

# Yes, You Can Learn To Keep Your Desk Clutter-Free

by Margaret Spencer Dixon, Esq.

**Myth:** A desk piled high with papers, notes, and reminders demonstrates that you are busy and productive. It is an effective way to keep on top of your work commitments, because "out of sight" means "out of mind."

**Reality:** In most cases, such clutter is a visual distraction that prevents you from concentrating fully on the task at hand. Those who work well at a disorganized desk probably do so in spite of the chaos, not because of it. Consistent use of a personal organizer, or at least a "to do" list and a calendar, is a more reliable way of keeping track of your projects and appointments.

What does your desk look like right now? Is it a neat, orderly surface conducive to efficient work and clear thinking? Or is it a repository for papers, projects, memos, advance sheets, legal magazines, Post-It notes, a half-eaten sandwich, and empty soda cans? Most likely, it vacillates between those two extremes. At times, it reflects the high-pressure, fast-paced nature of your practice. At other times (when the clutter has gone beyond the limits of what your eye can stand), it is immaculate – the result of several hundred dollars worth of billable time foregone while you tidied up the debris of your last few dozen projects.

Unless you are one of the few attorneys whose natural orderliness (or that of a devoted assistant) helps you maintain a working area which is well-organized and free of distracting clutter, it is time to consider changing your work habits to include keeping your desk clutter-free. Consider these benefits:

1. A tidy, well-organized work area will help you focus on the task at hand because there will be no papers, magazines, phone messages, or other items to distract you.
2. The items that you need to work on a particular project will be easy to find, because they were filed neatly away when you cleaned up your desk.

3. You won't have to worry about remembering appointments or work commitments, because you brought your "to-do" list and your calendar up-to-date as you cleaned up your desk.
4. You will no longer misplace papers, invitations, announcements, and other items whose temporary or permanent disappearance results in lost opportunities, frantic races to meet deadlines, or even missed deadlines and the threat of malpractice.
5. You will no longer spend frantic minutes going through piles of papers on your desk trying to find a crucial item that you must have to complete the project at hand. A survey has shown that people spend an average of 22 minutes a day looking for items on or around their desks. (Tracy, Declan, *Clear Your Desk!* Dover, New Hampshire: Dearborn Publishing Group, 1992 at 35.) At a billable rate of \$150 an hour, this adds up to more than \$12,000 a year.
6. Your desk will look, rightly or wrongly, as though it belongs to someone who is on top of her work and able to handle her responsibilities.
7. Your desk will reflect the calm-inducing beauty of orderliness, which in turn will reduce the level of stress you face every day.

Do these benefits outweigh the following costs of keeping an orderly desk?

1. It will take a measure of time and effort to achieve a clutter-free desk initially, and it will take a few minutes a day to maintain it.
2. You will no longer be able to illustrate – to yourself or to others – how busy you are based upon the height of the stacks of paper on your desk (and floor, credenza, shelves, etc.)
3. You will have to give up the adrenaline rush that comes from the exquisite relief of finally un-

earthing a crucial document from the piles on your desk.

4. You will no longer have a ready-made excuse for missing opportunities to attend professional functions, because you will no longer misplace the announcement or invitation, only to rediscover it two days after the event has occurred.

### **How to Clean Up Your Desk**

*(A Step-by-Step Guide for the Organizationally-Challenged)*

Have the following items at hand:

1. A few hours of low-pressure time during which you are unlikely to be interrupted. Weekend mornings are good, as is the “recovery” time after you’ve met a major deadline and your brain is not yet back in shape to deal with “real” work.
2. A wastebasket and recycling container.
3. A pad or two of sticky notes.
4. Two thick writing pads. Write “TO DO” at the top of one pad and “WORK PROJECTS” at the top of the other.
5. A pen or pencil.
6. Your personal organizer, or at least a pocket calendar.
7. One desk drawer with adequate room for office supplies.

### **A Plan**

Sometimes the task of cleaning up your desk seems so overwhelming that a major stumbling block is figuring out where to begin. For simplicity’s sake, here is an arbitrary plan that will take you over the hurdle: begin with the item nearest your telephone, and work clockwise around your desk until you reach your telephone again.

Pick up the one item nearest your telephone. (The only things that do not count as “items” for the

purposes of this clean-up are: a telephone, a lamp, a computer, your pad of sticky notes, your two legal pads, your writing implements, and your personal organizer. That’s it. Everything else is subject to this clean-up.) Handle each item once, relocating it according to the chart on page three of this article.

At the end of this process, your desktop will be clear, your calendar and Rolodex will be up-to-date, and your to-do list will be ready to be prioritized. All the paper that was on your desk is either in the wastebasket, recycling container, or in numbered or labeled piles on the floor. Use your WORK PROJECTS list to have file labels typed up for each project, and transfer the papers into the labeled files. The first character of each label should be the number of the project on your WORK PROJECTS list, which has now become the primary index to your project files. (It’s a simple matter, using word processing, to create secondary indices cross-referenced according to client, case, subject matter, etc.) Your “Hold” and “To Read” items can also go in files, or can stay in neat stacks on a shelf near your desk.

### **Daily Maintenance**

Every day – ideally, just before you go home – quickly go through the basic procedure outlined above. Starting at your telephone, pick up every item you come across and put it in its proper place or file, making notes on your calendar, to-do list, and Rolodex as you go. This is also a good time to check your calendar for tomorrow’s appointments and to prepare your to-do list. With practice, you’ll be able to sweep through these tasks very quickly. And the real joy comes in the mornings, when you arrive at the office ready to begin your work day at a tidy, clutter-free desk.

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## A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE FOR THE ORGANIZATIONALLY CHALLENGED

IF THE ITEM IS A:	DO THIS:
Knickknack, photo, clock, plant, mug, pencil-holder, set of plastic teeth that chatter when you wind them up, etc.	Put it on a shelf or any surface that is not part of your work area. (Arrange your clock so you can see it from your desk, ideally just behind your guest chair so that you can glance at it discreetly.)
Pencil, pen, notepad, tape, stapler, staple-remover, letter-opener, paper clip, etc.	Put it in the drawer for office supplies. If you have stacks of writing pads, put them on a shelf within easy reach of your desk. If you have more office supplies than fit in your drawer, return them to the supply room.
Paper unrelated to a work project, such as invitations, announcements, dental appointment reminders, etc.	Insert the appropriate information on your calendar, to-do list, personal organizer and/or Rolodex, then throw the paper away. If you need the item to accomplish some action on your part, put a sticky note on the item saying "Hold" and place it on the floor. Add other "hold" items beneath the first one.
Potential reading material (unrelated to a specific work project)	Quickly skim the table of contents, decide which articles you want to read, and mark the appropriate pages with sticky notes. Put the item on the floor with a sticky note on top that says "To Read." If nothing in the table of contents catches your eye, toss the item or send it along its routing path, as appropriate.
Paper related to a work project	Start a numbered list on the pad headed WORK PROJECTS. Identify the project by client, case, and/or subject matter. Write the number of each project on a sticky note, put the note on top of the paper, and put the paper on the floor. Continue numbering and describing projects on your WORK PROJECTS list as you pick up each piece of paper you come across. When you find a piece of paper related to a project you have already described, refer to your list, identify the project by number, and put the new item underneath the first piece of paper (so that you can still read the number on the sticky note). If the item requires action, make a note on your TO DO list; include a reference to the number of the project (according to the WORK PROJECTS list you are creating) so that you will know where to find the item when it is time to work on it.