![MindTools — Essential skills for an excellent career]

How to Be Organized

Taking Control of Your Day

Time is really the only capital any human being has, and the one thing he can't afford to waste.

– American inventor Thomas Edison

Do you waste much time during your day due to disorganization? Perhaps you spend 5 minutes searching for a misplaced file, another 5 looking for an email detailing an important meeting, and perhaps 10 minutes more finding today's to-do list, lost in the piles of papers on your desk. Before you know it, you've spent an hour throughout the day looking for things you can't find. And that's just one day! Imagine how much time you're losing each week, each month, and each year!

Many people struggle with disorganization. And, while some think they can succeed amidst the chaos, this disorganization can end up costing a high price. Disorganization can hold us back from getting the promotion we've always wanted. It can block our creativity, add stress to our lives, and prevent us from being as productive and effective as we could be.

In this article, we'll look at some strategies for getting organized, so that we can start living and working to our full potential.

Organizing Best Practices

Use a notebook – One strategy that many organized people use is to work with a notebook. This notebook is like a "catch-all" for your thoughts and for what you do during the day.

For instance, use your notebook to take notes when you're talking with a colleague or with a client on the phone. If you're working and need to remember to tell your boss something, write it down in your notebook. If you have a brainstorming session in the afternoon, your ideas can go in there too.

The advantage of a notebook is that you keep all of your thoughts, conversations, and ideas in one place. And, once things are written down, you don't have to waste mental energy remembering everything!

It's helpful to start a new, dated page each day. This way, you can easily go back and find the information you need.

Get organized during the first 15 minutes of your day – When you walk into the office in the morning, spend your first 15 minutes looking at what you need to do that day. Start with the "Next Actions" list from your **Action Program** ⊕, if you have one – or make a **To-Do List** ⊕, with your most important **priorities** ⊕ at the top. This gives you a solid grasp of what tasks are most important to complete first, and what you can complete later in the afternoon.

During this organization time, knowing when you do your best work can also be a helpful scheduling tool. Find out more with our article **Is This a Morning Task?** ⊕

Clear your desktop – Your desktop can often become a "catch-all" zone. There are old papers, future projects, files you're currently using, and a pile of papers you simply haven't put away yet. Although some people feel they work better with a cluttered desk, it's distracting and inhibiting for many of us.

If you want to get organized, then clearing your desktop is a smart strategy. This can be a time-consuming task, so it might be best to work on this at the end of the day or at the weekend. It's important to do this slowly, especially if your desk is extremely cluttered!

Start by clearing everything off of your desk. **File** ⊕ papers and reports that you've finished using, and recycle anything you don't need. Office supplies should go in a drawer or cabinet.

The items that are left are probably files and paperwork that you currently need.

Create an "action area" on your desk – Use this area for the materials you need to complete the project you're currently working on. As soon as you complete each "action," clear this area off to get ready for your next task.

Organize supplies or files you use often – The more often you use something, the closer it should be to you. Arrange your desk for usefulness, not for the way it looks.

How do you keep your desk organized? Spend five minutes at the end of each day clearing off your desk and keeping it organized. This way, you can come into work the next day with a clear, organized surface.

Organizing Tools

We live in a time of some amazing technology. Let's use it to get organized!

Use digital calendars or planners – Many people use these to help organize their schedules. These can be very helpful for keeping you on task!

For instance, many digital calendars, like Outlook and iCal, allow you to color-code tasks. You could use red for urgent, green for extended deadlines, and blue for low-priority tasks. Color-coding your day helps you quickly see what you need to do first.

Use a spreadsheet to keep track of your progress ⊕ – Spreadsheets are helpful because you can use conditional formatting that alerts you when tasks are getting close to their deadlines. As a result, you can see at a glance which items are, or are not, on schedule. This is especially helpful when you're working with a team, and when you have to be aware of people's progress.

Organizing Tricks

Offer yourself a reward – If you're finding it difficult to stay organized, try offering yourself a reward. For instance, if you complete four things on your to-do list, reward yourself with a cup of coffee, or with 10 minutes of free time to surf the web.

Use one calendar – If you enter some things in your PDA and some things on your desk planner, then you're probably going to miss key appointments and tasks.

Schedule small tasks – If a task or project requires action beforehand (like picking up bagels and coffee for the staff meeting), then schedule these related tasks into your planner as well. This helps you set aside enough time to get everything done.

Scan your documents – If you don't like having an office with lots of filing cabinets, then why not scan all of your documents and store them on your computer? If you have a personal assistant, this would be a great task to delegate. If not, then try scanning a few documents every day, and eventually scan all project documents over the long-term.

Choose organizing tools that you like – Pick products that appeal to you on a visual or emotional level. For example, if you decide to start using a notebook on a daily basis, then purchase a nice one that you really like. When your tools are visually appealing and comfortable, you're more likely to use them.

Key Points

Disorganization can cost you career advancement, decrease your productivity, and add stress to your life. Devoting time and effort to getting organized can help you tremendously in the long run.

Start by using a notebook on a regular basis to keep track of conversations, ideas, and reminders. And begin every day with a clean desk and an organized to-do list. Use technology to keep your schedule and projects running smoothly. Features like color coding and audio alarms can help you ensure that you don't miss appointments or deadlines.

This site teaches you the skills you need for a happy and successful career; and this is just one of many tools and resources that you'll find here at Mind Tools. Subscribe to our **free newsletter**, or **join the Mind Tools Club** and really supercharge your career!

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