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# GET ORGANIZED: THE PERPETUAL NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION



Irwin D. Karp

By Irwin D. Karp

Two traditions repeat themselves around January 1st of each year: making New Year's resolutions and abandoning them shortly after the year turns.

"I've got to get more organized" is one of the most common New Year's resolutions, for good reason. Disorganization wastes time, and most of us feel time-crunched as it is. If you've found that your previous resolutions to get more organized didn't last into February, you probably weren't specific enough. I suggest a shift in your thinking, from an intention to get organized to a commitment to do so. Establish a set of goals that are specific, realistic, measurable and time-sensitive. Most of all they should be achievable.

The first step toward achieving the overall goal of "getting organized" is to get a clear picture of what organization means to you. Is it a clutter-free desk? An end to the piles of paper spilling from desk to credenza to floor? The ability to find documents when you need them? Better management of your time so there's some left for planning, family and personal pursuits? A way of handling the torrents of e-mail and constant interruptions that eat away at your time so that by the end of the day you've fallen farther behind on your priorities?

If your answer is all of the above and you try to tackle all of those areas at once, you risk a broken New Year's resolution. You can, however, take some positive, concrete steps toward addressing one or two of those organizational issues in the New Year, and benefit with reduced stress and increased productivity in the months to come. Once you have achieved your specific goal in one area you can move from that success to the next.

Here are some organizing and time management goals for the New Year and tips for succeeding at each goal. Pick just one area first

and start to change your habits. Since psychologists say that it takes 21 days to change a habit, don't lose heart after the first couple of weeks, and stick with it. Small changes over time will bring big results.

## Organize Your Work Area

Time spent searching for things is wasted time—period. When people speak about getting organized, they are often referring to clutter, piles of paper, and a messy desk. Even for people who claim to know where everything is in their cluttered office, clutter is a distraction. It may annoy colleagues or you could be the butt of good-natured jokes, but it could be costly in terms of both reduced billings and overwork, or worst of all, missing an important deadline.

- **De-clutter your desk.** Good organization is the foundation of good time management. A clear desk is the foundation of productive work because it eliminates distractions and helps you to focus. If the paper on your desk resembles layers of geologic time, straighten the piles first. Sort the paper into groups: action now, action later, to be filed, to be read and case or project-related. Throw out what you don't need to keep. Move through the paper and make rapid decisions. Set aside some time for this and have your assistant help.

- **"Process" your paperwork.** If your in-box has become a storage box, you need a regular system to process paperwork. Picking up the same piece of paper and repeatedly returning it to the in-box is non-productive and time consuming. So is looking for stuff in stacks. If you put it back in a pile or in your in-box, you risk overlooking it or missing an important deadline. Schedule a time each day to review and make decisions on the next action for each piece of paper in your in-box. Don't put it back.

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• **Use the “RAFT” system** to deal with each piece of paper. Refer it: delegate tasks to others in your office. Act on it: if it can be handled immediately do it then. If it’s for action in the future, develop an action file. File it: if it’s reference material or related to a specific matter, send it to your filing system. Finally, Trash it: self-explanatory.

• **Develop an action file** for work that requires attention in the future. Many people don’t know what to do with paper that requires future action. Set up a tickler system that involves a set of file folders labeled one through 31 for each day and a set of folders labeled January to December for each month. When you process your paperwork, sort papers into the tickler file by the date you intend to work on them and cross-reference the task in your calendar and “to do” list. Put longer-term projects in the monthly folders and sort by date when you reach that month.

• **Set up a filing system.** That means someplace other than the floor. We’ve all seen offices where the fire marshal would not have been happy about the clutter on the floor. Don’t allow filing to pile up. Many people keep papers out in plain view rather than filing them because they fear that they will never find them again. If that describes you, work with your staff to develop effective, user friendly filing categories. Revamp your current system if it is unworkable. When creating a file name, ask yourself: “where will I find this document again?” Create a filing index that lists all categories, subcategories and file names in your system.

