

TAMING YOUR PAPER TIGER

It's Monday morning. As you walk into your office what awaits you? Do you see an orderly, calm space, or are you attacked by roaring, growling stacks of papers everywhere you look? Is your paper tiger chasing you?

Papers inundate our offices and fill up our mailboxes at home. Everything we do seems to involve more and more paper. We were supposed to become the paperless society by now, but instead it seems we have more paper than ever. In fact it is predicted that over the next three years businesses will create more information than has been created in all of history.

Almost 80% of today's information is still paper based. North American businesses generate over 1 trillion new pieces of paper each year. More and more paper seems to enter our lives. Just the other day at the grocery store, instead of receiving just one receipt, the clerk handed me four slips of paper. Along with the receipt I got coupons, a sheet showing the total of my grocery points and a special note about some type of contest. That was just one moment during the day and look at all the paper it generated. Add those four pieces of paper to the others that await me at my office and more when I get home. What's a person to do?

How do you know you have a problem with paper in your life? You know when it looks like an avalanche has occurred in your office and you can't find what you need when you need it. As the piles grow, it's easy to become frustrated, overwhelmed and snowed under. The difficulty in handling papers happens when we must choose which papers have value and which do not. The idea of throwing anything out can be quite frightening to some people. Others have no problem throwing things away, even things which are indeed valuable.

Some interesting facts about the paper in our lives:

- Are 18,000 sheets of paper enough? A typical four drawer file cabinet will hold 18,000 sheets of paper when filled.
- 80% of the papers you file will never be looked at again.
- The average time to retrieve and re-file a paper document is ten minutes.
- The National Association of Professional Organizers estimate that executives lose one hour each day – approximately seven weeks a year – to disorganization.

No wonder we're all fighting to conquer the stress we get from trying to tame our paper tiger.

How does your paper tiger rule your life?

Are you a Stacker? A Spreader? A Stuffer?

A Stacker of course has piles all over his/her office. These are the people who will usually tell you that they know exactly where everything is. Of course, when you ask them to find something you cannot give them a time limit. They will probably eventually find it. It may take a few minutes, a few hours, a few days, a few weeks, or maybe never. Perhaps someday they'll run across it when they are forced to deal with their piles.

A Spreader's desk is usually buried. Instead of piles and piles of papers, there are just papers everywhere and in no particular order. These people have a very difficult time finding items when they need them.

A Stuffer is the type of person who stuffs everything in folders, file cabinets, baskets, bins or boxes. Their office doesn't look that bad, but it is very difficult for them to find anything because they stuff without thinking about retrieving the information. They may have to hunt in many places before they find what they are looking for.

Just as each person's definition of clutter is unique to them, so too is each person's way of dealing with paper. Some people when handed a piece of paper will just put it on the nearest paper pile. Some people will at least give it a glance before putting it down and still others will read it over thoroughly, and then be paralyzed with the decision as to what to do with it.

The technological and electronic age we live in now, however, demands that we at least make some attempt to keep up with our papers. Compared to working with large items of clutter, working with papers is often slow and tedious. Many people I talk with absolutely hate the amount of paper they have to deal with and the thought of filing - Ugh!

Getting organized is a very emotional issue. I didn't realize how emotional people get about things until I started working with people and their papers and filing systems. Many people keep a copy, or more than one copy, of every paper that passes their way. This is their security blanket. They feel they will be covered no matter what the situation. The problem is they very often cannot find the paper they need when they need it. The information they have stored around them is basically worthless. Some people, the ones who don't want to get organized because it will result in losing their creativity, resist bringing order into their lives. They feel that the bigger the mess, the more creative they become. Then there are people who fear the responsibility of throwing something away now only to need it later. As a result they save everything so they won't feel guilty.

How can you help to tame that paper tiger that is always nipping at your heels?

There are many ways and many books written on getting your papers organized.

When it comes right down to it, there are really only three things that can be done with a piece of paper:

1. It can be temporarily put away in a file or a pile
2. Some action has to be taken with it
3. It can be thrown away.

When a piece of paper comes into your possession ask yourself, “What’s the next action I have to take on this piece of paper?” Keep it for reference? Act on it? Throw it away? If it is just information that you feel you need to save (just in case you might need it later) but really has no other value, then that goes in the files. When you pick up the next piece of paper ask yourself the same question again. This piece of paper might be an ad, an old meeting agenda, or an old to do list. In this case you can toss it. Of course, these days we have to be careful of what we toss and how we toss it, because of identity theft. If there is any type of information on the piece of paper that might allow a criminal to steal your identity, you want to be sure to shred it.

Assume the next piece of paper is a notice about a class you want to attend. This would be an Action item. In this case you might want to create a folder to hold all the information about the class and a follow up file to make sure you send in the registration and money when it’s due. You might also want to enter the information in your day planner or electronic device. This is what is meant by taking action.

Some other questions you can ask yourself about the papers you are keeping are:

- Does this information exist somewhere else?
- Is this information current enough to be useful?
- Can I identify when I would actually use this information? Sooner or Later?
- Are there any tax or legal implications if I get rid of these papers?
- Does anyone else require this information?

And finally:

What’s the worst thing that could happen if I no longer had this information?

Keep in mind that in some circumstances there are governmental rules regulating what papers we have to keep and for how long. In case of an audit or lawsuit, it is important to know what you are required to maintain to protect yourself and your company.

When calming your paper tiger it definitely helps to have a positive attitude. If in your mind you have decided that enough is enough and you want a tranquil, stress-free atmosphere in which to accomplish your work, the job will go much quicker and you will reap the rewards of an organized, productive workspace.

Further information on many of the ideas in this article can be obtained by attending a “SIMPLY ORGANIZED” seminar featuring the GO (Get Organized) System. If you are interested in getting organized and staying organized, this three hour seminar has a different approach and its many realistic, useful and practical suggestions will help you change your life.

I’d be happy to answer any organizing questions. Please send them to:

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