
AMEN to all that

Four simple rules to turbo charge your productivity

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In brief

There are people who can function perfectly efficiently when surrounded by chaos. I am not one of them. For me, an overflowing in-tray simply represents a lot of things I haven't done. So do the thirty-seven magazines sitting on the sideboard, opened at "must read" articles. I find all these things distracting. I work best when I am in present time and I do that best when my peripheral vision is not noticing things I have put off. They only prompt stress and distraction.

I found a simple way around this in 1995, when an unnamed but much admired consultant sat in my office from 7am to 6pm. When she sat down, she asked me to pick up the first piece of paper I noticed. She asked me why I shouldn't throw it out. Eventually I did, but only after she had exhausted all the other options. That was all she did. As the day progressed, I threw more and more things away. I did, however, do the things that had to be done. And, more importantly, I took a small step toward starting the things I had been putting off. Action was underway.

What did I discover in this session? Several things:

- Where I previously saw the disorganised nature of my office as a sign of my creative side, I now saw it was a sign of distraction.
- I realised I am at my most productive when I am focussed only on the task at hand.
- I also found that the amount of work in my in-tray was not overwhelming. Where I thought it was full of things that were hard to do, it was really full of things that could be easily disposed of in small steps.
- I also found that most things can be binned, delegated or filed. There are very few things that I actually have to do myself. With more time to focus on them, I do them very well.

I know of few processes that have as much leverage as productively cleaning your workspace. A clear desk can be a powerful platform for clear thinking, creativity and action. There are really only four things a manager could, and should, do with the any item that comes across his desk. In the following pages, I have simplified this process into four steps under the simple acronym, AMEN. I use it every four weeks or so, to tidy up my act and put actions in place. It is usually the best day of the month.



The four things you can do with anything on your desk



Abandon It Now

Seriously, pick up the first piece of paper on your desk and ask yourself “Why shouldn’t I bin this?” Does it just keep reminding you of something you haven’t done? In that case it is only generating stress. If it is that important, why haven’t you actioned it already? And if it’s that important, you can probably find it again on Google in about 5 seconds. Bin it now. Abandon stress, clear your desk and move on.

Still holding on? Then go to the next step.



Manage It Now

Okay, so someone is going to have to handle it. It doesn't sound like that person is you. If it required one of your strengths, you would already have done it. So who is the best person to handle it? Who is good at this sort of thing? Identify them. Write instructions on it and send it to them. Tell them what has to be done, by whom and when. If it requires an email, send it. If it needs a meeting, make the appointment. Put it in your diary. Bin the paper or send it to file. Just get rid of it.

Still holding on? Then go to the next step.



Execute It Now

So you are the only one who can solve this one? Okay, what is the first step toward the solution? Is it a phone call, an email, a meeting? Then take that action now. If it's a seminar to upgrade a skill, then book it or bin it. If it's a meeting, set it up now. Put it in your diary. Maybe it is something that you will need to focus on quietly for an hour or so. In that case, set aside the time in your diary now. If you are going to need another hour, set aside that too. When that time comes, do nothing else. Now move on to the next item.

Still holding on? Then go to the next step.



Note It Now

If you have gotten this far and you are still holding on, then there are four things we can say about you and that piece of paper: either you have not binned aggressively enough, or you have not been prepared to delegate the management of it, or you do not want to execute it. There is one other option: it can be filed. Such items exist, like stuff for annual audits, or future conferences, or ideas for sales presentations. Frankly, a lot of these could be binned too, but if you feel it is essential, send it for filing now.

Pick up the next piece of paper. Go to Step 1



For more information, visit my website www.alanhargreaves.com

Hi, I'm Alan Hargreaves. I specialise in simplifying complex business problems. In over 35 years as a business executive, I have never found an issue that cannot be addressed through identifying the essential but simple steps required to make any problem manageable. It might be your career, your firm, your team or your strategy. It doesn't matter. All hurdles can be lowered through dispassionate analysis, and all executives can embrace simple processes to take them forward.

Using these techniques, I have helped hundreds of people through the various stages of their business or career development. It may be the challenge of taking on new responsibilities; it could be the task of managing a business you have created yourself; it may be handling a difficult team in the midst of major change. I use a straightforward combination of key principles to get results: collaboration, adaptation, simplification and action. You can contact me anytime at alan@alanhargreaves.com.



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