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From Chaos to Calm

How a busy writer freed clutter from her desk...
And cleared her mind.

By Jamie Leggatt

My office used to be an organized mess. At least, that's what I told people who criticized my organizational style. The truth was, the mess was stressing me out to a point that wasn't healthy.

I would lay awake at night and worry about missing deadlines because I couldn't find the Post-it Notes I'd written them on, or I worried that I had completely forgotten to return personal and business phone calls or e-mails, started eating away at me. Sometimes I stumbled across an unpaid bill and my stomach lurched when I saw a payment deadline long past. After forgetting to pay my hydro bill one month, I received a letter threatening disconnection if I didn't pay in full by the next bill. I suddenly realized I needed professional help.

I turned to productivity consultant Sherry Borsheim, owner of Simple Solutions in Richmond, B.C., to help turn my home office into an organized command centre. I needed help to organize my files, to develop a system for paying bills and for running household errands on time. But what she did astounded me. Not only was my living and working space organized, but also my mind was free of clutter.

How did it happen? Sherry explained that clutter in our lives is often a reflection of what's going on inside of us.

"I noticed that when I'm off track, my office reflects that," she said. "We may be in a transition or some change in our lifestyle. When that happens, our world changes and some things don't fit anymore.

Was my life in transition? I hadn't realized it was until I cleaned up the clutter. I had changed the focus of my business, moved into a new house, was planning a big business trip to Chicago, and had bitten off a bit more than I could chew with work. My office and house reflected it all in not-so-subtle disorganized ways

What made this organizational experience so profound was that we organized with a purpose. To start, we focused on my desire to become more organized and looked at some of the biggest problems. Then we developed goals for organization. Some of my goals included paying my bills on time, remembering to return phone calls, remembering to run important errands, meeting deadlines, following up with important opportunities and clearing my desk of excess paper.

The process was amazingly simple. Sherry put a "tickler file" on my desk that took care of almost all my organizational needs. The first part of the system consists of files for each day of the month, labelled 1-31, with each month of the year in a file behind those files. To remind myself to work on specific projects, of upcoming deadlines or of a friend's birthday, I simply stick a note into the corresponding date and check the file every morning.

If I need to take care of something the following month, I put that information in the corresponding month file, and bring that information forward at the beginning of the month. Behind the months and dates is a

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file labelled "Future Years" in which I put anything that I will need to take care of next year. I'll bring it all forward when the time comes.

The next component of the tickler file is a set of actions I need to look at daily. My file is set up with a combination of business and personal files, such as To Call, Calls Expected, Data Entry, To Discuss, Errands, Pay Bills Personal, Pay Bills Business, Photocopy, Read, Write and Receipts. In each file, I have everything needed to do that action. So for example, in the Write file I have writing cards, envelopes and postage. That way I don't have to scramble for anything I need.

Although it seems so simple now it's sitting on my desk and keeping my life running smoothly, I just couldn't get to this point on my own. Sherry explained this is very common.

"Sometimes you're just so overwhelmed that you don't know where to begin. You just need someone to help you get started," she said.

For those ready to tackle big organizational projects on their own, such as an office desk, the kitchen or a study, Sherry has some practical words of advice. Before starting, set a goal and a time limit for your organization session. Then start at one point and systematically move along. If you're organizing a room, start at one corner and move around the room instead of zigzagging from one side to another. If you're cleaning up your workspace, start with the top of the desk and work your way down. Lastly, never leave the area you're organizing until you are finished your organization session. If some items need to be moved to another room, put them aside and take them to that room only when you're done for the day.

I found once my office space was organized, it became easy to keep it that way. Paper no longer sits in large piles on my desk. Action items get placed in my tickler files and resources I want to keep for future use go into my resource filing cabinet. I also employ a very important organizational tip in my daily life. I toss what I don't need.

What really amazed me was that when all the clutter on the desk was cleaned up, the clutter in my brain cleared. I no longer stay awake at night worrying about missing deadlines. I now pay my bills on time and it's so easy I'm almost embarrassed about my inability to do so before. I feel so much more productive and relaxed. In fact, I even found some desperately needed personal time. Now that's being organized!

Quick Tips from a Productivity Consultant

1. Use ONE daily planner
2. Combine errands to save time
3. Schedule time for all tasks, appointments, including travel time into your calendar
4. Be ruthless with incoming email & mail and toss as much as possible
5. Purge files regularly so the information is current and easy to find
6. Invest the time necessary to organize your work area and home
7. Determine the next action to void shuffling papers & creating piles
8. Write things down in a consistent place instead of relying on your memory
9. Purge your environment regularly. Do not hold onto unnecessary items
10. Schedule "high brain" tasks during peak energy
11. Schedule a file clean-out day once a year
12. Wrap up each day by planning for tomorrow!

Sherry Borsheim (www.simplyproductive.com) helps people to work smarter, through her professional organizing business, Simply Productive.

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