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Time Management



A Clean Desk

By Dr. Don Wetmore, President, The Productivity Institute

We all run into people from time to time who work with a messy desk and messy work environment. They have stuff piled up here and there, on the floor, on the shelves, and even on a table behind their desk. And whenever you try to encourage that person to clean up their messy work area, do they get defensive!

We all run into people from time to time who work with a messy desk and messy work environment. They have stuff piled up here and there, on the floor, on the shelves, and even on a table behind their desk. (They have to buy furniture to put this stuff on!)

And whenever you try to encourage that person to clean up their messy work area, do they get defensive! They have snappy retorts like, "A messy desk is the sign of an organized mind." Or, "This is my external filing system." And if you really push them they will almost always tell you, "But I know where everything is!"

"Out of sight; out of mind", the old saying goes and the reverse of that is just as powerful. When it's in sight; it's in mind and most cannot help but be distracted by what is before them. "I know I should be working on this report, but let me just go through this junk mail real quick." A messy desk can easily lead to lost items and missed deadlines. It is time consuming too, going through the same pile of stuff day after day.

Some studies suggest that as much as 15% of your workweek can be consumed with a messy desk either by being distracted by things that are in sight or by having to look for things.

I recommend you work with a clean desk, a clean work environment. You don't have to take me literally on this. I typically work with two or three files before me, but as best as I can, I keep the number of items before me to a minimum to keep my focus sharply on what truly needs to be done.

If you have a bunch of stuff on your desk it will be easy, just time consuming, to get your desk cleaned up.

Take each item, one at a time, decide when you will likely get to it, put it on your to do list for that day and then put that item away. For example, the first item on my desk is a research project. I will be able to get to that next Tuesday. I will open up my Day-Timer to next Tuesday and on Tuesday's to do list I will add, "Do research project". I then file that item in a file for retrieval next Tuesday.

The next item in my pile is the budget for the next quarter. I will get to work on that next Wednesday. I open my Day-Timer to next Wednesday and on Wednesday's to do list I add, "Work on budget", and then I file that item away for retrieval next Wednesday. I continue this procedure until all the items have been scheduled on my to do lists for the day I will tackle them and my desk is clean.

If you have a lot of items, it may take you all day to clean up your messy desk but your investment will provide you a clean desk that will permit you to have a better focus on what you need to do.

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