

Inc.

The Real Consequences of Office Clutter

By J.J. McCorvey | Jan 29, 2010

A recent survey says a disorganized workspace can lead to decreased productivity and unprofessional behavior.

Every business professional has fallen prey to the routine. One errant piece of mail becomes a looming pile. Empty cups from the morning coffee ritual stealthily begin to populate your desk, and soon, the entire workspace seems to vanish altogether. But office clutter isn't just a matter of keeping up appearances – it can actually cripple your job performance, according to a recent survey by Office Depot on workspace organization.

Out of more than 1,000 office workers surveyed in December, 82 percent said they feel being organized improves their performance, yet 32 percent admitted to keeping a disorganized workspace and 42 percent said they clean up clutter only once a month or less. The survey was part of a campaign launched by the office supply retail chain and the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO), a non-profit network of organizing consultants, to establish January as national "Get Organized Month."

"Nobody is ever going to find the time to become more organized," says Laura Leist, president of NAPO. "You need to make the time, just as you would make an appointment with a client."

According to the survey, clutter such as bestrewn papers, food containers, and even spare shoes can lead to many unprofessional situations, with a large number of respondents reporting lost time (47 percent), meeting tardiness (16 percent), and missed deadlines (14 percent) as a result of their behavior. Leist says small business owners are doubly vulnerable to these blunders, since they often "wear many more hats than in a larger organization" – though hiring an assistant isn't always the quickest solution.

"That [assistant] is usually great at maintaining systems that have already been created, but not necessarily how to implement and create that system," she says.

A rather vocal assistant is what brought Margot Sterns, owner of MTS Promotions, a provider of promotional products for companies, to the realization that her home office in New York City was in desperate need of a makeover three years ago. Since she was the business' sole employee, Sterns says she had trouble finding space for the orders she processed for the multiple clients she juggled at one time, and had to hire extra hands – despite her embarrassment. But after attempting to wade through Sterns' sea of hats, T-shirts, foam hands, and water bottles, the new assistant eventually gave up and hit her with the honest truth.

"He basically said to me, 'You really need help,'" says Sterns. "There were old samples mixed with new,

there was stuff all over my desk ... He tried, but it just got so overwhelming."

That's when she decided to take a more proactive role in putting the kibosh on her office clutter. With the help of Sharon Danzger, owner of Control Chaos and member of NAPO, Sterns took two weeks to reorganize her office from what she called "chaotic and out of control" to a structured work environment that runs faster and smoother than ever. Now, all of her promotion samples go in labeled boxes, such as "school items." Whenever she gets an invoice from a vendor, it goes directly into a folder instead of on her desk. And she's instituted a policy that whenever a new item comes in, something else must go out.

As a result of the new system, which she says is still in place to this day, Sterns says she's saved more time, which has allowed her to take on more clients and hire a permanent assistant. She's even started doing parties and bar mitzvahs and has increased her profits by more than 20 percent.

"I do believe [getting organized] is worth the investment of time and money, because what you get back, I think makes it more than worth it," Sterns says. "Getting rid of all that stuff really made a huge difference in my life."

Along with labeling and creating folders and boxes for certain items, Leist of NAPO says there are plenty of things businesses can do to become more organized, such as appointing a current employee as the "project champion," investing in CRM software, and making a decision about an item before it even goes on the desk.

"It's a lifestyle choice people make," she says. "If you don't make a decision on something and just set it down and say, 'I'll deal with it later,' that becomes clutter."