

SMALL-BUSINESS REPORT

A tidy work space saves time, money

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Monday was National Clean Off Your Desk Day.

Did you miss the memo? Perhaps it's buried under one of those piles of paperwork on your desk.



A PROCESS: Attorney Ilbert Phillips, in his West Los Angeles office, consults with professional organizer Donna McMillan. ANNIE WELLS Los Angeles Times

Don't worry. The entire month of January has been dubbed National Get Organized Month. You still have time to tackle what for most people is a top New Year's resolution.

Despite their resolve to do better each year, small-business owners often end up pushing time for organization to the bottom of their to-do lists. Yet a disorganized desk and office can be a drain on time and the bottom line.

If you can't find a client's file, notes from the last sales meeting or an important telephone number in 30 or fewer seconds, your methods are costing you money in terms of lost sales and lower productivity, not to mention mental stress, experts say.

"Getting organized is truly our only hope to stay ahead of the game, to stay productive and to stay competitive," said Barry Izsak, owner of Arranging It All, an organization company in Austin, Texas, and president of the 3,800-member National Assn. of Professional Organizers (www.napo.net).

The biggest challenge for most small-business owners is paperwork, despite technology-inspired dreams of a paperless office.

"If any of us look around our offices at this very moment, we see piles and files filled with paper," said Mona Williams, vice president of buying for Coppell, Texas-based Container Store.

"New technology and all of the data we now receive translates to more reports and pieces of paper we have to keep up with," she said.

To help conquer the paper storm, Container Store and other retailers are coming out with new lines of office organization products.

Gone are the traditional putty or smoky-gray plastic accessories. Instead, bright colors and textured neutrals are being rolled out to satisfy the clamor for attractive yet functional pieces.

Even the manila folder, the workhorse of the office, has been transformed by contemporary printed patterns of colorful stripes, circles and swirls.

Container Store, which has seen its office section become a more important area in its stores, says the growing

number of home offices and the popularity of open storage systems are helping to drive the demand for better-designed products.

"We are seeing a trend of higher-end materials, color and texture that is going to look more like home design," Williams said.

Target Corp. is also answering the demand for office products with personality. Its line of organizing tools from Real Simple magazine sports the trendy colors of orange, hot pink and chocolate brown.

Having the proper tools solves only part of the organization equation, experts say. To be a success, you need an organizing system tailored to your needs and a commitment to spend the time to keep it up.

"It's about the client; it's not about the stuff," said Donna D. McMillan, owner of McMillan & Co. Professional Organizing in West Los Angeles.

Professional organizers such as McMillan typically charge \$100 to \$200 an hour to analyze your work space, create systems to optimize your workflow and teach you how to use and maintain them.

McMillan, who was recently named best organizing coach by the Los Angeles chapter of the national organizers group, says people have messy offices for several reasons.

First, they try to do everything themselves, the typical time-draining habit of small-business owners.

Second, they are perfectionists. That leads to indecision and procrastination. They can't decide what to do with that e-mail document, so they let it pile up with the other unanswered electronic correspondence. Or they may be holding out for the perfect file cabinets, which they don't have time to shop for, so paperwork piles up on the floor.

Last, they don't allow themselves time at the end of the day to stop for 15 or 30 minutes to get organized for the next day.

Most don't cry uncle until they realize how much their inefficient ways are costing them.

For attorney Ilbert Phillips of West Los Angeles, it was a move to a smaller office with fewer employees that started him on the road to an expensive habit of office chaos.

"Lawyers who charge \$200 to \$300 an hour cannot bill a client for looking for their files, so you have to eat the cost," Phillips said. "It had the overall effect of cutting into the bottom [line]."

When he first hired McMillan several years ago, she sent him her list of favorite organizing tools, which include yellow highlighters, desktop hanging file bins for "hot action" files and cardboard file storage boxes. A complete list is on her website at <http://www.organizer4me.com>.

The first thing McMillan did was recommend that Phillips install antivirus software. Then she created a computer backup process for him to follow and gave him the name of a computer technician to keep vital office systems up and running.

Mail was the next target.

She set up a sorting system that ensured time-sensitive legal papers were not lost in piles of junk mail. Phillips has outboxes that match the mail system labels.

She also set up a personalized version of her favorite organizing system, the desktop action files. McMillan favors a plastic hanging file box that holds half a dozen or so file folders labeled, in her case, "To Call," "To Pay," "To Read Now," "To Buy" and "To Reply."

Phillips' action folders are geared to his workflow and include one for his bookkeeper, who comes in twice a month to record checks, invoices and receipts.

McMillan also uses the plastic containers as project boxes to corral paperwork related to a single project. They are the right size to set on a credenza or a bookshelf when not in use, she said.

She taught Phillips how to make the best use of what she calls "million-dollar real estate" on his desk and within arm's reach. Files that are used less often were cleared out and stored in file cabinets on the other side of the room. Tax records and other archive materials were sent to off-site storage.

McMillan revisits Phillips' office to tune up the organization systems about once a year and to make sure Phillips and his assistant are living by her mantras that everything in the office must have a home and that organizing is a process, not a one-day project.

"I find that people don't know how to do things that will make them more efficient. They've never been taught," McMillan said.

Online resources and books are readily available to help anyone get organized.

For some, hiring a professional is worth the price.

"When you hire an organizer, Phillips said, "it is an expense that has a duration. It ends. Where if you are disorganized, the cost goes on forever."

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