

Denise Smith Amos Of The Post-Dispatch

If your desk looks like a waste dump, your life is probably a mess, too, says Jeffrey Mayer, time management author.

He ought to know. He gets paid \$1,000 a desk to organize people's lives. His own desk is a spotless, glass table with a telephone and computer. The few books on it merely prop up the computer monitor to eye level.

"Most people waste almost an hour a day looking for papers that are lost on the top of their desks - 60 percent of which aren't needed anyway," Mayer writes in "Time Management for Dummies."

"Your goal isn't to have a nice, neat, orderly desk. The desk is secondary. Your goal is to get organized so that you can convert time that's wasted during the course of a normal business day into time that can be used more efficiently and effectively."

Nevertheless, the desk is your best starting point, he says, offering these tips:

1. Lock yourself in your office for two hours. Do not answer phones or mail or respond to knocks on the door.

2. Evaluate each paper. File important papers where they belong. Make two piles from the others: one stack is things you need to work on; the other is for the trash can. Don't be sentimental and don't reminisce; it wastes time.

3. Dump or recycle that "reading" pile. Old newspapers, magazines and trade journals are old news. Most of us can access information we've missed other ways. In the future, if you really must save important articles, rip them out and keep them in a file you take with you on business trips.

4. Make a Master List of tasks. Take the stack of papers you need to work on and enter them as tasks on each line of an 8 1/2-inch sheet of paper. (It has 25 lines.) Don't skip lines; fill in the whole sheet before starting another. Most people use one or two sheets. ("The list . . . is not a guarantee you'll get everything done," Mayer said, "it's a guarantee you won't forget

it.")

5. DO NOT USE STICKIES or other scraps of paper. They get lost or overlooked too easily. Besides, we've become immune to that yellow color.

6. Throughout the day, add EVERY TASK to your Master List, regardless of how big or small. Don't worry about prioritizing them; make sure you write everything down.

7. After you complete each task, cross it off the list with long, bold strokes. A mere check mark won't do; this is your opportunity to pat yourself on the back.

8. When you've crossed off more than half the list, transfer the rest to a new Master List and put a big X through the old one.

9. Get a daily planner, calendar or computerized organizer to plan your workday. Each day, add tasks from your master list onto your daily list. Put the most important at the top. Before you start work each day, review the day's tasks and appointments.

8. Don't do easy stuff first. Put the work you're getting paid for first. Put busy work like opening mail and answering phone calls at the bottom.

9. If possible, block out the first two hours each morning for your most important tasks. Don't answer the phone or mail. Don't schedule appointments for that time. If necessary, schedule this as an appointment with yourself.

10. Before you go home at night, clean your desk again, answer your mail, e-mail, and phone messages. Plan your next day with the Master List and your appointment schedule. Never leave a task unaccounted for. If you don't complete it one day, transfer it to the next or to some other less busy day on your calendar.

This way, Mayer says, you never forget to do something and you can follow through on a job before your boss follows up.

"When you can spend your time working on the things that are important to you and that make you money, instead of the things that keep you busy, the quality of your work will improve," he writes.