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Clutter

The paper trail of modern living

BY ALISON ROBERTS, MA

Last issue I spoke at length about household clutter: how it makes us feel, why we hang on to it and strategies to clear our space. This issue will specifically address our challenges with paper. Remember the rumours that suggested that computers were going to create a paperless society? So much for that idea! With the advent of fax machines, printers and photocopiers, we are much more likely to print off documents and emails now than ever before. The trees are not the only ones suffering, so are we!

CONFESSIONS OF A CLUTTER CONSULTANT

Paper is the bane of my existence. There, I said it. Straight from the mouth of a professional organizer. "What hope is there for me," you might be thinking, "if an organizer can't keep control of her paper?" Take heart, there are ways to make sure that you don't get buried under piles of magazines and stacks of filing. Read on for practical strategies on how to manage the paper trail of modern day living.

CONFESSION: I thought I was doing well by grouping my monthly expenses into piles and storing them neatly under my desk. While I had hoped to record these expenses on a monthly basis, I would do so for a month or two and then lose interest and they would pile up. My new year's resolution for 2006 was to not only deal with these expenses on a monthly basis but to enter them directly into an Excel spreadsheet (instead of having a paper summary). I announced this on a number of occasions and here it is, halfway through 2006 and I am still entering my expenses at the end of every month.

Now, instead of being faced with a job 12 times larger



than it needs to be, I am dealing with it on a month by month basis. It is much more manageable this way and it hardly takes any time at all. Did you notice that I announced my intention? This technique may not be for everyone but for me, once I go public with a goal, the thought of being embarrassed is enough to keep me on track. I have used this strategy to run a 10 km run, write a book and go for a month without chocolate.

REALITY: paper needs to be dealt with on a regular basis.

Not too long ago I spent about five hours working with a woman to purge her documents and update her filing system (we recycled papers from 1973). As I prepared to leave at the end of the day she looked at me with panic in her eyes and asked, "now what do I do?" "You schedule a time to deal with your papers on a regular basis," I replied.

Clutter often represents delayed decisions, but no matter how many times you move the piles around, the paper doesn't disappear. Decide on a time to act on your incoming mail and deal with your filing and build it into your weekly or daily routine. Otherwise, notices get lost, invoic-

es don't get paid and people are hit with interest charges and late penalties.

CONFESSION: I was notorious for scribbling ideas on scraps of paper and then generating a small mountain of messages on my computer stand or kitchen table. In addition, it wasn't uncommon for me to remove a file folder from my knapsack and have half a dozen slips of paper slide out onto the floor.

Several months ago I approached my sister's husband about using his on-line account to do research for an upcoming talk. He is a professor at a university in Ontario and agreed to pass on his account info so that I could obtain more current statistics and journal reports. Less than 24 hours after my telephone conversation I returned to my computer to do some research and couldn't find the user name or password. I began searching frantically, lifting up papers, searching inside file folders; I even went through the recycling bin.

My partner was very practical and simply stated, "Just phone him back and ask for the information again." "I can't do that" I wailed, "I'm supposed to be organized." I eventually did find the slip of paper (tucked into my day timer a few months ahead) and proceeded to do my research. That close call taught me a valuable lesson.

REALITY: little scraps of paper and post it notes get lost very easily.

Now I have one central "idea book" in which I record thoughts, quotes and items to follow up on. Date each entry and simply draw a line across the page to conclude your thoughts. Your idea book becomes a chronological list of information that can be reviewed months later. If you operate a business out of your home or are in need of a better solution for phone messages, invest in a spiral bound, carbon copy message book that records every message in duplicate. That way, if your son or daughter claims that they never got the message to go into work early, or you can't find a phone number, you can refer back to the carbon copy that remains in the spiral bound book.

DESIGNING YOUR RETRIEVAL SYSTEM

Many people suffer from the "out of sight, out of mind" syndrome and are reluctant to file their papers away for fear of forgetting about them. While this is a common concern, it actually indicates a poorly designed filing system. When people are concerned that they won't be able to find information once it is filed, that is a clue that they don't trust their system. Take the time to go through all of your folders and file names and make sure that they are current and reflect how you think. Filing systems are actually retrieval systems, so when you are looking at a piece of paper, ask yourself, "What is the first word that comes to mind when I think of this?" That is your clue as to what the file should be named.

Remember to keep your categories broad, the simpler the better. Sometimes we create a complex filing system that proves to be too complicated for everyday use. Track the flow of information into your home or across your desk and create broad categories based on the demands of your job or the realities of your life. Don't assume that alphabetical is the way to go; identify general themes by colour and then have sub-categories within that section. For example, you might have a category for home (including insurance, renovation ideas, rental agreement); health (physical, emotional, gym membership); pets (vet bills, training tips); travel (cruises, hostels); finances (investments, bank statements, pay stubs) and warranties (receipts and guarantees). Cluster information together and make sure that you don't have duplicate files (automobile and car, for example, or family doctor and general practitioner).

If existing folders are bulging with information, perhaps they should be divided into sub-categories or purged to ensure that information is current. Files with only one or two pieces of information might be too specific; perhaps they can be combined with something else.

SUMMARY

Keep all of your papers in one place. Too often I see

people with accordion folders, baskets, and different drawers full of paper. Consolidate them into one location so that there is only one place to look when searching for a document. If you don't like the thought of a sterile looking filing cabinet in your home, remember that it can be tastefully hidden beneath a colourful piece of fabric or painted to match your decor.

Some people suggest that 80% of what we file is never accessed again. In reality, many people turn to the internet for the latest information and it is a fantastic source for recipes.

Finally, when you are handling a piece of paper ask yourself, "what is the worst that could happen if I threw

this out?" If you know how to find the information then feel free to recycle (or shred if it contains personal information). If you need it for medical or legal purposes, create an appropriate folder and file away.

If you have any questions or comments, feel free to email info@moodsmag.com ■■

Alison Roberts has a Master's degree in Psychology and once found a cheque for \$1600 buried in a stack of papers. She promptly began de-cluttering her own life and unearthed waves of creativity that she never knew existed. She currently lives a clutter-free life in Comox, British Columbia and has completed her first book, Clutter's Dirty Secret.