

# File this under tips to tidy up your desk



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Professional organizers say there are certain strategies to cleaning a desk. They suggest starting with surface items on your desk to create working space. (Denver Post)

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- Barbara Brotman offers tips on how to de-clutter your desk.
- Professional organizers lend a hand on how to tidy up your desk.

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Let's see ... a 2011 magazine article about the 20 best vacuums ... a handwritten note to myself headed, "Where did I put it?"... the lab results from a 2005 cholesterol test ...

A new season; a clean desk.

Or so goes the dream that seizes me periodically and sends me to my desk and my file folders, those repositories of ancient newspaper clippings, printouts of once-urgent information and occasional oddities like pieces of acorns.

What is it about the prospect of a clean desk that is so entrancing? I swoon at the thought.

Imagine: a bare, sleek desktop, gleaming with order and calm. File folders pruned so severely that they hang from their rails freely, air on both sides. A junk drawer that belies the name.

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Who wouldn't want to reach such organizational nirvana?

And so I set to the task. Hours and days later, I emerged with some thoughts about how to thin the paper herd and a desire to perform public service by sharing them.

Here, from my experience, are some rules of thumb.

You can get rid of the 2006 Fall & Winter Visitor Guide to the Chicago Botanic Garden.

You can toss that 2011 newspaper article suggesting impressive tech gifts for the winter holidays, as these are probably unimpressive in 2014.

You can throw out the printout of a passenger itinerary for a flight your daughter took in 2007.

You can lose your Blockbuster membership card from 2003.

That 2005 cholesterol test? My rule of thumb would say to throw it out.

But it turns out that professional organizers have their own guidelines. And medical results pass muster with Amy Trager, a certified professional organizer who is president of the National Association of Professional Organizers.

Save them, she said, because if you switch doctors, it's easier to hand over a piece of paper with lab results than search for your medical records.

I paused in my gathering of my own rules of thumb to hear from the professionals. Trager listed a few other must-saves: birth certificates, death certificates, documents of marriage and divorce. Documents related to purchases or sales of property. Current insurance policies. Whatever tax return-supporting documents you might need if you were audited.

Beyond that, she advises a heavy hand on the shredder, and using it for anything outside the current calendar year — or even, if you can manage it emotionally, beyond the last month.

As for the thorny stuff — what she calls For Fun Information, those articles and catalog pages people still clip out — she suggests asking yourself two questions: Are you really going to take the time to look at it? Can you get the information somewhere else, like online?

The questions cut to the quick of my entire "Gardening" file folder. It is filled with fine information. I have never looked at anything in it.

I could throw the whole thing out without looking, if I could muster the strength.

Pooja Gugnani, a professional organizer and founder of Organizing With You, offered salve for the magazine-clipper's wounds.

"If it's absolutely something you don't think you can find online, you can scan it," she said. "And if you don't have a scanner and you absolutely need it, I would say you need to have either a binder or a file folder."

In which case, she counsels applying the "one-in, one-out" rule, tossing one item every time you add one so it doesn't become a slush pile.

It's a dispiriting exercise, exorcising your desk. All those interests and plans filed away, and then forgotten. All that excellent information on the comparative qualities of different brands of opaque tights in an article unseen since the day it was filed away. All that now-useless paperwork that simply accumulated.

On I pushed, through Target receipts from 2008; a 2005 article on a beautiful backyard that I have not looked at since 2005; a printout of the shipping tracking information for a long-ago-purchased shower curtain.

The task seemed insurmountable. For the intimidated, the professionals counsel strategies:

"Always start with surfaces first, like the desk surface," Gugnani said. "That gives you a working space."

Sit down with three bags or bins, counseled Trager: "one for recycling; one for shredding; one for things you want to keep."

And if the job is too overwhelming, tackle it "one handful at a time, even if it means those bins sit next to your desk for a few weeks," she said. "You're still making more progress than if you didn't do it at all."

As I tossed paper, I daydreamed of the paperless office. Maybe one day I won't have a desk with file cabinets at all — just a laptop and serenity.

Though apparently, not necessarily.

"A lot of the work I'm doing now is helping people de-clutter their computers — their email, their file folders," Gugnani said.

I went along, wondering why I saved a junk mail credit card solicitation from 2011 and adding to my rules of thumb.

You should not keep a paper file marked "social media," containing print articles about digital life, because that feels wrong.

You can keep anything of sentimental value forever.

And you can save an item if it qualifies as a historical artifact.

That Blockbuster card may live.

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