

# Clear the Clutter

By Dianna Booher

The way you approach your in-box, workspace, and filing has as much to do with how much you get done in a day as does the number and size of your projects. Consider the following steps to define and then streamline work habits, patterns, and methods.

## Optimize Your Scheduling by Building White Space into Your Calendar

To schedule your work most effectively, do not schedule enough tasks to consume every working and waking moment. Plan to about 80 percent capacity when you're going to be in the office and about 50 percent capacity just after returning from a trip. That means for a 50-hour work week, schedule about 40 hours of work, knowing that another 10 hours of "stuff" will appear unexpectedly.

## Avoid Work-and-Wait Patterns

Waiting for approvals, opinions, information, equipment, or resources is a major timewaster. Here are some tactics that can minimize, if not prevent, slow-downs:

- Get other people's buy-in on the due dates before you schedule tasks.
- Call people and explain your priorities and urgency.
- Offer to help people do the work or collect the information you need.
- Let people know you don't have to have the information "in formal/final form."
- Let people know you'll take incomplete information until the total information is available.
- Ask people who they can refer you to for further help/information.
- Escalate the problem to your own supervisor to negotiate the information at a higher level.
- Remind everyone involved that you need the information as soon as it's available.

## Be Wary of High-Tech, Time-Saving Devices

High-tech may mean high-time. Before buying any "time-saving" gadget, consider the hidden investment of time in its use: Time to select and purchase the appropriate item. Time to learn how to operate it. Time to set it up and store it and secure it. Time to refurbish or repair it. Time to insure it and replace it.

It's important to recognize that low-tech items like the pencil, broom, razor blade, spoon, and bucket can be real time-savers themselves.

## **Clutter Your To-Do List, Not Your Mind**

Your mind can hold only about seven chunks of information at once. Why push your luck? Do you frequently have flashes of brilliance when you're in the shower, out for a walk, driving the freeway? Write them down immediately rather than juggle them in your mind.

Those who make lists stay on target and save time between tasks and ideas without wondering what comes next. Those who don't make lists are at the mercy of events, memory, and mediocrity.

## **Equip Multiple Places of Existence**

Wherever you need to do work, have there what you need—paper, pen, stamps, stationery, stapler and extra staples, rubber bands, binder clips, phone, calculator, computer, food. With the routine tools at hand, you can FINISH all these petty little projects while you're waiting in the car, in the line, in the lobby.

Get a transport system for what you have to carry back and forth. Sorting and packing and then resorting and repacking into your briefcase can be a time-consuming chore. If you have several continuing projects, then have a bag, case, or binder for each.

## **Create Systems and Routines for the Daily Duties**

Systems and routines make things faster, cheaper, better. If you collect the same information over and over, can you compile a form to hand to your customer or employee?

If you give out the same answers to the same questions, can you prepare a flyer to make available to visitors and callers? If you give the same instructions for operating the same equipment, can you post the procedure near the equipment? If you respond to customers about the same products, can you create boilerplate letters and proposals ready for customizing? If you have a typical weekly staff meeting, can you use the same boilerplate agenda for customizing?

## **Use the 2x2x2 Rule**

When the amount of work in your in-box seems overwhelming, use the 2x2x2 rule (two-hours, two-days, two-weeks rule) to eliminate desk stress.

Sort with this rule in mind:

- Two-minute (or less) tasks due in two-hours or less: These are two-minute tasks due within a couple of hours.

- Two-hour (or less) tasks due in two days or less: Sort into the two-day pile things that can wait a couple of days and that will take longer than a couple of minutes but not more than two hours.
- Two-day (or more) tasks that can wait for two weeks: In the final pile—the two-week pile—sort projects that will take you longer than two hours to complete and on which you have at least two weeks before the deadline.

This method will build momentum, a sense of accomplishment, and an atmosphere of maximum concentration.

## **Complete Things**

Bonuses come upon the completion of projects. Signed contracts come at the end of negotiations. Points go on the scoreboard only when the runner crosses the goal line. Incomplete tasks leave you feeling depressed and wasted. One thing completed is worth ten things on hold. And you'll feel energized by the accomplishment.

## **Work in Marathons**

Marathons serve two motivations: To catch up or to get ahead.

When you feel as though you're slipping further and further behind, decide to do a work marathon to catch up. Arrive early. Work late. Send out for food. Don't allow interruptions. Don't rework anything. Work fast and don't look up between projects. Put in three or four days like that, and you'll feel caught up enough to face the world again.

On other occasions, you may have monumental tasks before you and want to get a jump start on them. Schedule a marathon and make it a big deal. The exhilaration from what you accomplish will more than reduce the fatigue from the actual work.

When you get things done quickly, efficiently, and on schedule, not only do you impress your boss and your coworkers, but you create a sense of accomplishment that satisfies yourself as well. The next time you feel like you just can't get organized, try implementing a few or all of these tips to build momentum.

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***Dianna Booher** works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of **Booher Consultants**, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication. Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of "21 Top Speakers for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its "Top 100 Thought Leaders" and "Top 100 Minds on Personal Development." [www.booher.com](http://www.booher.com) or call 800.342.6621.*

*For more tips on conflict resolution, see Communicate with Confidence: How to Say It Right the First Time and Every Time (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.*