



Are things slipping through the cracks?organizing your information in a consistent way will help.

As the volume of information available and the speed with which it arrives goes into hyper-drive, using a computer to control your personal environment has become a basic necessity for today's survival. The increased workloads and the complexity of our lives require us to handle many diverse responsibilities at the same time.

Equipped with the right system, you can let technology work for you, strategically managing activities and tasks, as well as ensuring your goals and objectives are attained. There are a variety of programs out there to help you such as Outlook, Act, Maximizer, or Lotus Notes.

These programs were designed to make organizing your daily information almost automatic. When an *organizational structure* is applied to these programs they can pull together everything you need to know about your daily tasks, appointments, e-mail messages, and other details. It can act as your assistant in dealing with the flurry of small but important items. Let all of the containers such as Calendar, Contacts, E-Mail, Notes, Folders and Tasks become your highly functional organizing system.

Before you utilize these containers, you need to simplify your decision-making process. When faced with new information, you must apply The Principle of A.R.T.© and decide whether you need to act on it, record it or toss it.

- Act ~ Can it be handled now? Do I have enough time? Do I have enough energy? As a general rule, if it can be handled quickly, do it.
- Record ~ If you determine that an item cannot be handled immediately, enter it into your system.
- Toss ~ Items that do not enhance your life and have no value can be immediately tossed!

A couple of quick questions you can ask yourself when deciding to toss:

- Is someone else responsible for retaining this?
- If I need it later, can I easily get it elsewhere?
- By the time I might need this, will it be out-of-date?
- Is it obsolete now?
- Is it too late to do this?

Let's focus on a couple of these containers to help you become more organized with your information avoiding things slipping through the cracks:

- **Tasks** is like your "to do" list. Many times these lists remain exactly that, things that you still need to do. These lists often fail because they do not identify the next activity to be done to bring it closer to completion. As such, they remain on the "to-do" list far too long. Failing to identify the next activity invites procrastination. Since most lists represent only partial reminders, they cause us to review information more than once before deciding what to do with it. A lot of you have already tried using the "Task" list and have not had success. Our clients have been more successful when they preface each task entry with its appropriate next activity. Preface each item with the required activity type and similar tasks, when sorted by subject, will be clustered together, allowing you to maintain focus and efficiency. Your Task list could include the following activity types: Call, Email, Goal, Read, Errand, Pending, Research, File, Plan and Write. Create your own customized list of activities that suit your own particular business or personal environment and then stick to them.
- **Email** - your goal should be to work towards an empty e-mail Inbox or at least emails that are no older than the last 4-5 days. For the most part, it is best to think of your e-mail system as a communication tool and your inbox as a temporary resting ground for items needing your attention. If emails and their attachments need to be saved for future reference, then they should be saved outside of your email program with the rest of your electronic document in your My Documents folder or within your network directory. For those emails that need to stay in your email program you can create a proper storage area for each e-mail you need to retain by creating, and using folders and sub-folders under your Inbox. These folders should match the folders that you also keep on your network drives as well as your hard copy paper files. We will talk about that a little more later.

- **Notes** are the electronic equivalent of the sticky paper notes and are a freeform recording tool. While not a lot of functionality has been given to this section, Notes are a perfect area for collecting and organizing reference and checklists. They can be sorted and accessed as needed. Notes are not connected to a reminder system, have no scrolling function and have limited display settings, but they function exceedingly well at managing lists such as price lists, travel checklists, or product specifications.
- **Folders** - Consistency is an important part of any successful organizing system. We mentioned folders in our email discussion above. One of the first steps we take when working with our clients to get them organized is to develop their own individual classification scheme that they can use across all areas of information. This classification scheme is used for the email folders, personal network drive or My Documents folders as well as the paper files. To develop these hierarchies start with your top ten primary categories of information such as; Administration, Clients, Corporate, Finance, Human Resources, Legal, Marketing, Operations, Research, and Sales. The next step is to then create sub-folders under each of the primary categories, as needed. We recommend that you have no more than 10 folders in any one list. Not all folders will be used in all three areas but the ones that are used will be consistent across all levels of information.

Remember that any system you set up must be maintained in order for it to be successful. Just like any other system in your life whether it is your fitness, or your home or your relationships, they all need to be maintained.

Make it a habit to review your system often. Prepare yourself for tomorrow, and allow your mind to be free. A modest investment in time learning how to use these tools efficiently will bring immediate results. Become more productive today ~ let organization and technology work for you!

Jane Woolsey, founder of Business Organizational Solutions and co-founder of An Organized Vision, has a wealth of experience in all areas of corporate organizing and has utilized her expertise to assist a variety of clients become more productive in both virtual and in-person training sessions. If you are interested in finding out more about her services visit her website at www.anorganizedvision.com or contact her through email at jane@anorganizedvision.com.