• **Create a reading file.** Magazines and journals often pile up unread. Assuming that you really don’t need to keep these periodicals for posterity, use the “rip & clip” method. When you process your mail, go through the table of contents and rip out the articles that you

really want to or need to read and place them in a reading file. Discard the rest of the magazine. You will accomplish two things. First, you eliminate the stacks of unread magazines reminding you of things undone. Second, if you grab a few articles for inevitable waiting periods each time you leave the office, you will actually get more reading accomplished.

• **Get rid of old files.** It’s amazing how many paper files and computer files we accumulate each year. Can’t fit your hand into your file cabinet? The begin-

ning of the year is a great time to organize and files. Schedule a file “clean-out day” to purge or archive old files. Set up a retention schedule and provide for a document life cycle. The same goes for computer files—documents in your hard drive and old e-mails. Organize computer files to parallel your paper files.

### **Manage Your Time**

Time management is really self-management. It is the ways in which you maximize your use of your available time. Effective time management starts with good organization and the key to both is planning. As Christopher Robin explained in Winnie the Pooh, “organizing is what you do before you do something, so that when you do it, it won’t be all mixed up.”

• **Create a master list and write things down.** Spend some time up front to plan the effective use of your time. Have objectives for what you intend to accomplish. Create a master list of every case, every project, everything you have to do. Don’t keep things in your head—write them down. At the end of each week, assess your accomplishments as well as things undone and make a plan for the following week keeping in mind pending deadlines.

• **Schedule time for priority tasks.** We schedule meetings, appearances, depositions and appointments.

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## **THE FIRST STEP TOWARD ACHIEVING THE OVERALL GOAL OF “GETTING ORGANIZED” IS TO GET A CLEAR PICTURE OF WHAT ORGANIZATION MEANS TO YOU.**

We should also schedule time to work on priority tasks. Review your calendar on a weekly basis and determine the available time (the “white space”) for actually doing productive work. Block out these 60-90 minute periods of time in your calendar (as you would for any other appointment) and make an appointment with yourself to do concentrated work. I call these periods of “planned unavailability” when you turn off anything that beeps, rings or flashes so you can focus on the task at hand.

• **Set out your priority task for the next day.** Make a plan for the next day before you leave the office in the evening. Your desk needs maintenance. Take a few minutes at the end of each day to straighten up loose papers and clear your desk. Set out the item you intend to work on the very first thing in the morning in the center of your desk. This will save time and help you focus on your priority task—not your clutter—when you arrive in the morning.

• **Minimize interruptions.** The greatest time management tool is focus. Phone calls, e-mails and drop-in visitors throw us off task. Close your door when you are working on the scheduled blocks of time for priority tasks. Absent true crises (i.e., unforeseen events), most things can wait an hour. We don’t answer calls or check e-mails when we are in meetings or in court; we should give ourselves the same courtesy when we are focusing on important work. Don’t check e-mail all the time. Schedule several times during the day to review and respond to e-mails. Likewise, bunch times to listen to voice mail and return phone calls.

• **Overcome procrastination.** Putting things off generally wastes time, causes stress and leads to self-generated deadline crisis. It wouldn’t do much good to make a New Year’s resolution to stop procrastinating, but then never get around to it. If a project is daunting, break it down into small chunks and start working on a manageable piece. Develop an action plan for a larger project and set internal deadlines for each step leading toward the ultimate due date.

If your resolve for the New Year is to get better organized, choose one or more of the organizing goals highlighted above. Attitude is important. Start with intention, develop a plan showing your commitment to the necessary steps and act on them. Intention without action will not meet your goals.

Getting organized is not a one-time event. It’s an ongoing process and it requires maintenance. Stick with it and you’ll see how small changes implemented and practiced in the beginning of the year will improve your control over your space, time and productivity for the remainder of the year.

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*Irwin Karp is an organizing and productivity consultant with Capital Organizing Solutions in Sacramento. He helps busy lawyers get organized and get things done. Irwin is also an attorney, former managing partner of a small environmental law firm and a Special Advisor to the State Bar’s Law Practice Management and Technology Section. He is also a member of the National Association of Professional Organizers and the Institute of Management Consultants. He can be reached by phone at (916) 446-6846 or e-mail at [ikarp@caporganizing.com](mailto:ikarp@caporganizing.com).*