Linda Chu

Get Organized . . .
And Enjoy More Time

Keep everything . . . provided you have the space and you can find it.

Therein lies the challenge.

Whether you are a piler, a filer, or a stuffer, you may be running out of space. In this electronic age, our access to information in many formats has resulted in our offices, desks, computers, and minds becoming stuffed to capacity. Not only are we crowding ourselves out physically, we are overburdened and stressed with too many interruptions via email, voice mail, and paper mail.

Getting organized may be one hurdle to master, but *staying* organized is where the race can be won.

This data is from a November 2006 Office Depot Organization Study.

- 53% live in "controlled chaos."

- 76% report losing time to disorder.

- 51% are concerned about missing important deadlines or appointments.

- 16% cite fear of diminishing their reputation.

- 14% lose business opportunities due to disorganization.

- 61% claim the biggest frustration with their disorganized environment is that they can't find what they need quickly.

- 27% find it hard to concentrate with messy files around.

Many of you may be nodding your head, commiserating with those facts.

- Yet, only 22% actually spend the time to arrange their desks (physical and electronic desktops) for maximum productivity every day.

- Only 49% organize on a monthly basis.

- About 67% are not sure how to start or maintain their efforts.

> **Work is invading our private lives as we sit in the bleachers at our children's games, working away on our BlackBerrys and iPhones.**

We are all crying out for more time to complete our competing tasks. There are only 24 hours in a day, so unless we are prepared to work all 24, there are some decisions to be made. While technology has provided us with the opportunity to access our information anywhere, any time, those same "electronic leashes" shackle us to our work 24/7.

Our days end with many wondering where the time has flown. We work later and later and begin taking work home. Work is invading our private lives as we sit in the bleachers at our children's games, working away on our BlackBerrys and iPhones.

Time Management: A Misnomer

Time management is a misnomer because time ticks away with or without our control. It is more a matter of what we do with our time that counts. Getting organized is more important than ever. By choice, we can dedicate time to our real priorities as we seek that ever-elusive work/life balance.

Interruptions are a fact of life and work. It has been proven that every time we are interrupted, it takes us 15 to 20 minutes to get back into prime focus. That's just one interruption. Imagine if the average employee in your organization loses 20 minutes a day of focus. The combined wages add up quickly, not to mention the lost productivity.

Focusing on what matters most at any given moment is the key to a successful priority action plan. Yes, there will be the unexpected interruptions and emergencies, but having a game plan and identifying your high-priority tasks will give you a better sense of control in your day.

Prioritization: Focusing on What Matters Most

Knowing where to start seems to be one of the most common dilemmas. Our task lists run on forever—one task being replaced by two, as soon as some progress is made. We are like a kid in the candy store—we want it all; we stuff our mouths so full with gumballs, we can no longer chew.

Before diving head-first into a long list of tasks, it is important for you to be clear on your vision and goals. Spend some time to determine what you want to achieve in your organization, business, work, and personal life. If your vision and goals are not clear, it really doesn't matter where you start in your mounting list of to-dos.

- Do you know your company vision?
- What goals do you need to accomplish to meet that vision?
- What are your short-term and long-term goals?
- How do your personal goals fit into your day?
- What is important and of value to you?

Prioritizing your day and tasks means you are clear about what needs to be accomplished to reach your goals. Each action you take should serve to support reaching that vision.

Steven Covey, in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, describes a time-management matrix.

Steven Covey's Urgency and Importance Time Management Matrix

	NOT URGENT	URGENT
IMPORTANT	**2** • Prevention • Building relationships • Identifying opportunities • Planning • Recreation	**1** • Crises • Pressing problems • Deadline-driven projects
NOT IMPORTANT	**4** • Trivia • "Busy" work • Some emails and calls • Time-wasters • Pleasant activities (socializing)	**3** • Interruptions, some calls, some email, some reports, some meetings • Popular activities • Urgent for others

One axis describes **Important** as tasks and actions that support us in reaching our vision and goals.

The other axis describes **Urgent**, relating to the pressure and rush that is imposed on time spent in completing certain tasks.

Many of us spend the day working on many projects and tasks, feeling quite busy and pulled in many directions. At the end of the day, on reflection, we often feel that not much was accomplished even though we were "busy."

If you are finding yourself in Quadrants 3 and 4, you may be feeling you were working on things that seemed urgent at the time, but in reality they were not important—when it comes to accomplishing your goals.

