How to Organize Your Office for Maximum Productivity

Having an optimal workspace can greatly affect your productivity. Here is what you should do.

BY: NEIL PATEL

Where you work affects how you work. Working in a cluttered, messy, or distracting environment will affect your work, and probably in a negative way.
If you're like the average knowledge worker, you spend most of your time sitting in front of a computer screen. Even though your work revolves around a computer, your office as a whole should help you to be as productive as possible.

A well-organized office has huge benefits. In the first place, it provides a feeling of control and competence, which leads to higher levels of productivity. Second, the very fact that it's organized defends against distractions. Your organized office can absorb the incoming work, and position you for success.

Start with a purge

You can't create a productive workspace without The Purge.

Depending on the condition of your office, the purge could take anywhere from a few hours to a whole day.

The final goal of the purge is to have an office that is completely free of clutter.

Create a catch-it space

Every office needs a place to catch incoming junk.

There are three main types of junk that flow into an office: 1) important documents, 2) stuff you need to keep (jacket, umbrella, travel mug), and 3) trash.

A catch-it space should be set up in the most obvious area of your office. If you have a door, create your catch-it space to the right of the door. If you're in a cubicle, create a catch it space somewhere near the entrance.

A catch-it space should have: 1) a credenza or tray for documents; 2) a shelf, hooks, or a box in which to place important items; and 3) a trashcan.

Your catch-it space helps you keep your office clean with little effort.

Keep your desktop clear of clutter

The most important physical space in an office is the desktop.

Most people find that they are most productive when working at a desktop that is free of clutter. Other people, mostly creative types, thrive in a setting that is disorderly.

If you have a penchant for the creative and a secret love for the disorder, then do what suits you. Some entrepreneurs, famously including Tony Hsieh, love a messy desk.

For the less inspired among us, a clean and pristine desktop is the best option. Our work styles are reflected by our work surroundings; a clean workspace creates a productive workflow.

Place two document trays on your desk

A two-tray system is the simplest and most effective for handling incoming paper.

The system works like this: 1) new tray, new documents; 2) old tray, documents you've opened or looked at, and need to deal with.

All new, unread, or unopened documents go in the new tray. This tray is for the benefit of people who wander into your office to toss stuff on your desk. Point to the tray. The new tray is for things that you still have to deal with. Unopened envelopes, folders, documents--it's all waiting for you, neatly stacked, when you're ready for it.

The old tray is for things that you've opened but still need to deal with--scan, file, forward, etc. It's like a to-do list, but at least it's not scattered all over your office

This is a very simple approach, but it works wonders for eliminating paper clutter from a desk, freeing you to be more productive.

Create two zones

Not all work is created equal. You should approach office organization with this two-zone perspective.

Zone 1: Computer work. This is your traditional desktop. You spend most of your time here, knocking stuff out and getting things done.

Zone 2: Non-computer work. This is where you go to do non-computer stuff. It could be the same desk, but simply another area that is cleared of monitors, cords, and chargers. This is where you go when you thumb through documents, use your iPad, sign papers, scan documents, or stamp envelopes--whatever it is that doesn't require a hands-on-the-keyboard approach to work. The two-zone approach to an office helps you both organize your work and your approach to getting the types of things done that you deal with on a daily basis.

Place physical objects into drawers or organizing trays

Most offices need a few supplies. Even Andrew Hyde, the extreme minimalist who stripped his possessions down to 15 things, needs a place to put his iPhone, chargers, earphones, camera, sunglasses, and wallet.

Whether you have 15 items or 500, you need a place to put it all--a place that is out of sight. A desk drawer is the logical place. Avoid the temptation to keep your cute stapler, fashionable tape dispenser, and adorable paper clip holder on top of your desk. For the most part, these supplies need to be stored in an organized and accessible place like a drawer.

Get a bigger trashcan

A bigger trashcan sounds a bit silly, but it's actually a strategic hack. Here's why. Most of the paper that comes into an office can be discarded or digitized rather than filed. Filing papers is one of the tasks that takes the most time, and is thus the most procrastinated.

Because a large trashcan is more visible, you tend to think of it more often. When unnecessary paper comes into your workspace, you're more likely to place it in the trashcan than to stack it in a disheveled paper tower of "No Clue What to Do With It."

A bigger trashcan also prevents trashcan overflow. One of the worst forms of office clutter is a trashcan that reached its capacity three days ago. Get a bigger can, and you'll be able to absorb more waste. Make sure to recycle!

Conclusion

Be sure to combine your personal productivity system with your office organization method. Some productivity methods recommend a certain approach to organizing your office.

Whatever your preferred organizational method or productivity system, don't wait to create your organized office. The longer you wait, the more time you waste.

What methods do you use to create an organized office space?