

Here's how
to get your
work space
in shape

BUSINESS TODAY

WAR ON CLUTTER

Make clean sweep, work effectively

By JENNIFER HELDT POWELL

If the piles on your desk threaten to topple off and crush a co-worker, it's time.

If you can't find the memo that tells you when to meet with your boss, it's time.

If you're not sure if that fuzzy thing in the corner of your drawer is a mouse or a

half-eaten sandwich, it's time.

It's time to clear the clutter and free your mind.

You may think you have no time to organize your work-space.

But the professionals say you'll have more time if you do.

"I believe clutter and mess just boxes you in," said Stephanie Winston, author of "Getting Organized."

Yet, even those who agree often let the piles grow higher.

"I think one of the main reasons people are disorganized is that they procrastinate and then it gets overwhelming," said Sarah Buckwalter of Organizing Boston.

The time excuse is often real, especially in high-pressure jobs in which people are always on the go, said Micnele D. Matties of No Worries Organizing.

"People need to schedule time off to manage their stuff," she said.

The good news is they don't have to do it all at once.

Winston has developed a cleanup plan with Office Depot that takes no more than 30 minutes a day for five days.

"I have this theme in everything that I do — divide and conquer," she said. "You take these masses of stuff and you do it day by day and bit by bit."

The first step is to wade through the mess. Start small, advises Winston. Pick a corner of your desk and clear it off. Alternatively, throw everything in a box and take out just those things that should stay.

Get rid of what you don't need. Junk it or find someone who can use it. There are several groups that can find a good home for cast off pencils or stacks of old reference books.

"A lot of people clutter up their spaces with the 'what ifs' and the 'well, I could use this,' but it's really delayed decisions," Matties said.

Once you've decided what is staying, ask yourself where each item belongs. Where do you naturally set the phone, for instance. Where are you most likely to look for the tape dispenser?

"You have to have a system in place to be efficient," said Ann Marie Williams of Atmosphere Consulting. "Everybody is different. There is no cookie-cutter way to organize. You try to work with people's natural tendencies and find out what works with how they place things."

Some people want things at their fingertips, some want them out of sight.

Filing systems should be simple to be effective. Categories often make more sense than an alphabetical system. Use the broadest category possible and create subcategories if necessary.

Don't be discouraged if it doesn't work right away, Williams said.

"Some things are trial and error," she said. "Sometimes it's a matter of just making small adjustments."

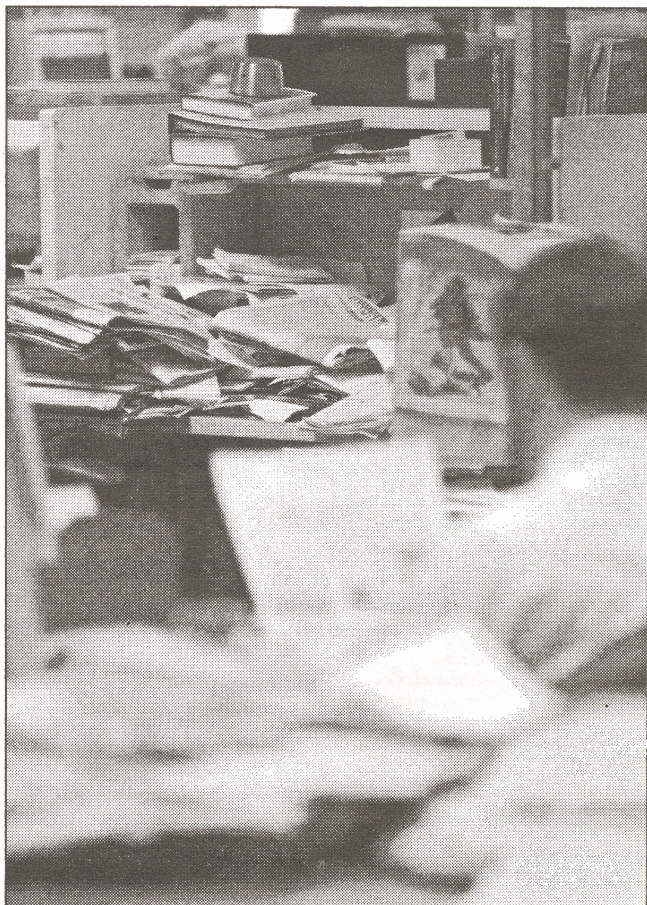
And if it's too overwhelming or you can't seem to stay on track, you can hire a pro. The cost is \$40 to \$200, depending on the individual and the job. The high end is for corporate clients and trainers.

Locally, you can find an organizer through the New England chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers. Look for someone who understands your needs and with whom you feel you can work closely. Some will do the organizing themselves. Others will coach you through the job.

However you get organized, staying there will take time. Schedule a few minutes every day to do it, experts say. Do a bigger cleanout every few months.

"It's not all about putting it in a nice neat pile and walking away from it," Williams said. "A lot of times with the regular clutter there is a lot of emotional clutter."

But once it's gone, she said, "It can be very freeing."



STAFF PHOTO BY LISA HORNAK

THE 'PILE FILE' METHOD: A reporter's desk at the Boston Herald is one example of a work space that could use some shaping up.