Quadrant 3

These likely are tasks that others would like you to do; they really have no importance to your quest to achieve your goals.

Quadrant 4

I call this the procrastination corner. Here are all the tasks we do to feel/keep "busy." They are the easy things on our list that we can check off to feel that sense of accomplishment. In this quadrant are activities in which you engage when you are avoiding tasks that will actually get you closer to achieving your goals.

Quadrant 1

Leave any task long enough and it will become urgent—if not for yourself, for someone else. For those thrill-seekers who like working under pressure, Quadrant 1 makes them feel important and useful. Productive? That is debatable. But for certain, being in this quadrant is fighting fires and not being proactive.

Quadrant 2

This quadrant is the key to being more effective and productive. When we are clear in our vision and we understand what is important for the long term, we are able to better prioritize the activities that focus on achieving better value for ourselves and those we impact. Concentrate your time in this quadrant, working on what is important, rather than urgent. Not surprisingly, recreation—aka exercise and downtime—is in this quadrant.

Schedule time today to chart your activities according to Steven Covey's Urgency and Importance Time Management Matrix. In which quadrant are you spending most of your time? Are you moving closer to your goals?

Paper and Information Management

Computers and the paperless generation: The majority of businesses have not embraced that concept. Many of us still are faced with the daunting task and anxiety of the daily search for information. At least 1 hour of your day may be spent looking for something. For just one person, that can add up to at least 20 hours a month in lost time and productivity.

Out of sight, out of mind. That is a real fear for most people. If they put it away, they may forget about it, so their idea is to keep it out and trip over it until they need it.

Looking back, we realize our office is littered with intentions, one covering the other. Procrastination sets in, because we often are so overwhelmed with our piles, we don't know where to start.

By adopting the following space-creating process, we can get organized and re-claim our offices so we can focus on the more important tasks that beckon.

Helpful Hints

Active, Reference, Archival

Divide your information into 3 categories.

1. **Active Information** means action is required. Active information can be placed into a priority action plan, like a Tickler File or BF—Bring Forward File.

2. **Reference materials** have no action required but may be part of your "reference library." Your reference materials may be moved away from your immediate work surface into a dedicated filing system for ease of access.

3. **Archival resources** may need to be kept, based on legislation requirements. If space is limited, archives may need to be moved out of office or even off-site.

The Top 3 Things You Can Do for Yourself to Start the Shift Back to Work-Life Balance

1. Take back your time. Start with 15 minutes per day.

2. Ask for assistance. You cannot do it all, nor should you. Consider leveraging your routine administrative tasks to a virtual assistant (or student volunteer).

3. Do not make yourself available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It is up to you to educate your clients and colleagues and to set your precedent. Turn off your cell phone and email after hours. If you respect your time, others will, too.

No Time to Open All Those emails?

Here's a quick tip to put into practice immediately, to save precious time when managing your emails.

- EOM: End of Message

Use EOM in the subject line to signal the recipient that the message is in the subject line. That works nicely for things such as, "See you Friday at 11:00 AM. EOM" and "Congratulations on a great job! EOM."

When time is limited, every second—or in this case, every click—counts.

S.P.A.C.E.

Sort

Taking inventory of every item in your office, as overwhelming as that may be, is a critical step to taking back your space. We often are derailed by glossy pages in magazines sporting clear offices and amazing "organizing" products—so much so that we buy those items.

We realize all too quickly that our purchases are still in their shopping bags untouched, and programs are uninstalled. Wrong size, not enough, wrong fit. Most products don't come with a quick fix to organize you without some preparation and work.

By taking stock of what you have, you will have a better understanding of the volume of your information and the frequency of access that you require.

Purge

"What if I might need it one day?" is the single largest concern that prevents people from letting go of resources they have collected.

As you move through the piles in your office, first concentrate on the obvious: The Yes and No items. The remaining Maybes, which legislation does not require you to keep, can be indexed under a file for last year.

As you access information in the current year, place the information in the information resources file for the current year. After a year has passed and you have not accessed older resources—and space is limited, purging them from your space may be advisable.

Assign

As you sort and purge information from your space, categories and priorities will become apparent. Group items of similar information that require similar actions.

We often spend too much time thinking about an ideal system, only to find one piece of paper in a folder—or empty folders. I would suggest creating your filing system as the information presents itself. Think big categories and, as your information grows, subdivide.

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Contain

Taking inventory of what you have will lead you to better-informed decisions on what to purchase (if anything at all).

