® **Deborah Gussoff**, owner of In Order, Inc., has been helping clients streamline, simplify, and organize their space, time, finances, and lives. She works one-on-one with clients both in-person and virtually. She is

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