

# Your Career: How to get organized as work piles up

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NEW YORK - Multitasking. It's a practice many workers were familiar with before the recession, but now millions more must do it because they're being asked to do more with less. Some employees are multitaskers by nature. Others, particularly those who struggle with being organized, are having to learn on the fly how to juggle multiple assignments. It may seem daunting, but management and human resources consultants say it's easier than you think to become more organized and to multitask:

## PRIORITIZE

Scott Stevenson of the accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers works with employees to help them deal with changing and expanding job descriptions. His first recommendation: Take 15 minutes at the start of the day to review what you're being asked to do. Jot down everything you need to accomplish that day. Put tasks that can wait on a separate list.

And, even if your bosses expect you to multitask, don't try to work on more than one assignment or project at any given moment, said Douglas Merrill, a former CIO at Google and author of "Getting Organized in the Google Era." And once you start work, don't multitask, said Douglas Merrill, a former CIO at Google and author of "Getting Organized in the Google Era." "You can't do it," Merrill said. When you multitask, you often overlook the context that an assignment requires. Too often you're doing a tremendous amount of work but you're actually doing it wrong, he added.

Instead, Merrill recommends splitting up your work into segments. Work on one project for 15 minutes, then stop and take a break — or at least a breath. Then work on another task for 15 minutes. You'll need to adjust the time intervals depending on what kind of work you're doing, but the key is to devote your attention to one task at a time.

## SET REALISTIC GOALS

Merrill urges people to become goal-oriented about what they're trying to achieve at work. And be specific. Don't just say "I want to be productive today" but instead say "I want to complete two large assignments today, one before and one after lunch." Then, be honest with yourself. Do you have time to do the tasks on your to-do list? If it's a new task, are you able to accomplish it?

If feasible, talk with your boss about your plans as much as possible — ideally at the start of every project. That way, you both have realistic expectations and there shouldn't be any unpleasant surprises about how long it takes you to complete your work.

## THE BIGGER PICTURE

PricewaterhouseCoopers' Stevenson recommends workers perform a "job inventory." List everything you do, including all your everyday tasks, and the things you do weekly, monthly, quarterly, every year. This way, you'll have a clear picture of what your work requires. "It's important to have a very real and very live job description," Stevenson said. "Jobs have many more dimensions than in the past. Someone who is a finance role is now also being asked to have better client service skills. There's a lot being asked."

If you're overwhelmed or don't feel you're able to tackle some of your new responsibilities, Stevenson said it's important to communicate that to your superior. But even if the boss doesn't agree to lighten your load, the structure you create for yourself should at least make your day easier to manage. Like many workers, you may find that the demands of your job mean you have to do some work after-hours. Merrill encourages people not to have unrealistic expectations when it comes to work-life balance. "Work-life balance is not just about working less," he said.

But finding that balance can be part of your attempts to organize yourself. For example, Merrill decided that he can check e-mail at home, but only from 10 p.m. to midnight. He also checks his smartphone on vacation, but only for one hour a day.

#### AN ORGANIZED DESK CAN HELP

If your desk is a mess, you'll find it harder to get things done. If you can't find the papers and documents you need, you'll lose time.

Laura Leist, president of the National Association of Professional Organizers, recommends that you start to organize your desk by clearing everything off and starting fresh. Sort all the papers and paraphernalia on your desk, and toss what you don't need any more. Then choose a system to organize what you decide to keep.

Leist suggests creating a "Daily Action Center" on your desk where you can place frequently accessed items, such as notes for upcoming meetings or fax cover sheets. If you have a filing cabinet, keep the folders that you need on a regular basis close by. You're more likely to stick to an organization structure if it fits the way you work, Leist said.

And before you file something away, go through the papers and throw out what you don't need. The less extraneous paper you have in your files, the less time you waste when you look for something you need. Leist recommends trying the new system for at least three to four weeks. If it doesn't work, keep experimenting until you find one that does.

But not everyone says a clear desk is always the solution to a less-cluttered mind.

Merrill said his desk doesn't look organized to an outsider, but the Post-its and paper piles have a purpose. To avoid them from getting out of hand, he goes through the piles every week and throws away papers he doesn't need.

Merrill also recommends transferring as much data as possible, such as phone numbers or old notes, onto your computer. That way, you avoid piling up papers and you can retrieve the information when you need it again.

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