Products are the fourth step in the process of getting organized, not the first step. Stop wasting time and money by prematurely purchasing products to get you organized.

Evaluate

Keep function vs. form in mind as you design your ideal workspace. I would concentrate on creating processes and systems to get your space to work for you first. Then, as your budget allows, you may decide to adopt a specific look.

email Management

Email is nothing more than correspondence in electronic form, but because it is electronic, the speed and volume with which we receive this correspondence is crippling our ability to manage. We've become deer in the headlights on the electronic highway.

Managing email—and other forms of messages and correspondence—starts with a clear decision-making

process. Rather than stopping in your tracks every time an email comes into your mailbox, it is recommended that you process your email in batches.

Schedule Dedicated Time to Process email Messages

Turning off your email notifications will help reduce interruptions. Who can resist the ping of "someone loves you"? We are stopped in our tracks and must have a look, only to be disappointed that it's only another chore to add to our growing list, forcing us to re-focus on the task at hand.

The Decide-in-5 Model of Decision-Making

Processing is not doing. Nor is it about opening and closing the same email several times over and over and never having the time to do anything with it.

It's applying the following decision-making model to ensure you are focused and can plan in advance the activities each correspondence requires of your time.

1. Delete
2. Do (in 2 minutes or less)
3. Delegate
4. Document (in your reference library)
5. Defer

Delete

Simply put, it's about deleting messages that are not required, like junk mail. It may also mean opening an email and receiving the information sent and leaving it where it is. An opened email means it is processed and no further action is required from you.

Do (in 2 minutes or less)

If you cannot delete the message and an action is required—and you can complete this task in 2 minutes or less, then complete the task. As Nike says, *Just Do It!*

Don't get overwhelmed and distracted with all you have on your plate. Procrastinating will not make it go away.

Delegate

Is this something to which you must attend or can you delegate this task to someone else? Even if you are ultimately responsible for this task, you may be able to delegate a portion of it. Break down each step required for completion and determine which portions can be delegated. You can still manage the outcome, without having to "do" all the work.

Document (in your reference library)

We often receive email with information attached or included. Your email inbox is a receptacle to receive correspondence. It is not meant to store your information.

If no action is required by you, but you would like to keep information for reference, save the attachment or the email in your hard drive or network drive.

Defer

While processing your email—and if you cannot Delete it, Delegate it, Do it in less than 2 minutes, or Document it—defer this action to your To Do list.

Outlook Tasks is an electronic To Do list that can be used to manage all your To Dos. Deferring actions that take longer than 2 minutes to complete gives you the ability to plan your time, as you prioritize what is important against all the other tasks you must complete. Take back control of your email!

Intentions vs. Follow-Through

Once an email is received in your Inbox—and you are looking at it in the timeframe you have dedicated to processing your email in batches—you have begun to take back control, rather than having email control you.

Every action required from you that is placed on your To Do Task List is nothing more than an intention. Following through in a timely manner will ensure your success in achieving better efficiency and productivity.

Time must be spent on moving your tasks into your calendar. Nothing will get accomplished unless you invest time to ensure the task can be completed.

Outlook has the ability to defer your emails by creating an action-to-do item on your Task List, From your Task List, you are able to move this task by scheduling it into your Calendar.

When we feel more in control of the decisions we need to make, we can better prioritize the way we spend our time. In doing so, we have the power to say No with certainty.

Saying NO to one thing means you are saying YES to something else.

Having the ability to prioritize your tasks and to dedicate specific times in your schedule will give you better control over your day. Then interruptions, in their many forms, can be managed more effectively.

If you respect your time, others will also. ▲

Organizing Consultant **Linda Chu** is past president of Professional Organizers in Canada and founder of Out of Chaos. Her work with a broad range of clients in the municipal, corporate, and residential areas has established her as one of the country's experts in personal and professional organization.

Linda works with executives and corporate teams to improve their workplace effectiveness and with homeowners who want to de-clutter, downsize, or move.

An in-demand speaker, Linda provides tangible strategies on how to master the overwhelming challenges we all face in gaining control of our time, space, and information. She helps restore balance in people's lives.

Clients include municipalities, school districts, and firms such as General Motors, IKEA, and Whirlpool Canada. Her media appearances include Citytv Breakfast Television, CBC Radio, *Chatelaine Magazine*, *National Post*, and *Reader's Digest*.

Contact Linda Chu to learn how to customize your Outlook Tasks.

www.outofchaos.ca