Is keeping paperwork organised slowing you down?

By Wendy Davie

Paper clutter in your office is a real time waster. When you are looking at unfinished paperwork on your desk you are distracted from what really matters, RUNNING YOUR BUSINESS. Paper and clutter can become a real timewaster; this does not need to be the case. There are many simple strategies for getting your paperwork under control.

Let's begin by looking at how to declutter and control what paper you have around your office at the moment. Remember your office will look worse before it looks better, so don't be put off by the process. Once you get started you will be surprised how quickly you can work through a decluttering session.

How to begin the process of decluttering paper:

- Gather all paper lying around in piles or alone and place in one (or two if there are masses) pile.
- Place a large rubbish receptacle beside you, and a box for recycling.
- Have a tray for filing and one for reading material and some extra file folders.
- Have a to-do list pad on hand to make notes, and your current diary/planner.
- A tray for action and current project files.
- Now looking at one piece of paper at a time determine which tray or box it belongs in, then put it there.

This is the process of making big chucks much more palatable and manageable so you can move on to the next step.

Deciding what to keep and throw:

- If you need to take action on it, note it on the to-do list and place in the action file. You can also add the item to your planner with a deadline date, so you do not forget.
- If it is part of an active project then note it on the To Do list and file in the Project File. Remember to ensure you have diarised your Projects.

- If it needs to be read, place it in the reading file. You can go through this when you have time. However remember anything more than a month old is likely to be old news, so be ruthless.
- If you need to save it for reference or document retrieval, place it in the filing tray.
- If you have no use for it or cannot think of an excuse to keep it. THROW IT AWAY.

You can now file away items in the filing tray without feeling overwhelmed by the volume. Remember when you file use a system that works for you, and always file for retrieval.

You can now get on with actioning the items on your to-do list and putting important dates and actions in your planner.

Keeping paper under control

So now you have a clear desk and all your paper is where it belongs, how do you keep it that way.

- When you have finished with an item, either place it in a "to be filed" tray or immediately file it to its home file.
- When you have finished with something put it away immediately.
- Utilise action and project files for those ongoing papers that do not need to be filed away yet.
- Set aside a time each day to attend to paper and incoming mail, once under control this will be between 15-30 minutes.
- When you are sorting your mail, take action immediately. Always have your planner and to-do list with you when going through mail, so you can make notes as you go and put the paper where it belongs.
- Handling a piece of paper only once is almost impossible, so use your action, project and filing trays remember to note it in your planner or to-do list.
- Place all your invoices that need paying in a tray together, so you can always find them and attend to them in a timely manner.

The aim is for every piece of paper to have a home. A good guideline for this is.

- Action file- requires action but not during the sorting process. List item on the to-do list and place in action file.
- Project Folders- An action type folder where all papers that relate to a current project go into this folder, once the project is complete the Folder can then be filed away.
- Review Folder- This is for items that require review or discussion. If it is an event invite for example pencil it in your calendar before putting it in the review file. Always note it on the To-do list as well. Check this file at the end of each day for items that require action.
- Reading File/Basket- Anything from magazines, newspapers, and articles etc that you wish to read. It is usually a good idea to set aside "reading time" each day to go through these items.
- Message log – Always have a log of messages you receive. This way you will ensure that each message is returned in a timely manner.

Keeping paper under control in your office will save you time, energy and money. It will make your you and your workspace far more productive.

If you are still having trouble with getting your paper under control you can always ask for help from a Professional Organiser. Go to www.aapo.org.au to find one located near you.

Recommended Reading:

"The Accidental Organiser" – Wendy Davie

"Getting a Grip on the Paper War", Robyn Pearce.

"Organizing from the Inside Out" Julie Morgenstern

"Taming the paper Tiger" Barbara Hemphill