

Organization can save small firms time and money

By Cyndia Zwahlen, Los Angeles Times

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Management
180°

CONSULTING

Office workers lose the equivalent of almost a week of work a year looking for files, online documents, staplers and other materials, a 2010 study found.

Today is National Clean Off Your Desk Day. No joke.

The "holiday" was created by Anne Chase Moeller, daughter of one of the founding brothers of reference book Chase's Calendar of Events.

It's safe to say that probably not a lot of people will be celebrating, but it can be a reminder that good organization of papers, files and other materials can save small businesses money. A fact that is too often neglected.

Growing or struggling, many small-business owners are sort of flying by the seat of their pants when it comes to getting organized," said Nadine Levy, owner of Management 180 in Calabasas, which specializes in organizing small businesses.

Office workers lose the equivalent of almost a week of work a year looking for files, online documents, staplers and other materials, according to a 2010 study funded by office-products maker Brother International Corp.

More seriously, a lack of organization can lead to losses "if you don't file your tax records on time because you can't find your receipts, or if you can't find something you need for a client meeting you are heading out to, or if you have a payment due but can't find your records," said Donna Rosman, owner of Professional Organizing Services in Monrovia.

The recession-spurred layoffs that hit many businesses can make organizing even tougher.

"The staff who stays inherits not only more tasks but also the files of the person who left, who inherited their files from the person who had the job before," said organizer Regina Lark, owner of A Clear Path in Los Angeles.

"They don't have time to deal with what I call 'the wreckage of the past,' so they just keep building on it, setting up new files.

"You can just see the cycle and it's ridiculous."

Small businesses are now a focus of the National Assn. of Professional Organizers.

In this past year we've developed a new strategic plan," said Chris McKenry, owner of Los Angeles-based Get it Together LA! and a board member of the trade group.

Bruce Shannahoff, a chiropractor and owner of Valley Spinal Decompression Center in Encino, credits McKenry for improving his workflow by organizing his office.

"You have to have a space that works for you. You want to look polished and on top of your game,"

Shannahoff said. One of his favorite items is a paper organizer McKenry designed and had built into the wall within arm's reach of the reception desk to hold frequently used marketing materials and printer paper.

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Regina Lark, owner of A Clear Path, says often when an office worker leaves, others don't have time to deal with files that person handled and just build on "the wreckage of the past." (Don Bartletti, Los Angeles Times / January 10, 2011)

In this past year we've developed a new strategic plan," said Chris McKenry, owner of Los Angeles-based Get it Together LA! and a board member of the trade group. Bruce Shannahoff, a chiropractor and owner of Valley Spinal Decompression Center in Encino, credits McKenry for improving his workflow by organizing his office. "You have to have a space that works for you. You want to look polished and on top of your game," Shan-nahoff said. One of his favorite items is a paper organizer McKenry designed and had built into the wall within arm's reach of the reception desk to hold frequently used marketing materials and printer paper. Professional organizers generally charge \$55 to \$125 an hour for a three or four-hour session. But there is much you can do on your own. Here are some tips from professionals:

- Start small. "Just take a pile, find yourself a clear surface and just start putting things into categories and see what you have," McKenry said.

Have a recycle bin handy, along with a trash can. Shred appropriate papers, or stockpile them for a future session. Set a realistic schedule.

"Every hour you devote to de-cluttering you need to have another hour to sort and put back," Lark said.

- Set up a system. "A lot of disorganization just comes from the compulsion of avoidance — you are avoiding making decisions" about what to do with a piece of paper, e-mail or other information, Rosman said.

Several books are available on how to set up a system and make it work for you.

- Several organizers recommended that owners and employees keep small spiral notebooks on hand for phone numbers, to-do items and other information that might otherwise be scribbled on small scraps of paper and lost. The information can later be entered into a computerized contact management or other kind of program.
- Don't be shy about throwing away or deleting documents and other information. Organizers say 80% of information that is filed away is never looked at again.
- Schedule regular maintenance sessions. Daily or weekly, take time to catch up with paperwork, including electronic versions, and purge unneeded documents.

"Realize it's never done," McKenry said. "You are always going to have more paper coming tomorrow."

smallbiz@latimes.com