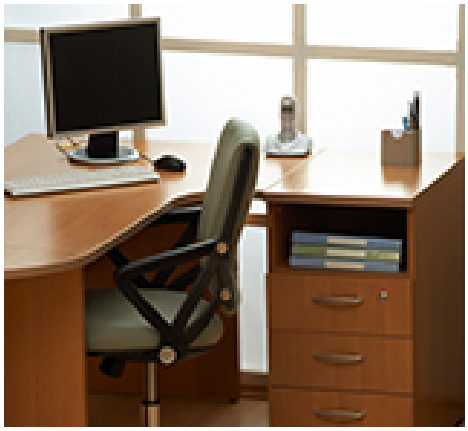
Staying Organized Once You Find a System That Works



Of course, the first step in getting organized is finding the right system. Whether your goal is a more manageable in-box, a garage that will hold your car, or less time spent running errands, you need a set way of doing things and a home for everything you own. But any system is meaningless if you don't stick with it over the long-term. The real challenge is learning how to maintain your momentum past the first week of "being organized."

Make the Time

A system is only as good as the time you devote to using it. For example, setting up files for organizing your incoming paperwork into action categories is a great way to keep to-do's under control. However, if you simply plop the mail on your desk each day without opening or sorting it, you've defeated the whole purpose of your system. If you're good about adding paper to those folders but never seem to pull any back out, you may actually find yourself in a worse position than before you started!

An organizing system is like a pet in that it needs regular care and feeding to survive. Some systems (like sorting the mail or tidying up your desk) require daily attention, while others (like paying bills or shopping for groceries) might need to happen weekly or monthly. Whatever the time frame, setting aside a regular block in your calendar for acting on that system will help turn a "technique" into a habit. Staying organized may be as simple as reminding yourself to leave your keys and briefcase by the front door when you come home or stopping work 10 minutes early so you have time to put away your supplies at the end of the day. Of course, larger systems will require more time. That could be an hour once a week for filing or another hour each month for bookkeeping. Figure out what it takes to stay on top of your "stuff" and be prepared to commit the time if you want to see lasting results.

Keep Things Lean and Mean

"Clutter creep" is the most deadly foe of any organizing system. This silent killer sneaks in slowly over time and you don't realize that your files, closet or schedule have become overloaded until it's too late! The key to avoiding clutter creep is giving your systems a regular purging BEFORE they start to need it. You don't have to devote every weekend to cleaning out your files though. Simply time your efforts to coincide with a logical "trigger" activity (go through your closets at each change of season, clear out your filing system when you pull your tax papers for April 15th, etc.) Even just a quick once-over, removing anything that is clearly outdated, unnecessary, and unused will keep things in check.

Review and Revise

A system that works for you today is not guaranteed to serve you as well this same time next year. Things change, the center does not hold, and you find yourself with different priorities as time goes by. It's folly to keep plugging away with an obsolete system that isn't meeting your needs. Staying organized means recognizing when an about-face is in order! The signs are unmistakable: processes that once seemed easy are now difficult and cumbersome, you're missing deadlines, and things are falling through the cracks. Don't get frustrated and give up, saying, "See, I knew I couldn't stay organized!" Step back, take a breath, and calmly re-evaluate the situation. Ask yourself what isn't working for you anymore and why. More importantly, try to determine exactly what needs to change for this system to suit you better. Your answer will guide you toward the right tweaks and adjustments.

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