

Become a Task Master

First, Scrap That Daily To-Do List

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How organized are you?

If you're like me, you make a list -- at least mentally -- of all the things you have to do. Mine starts out with the day written in capital letters at the top of a tablet page. I usually list the five or so things I really must accomplish by day's end. Oh, it looks so promising.

But I know the reality: Those five things will become about 79 by the end of the day. One boss needs one thing, another boss needs something else. A few interviews creep up that weren't expected. The phone doesn't stop ringing. A girl's gotta eat. Colleagues stop by to chat (thankfully). The e-mails ("I need a response right away!") keep coming. There's a meeting I forgot to mark on my calendar. Then it's 7 o'clock in the evening.

So much for that 9 a.m. boy-do-I-feel-organized sensation.

But it doesn't have to be that way, argues Kenneth Zeigler, an organizational consultant to companies such as the Hertz Corp. and the Federal Reserve and author of "Organizing for Success," a book that claims we can get two more hours out of each workday if we follow his instructions.

After speaking with him, I began to think it was true. But first I had to find my keyboard.

People are less organized at work than ever, Zeigler said. That's because downsizing in recent years has left many people simply overworked and overwhelmed. Even if a worker isn't taking on a job that used to be completed by four people, the onslaught of instant messaging, BlackBerrys, e-mail, voice mail and text messaging means employees are always on. And that means they can't get any one thing done without interrupting themselves to do several other tasks.

One thing we all need to learn, he said, is to cut into demands to have something done immediately. If people realize you'll get something done if they push you at the last minute, they always will, he said. "What you need to do is move them away from that expectation, or they won't plan ahead."

If workers say they can't do something at that very moment, then the demanding person will learn to plan ahead. "All of corporate America is extremely reactionary," he said. "We give the impression that we can go to another person and they will do something for us immediately."

Next, we need to learn to control ourselves. Zeigler recommends a "master list" to control all the things that fly at you every day.

Zeigler said the most used, and least effective, tool is a to-do list. "A typical to-do list might contain dozens of items that a person would naively hope to accomplish in a day," he writes. (Okay, now I'm embarrassed.)

A master list, on the other hand, is a weeklong slate of tasks that need to be accomplished, but it's also a changing list to which we add ideas as they pop up, personal to-dos and notes from conversations. He recommends we update the list at the end of each day. It's a good time to do it because it provides a sort of closure and separation between work and home.

With a master list, a worker only has to look at one place for the things he or she needs to do. It's not a daily list that gets thrown out every day. It's not 12 Post-its hanging around a monitor.

Much along those lines, Jan Hawkins, a program assistant with Serve Inc., a nonprofit in Manassas, is a slave to the Outlook calendar that is part of her e-mail system. She believes it is the reason for her successes.

Her desk is a disaster. It's covered in paper. But her day? Totally under control. She makes a list of tasks every day in the program. She programmed the computer to remind her at 4 p.m. of anything that is due and wasn't taken care of that day. If anything isn't finished, it will roll over to the next day in red. If someone asks her to do something, she immediately puts it in Outlook, or she will forget it. "It's too easy to go in one ear and out the other," she said.

She is so organized that her boss pulled her aside recently to say she hadn't seen the office run this smoothly in a long time.

"I'm always thinking about how to organize," she said. "Now if I even think I need to remember to do something, it goes right on the task list."

We all have our ways that work for us. But we could be even more organized, Zeigler argues.

Srikanth Meenakshi's desk long ago disappeared under papers. But he knows where everything is: It's neatly ordered in files in his computer. His organization is a dichotomy, he said, between physical and digital. Sure, the software engineer will sometimes take a few hours to dump the old papers that clutter his world -- after all, he knows he will find them again in his computer. But as with most of us, the papers just pile up again.

"My desk is always a mess, but I've never had trouble finding anything," because it's in the computer. Organizing on his computer, however, is not so much a conscious effort as it is a necessity to get the job done. "If I don't put something in the right folder, if the

project files aren't organized," then the job won't work, he said. "I have to integrate [things] into proper classes. So that translates into how you organize files and your e-mail account and traffic."

Even in his house, his personal e-mail is organized nicely while the rest of his world is, well, less so. (Just ask his wife, he said.)

Zeigler calls for a simple file system: You simply cannot have anything on your desk but the bare essentials. (He heard me laugh when he said that.)

But the argument is a good one. With all the piles on our desks, it's hard to concentrate. We bounce from one thing to another, and it takes twice as long to accomplish any one thing. He likes to say we should become like a jukebox. A jukebox takes a disc out, and when the CD is done playing, it is put back. Then on to the next one. Do that, he said, and you "can put 100 percent of you into that file folder."

But aren't people afraid to put folders away because they might forget such-and-such a folder exists? Well, yes. But to fix that, you should create a system that lets you know just where the present folders are and what is in them. The "future" or "past" folders should be tucked away in a reference cabinet.

"The file system in a desk should mirror an e-mail system," he said.

That's great advice for someone like Meenakshi, who is organized by computer. But I guess Zeigler hasn't seen my in-box lately.

But I'll admit it: Thanks to our conversation, I suppose I don't have any excuses. I know it doesn't have to be this way.