

Information overload: de-cluttering your “to do” list for a healthier state of mind

In today’s fast-paced world it can seem like your list of “to dos” at work is getting longer and longer and time is never on your side. Exploding inboxes and never-ending priorities can weigh you down, affect your progress and leave you with feelings of impending doom. Luckily, there are tips to help you lighten your load and de-clutter your world and mind.



Manage your “to dos”

Making a list of tasks should help you get things done, but sometimes you end up carrying jobs over from list to list and using the smaller jobs as a way to procrastinate. Get the job done and:

Colour code. When you have a long list of conflicting priorities all screaming for your attention, you need to learn how to prioritize. Try the traffic light system: red tasks need to be done and quickly, yellow tasks are important but can be finished later, green tasks are low priority and can be completed time permitting. Try getting those tough “red” tasks done first thing, instead of putting them off. This will give you the boost you need to propel you through your day.

Clear your space. Whether it’s your workstation, desk or even your vehicle (which also doubles as an “office” for those on the road) keep your work space clear of everything except for the project you’re working on. Tidy up at the end of each day so you can start fresh in the morning which will significantly decrease distractions and keep mental clutter to a minimum.

Take time to prepare. At the end of each day, try to set aside 15 minutes to write down tomorrow’s to dos. Since everything is fresh in your mind, look at what you completed today and what needs to be done tomorrow so that when you arrive at work the next day, you’re quickly focused and ready to get going on your task list.

Beating digital chaos

It’s a fact: more and more of us are having to go digital. From cell phones, to electronic billing, to e-mails and hand-held devices, technology is rapidly becoming a way of life for lots of workers—even those in traditionally “technology-free” jobs. So it’s not surprising that when you sit down to a voicemail box or e-mail inbox filled with messages every day, you can start to feel more than a bit overwhelmed.

Unfortunately, the common “filing cabinet” approach simply replaces voicemail or inbox clutter with folder clutter. Instead, when you read an e-mail or listen to a voicemail, make a decision about what to do with it immediately: is it for follow up or to be archived or placed on hold? You’ll be surprised how paring down the decision-making process can solve your problems.

For e-mail

Follow up. These messages are tasks that need action but can’t be done in a couple of minutes, aren’t a priority or require more information. Review this folder every day and delete the tasks already completed. If a message can be dealt with in two minutes or less—like a quick approval or an FYI—take care of it, breathe a sigh of relief and delete.

Archive. Store reference information in your archive folder so they can be easily accessed in the future.

Hold. This folder is temporary storage for important messages you need to keep your eyes on for the next few days. They don’t necessarily need action, but could be a pending response from a co-worker or the confirmation number for a package on route. Again, review regularly so you can delete when completed.

Pick up the phone! Sometimes you can avoid inbox overload by skipping the 20 back and forth messages and having a five-minute phone conversation with the person instead.

To deal with your out of control inbox, start with the oldest message first and make a decision about the fate of each of your messages. From now on schedule time in your day to sort through your e-mail and treat this like a regular meeting you can't miss. The bottom line is to never keep a read message in your inbox—you need to make room for all those inevitable incoming messages.

For phone, voicemail and hand held devices:

Assign a “phone time”. Let people know the hours you'll be accessible by phone so they can try you then. Doing so will help reduce the back and forth and voicemail overload.

Remember the three Ds. *Deal with it* by returning the call or handling the task if important, *delegate* to someone else if the message doesn't really pertain to you or your job and *delete it* if it's a telemarketer or someone pitching you services you don't need.

Turn it off after hours. Make sure your work phone/hand-held remains just that: *for work*. Turn it off after hours whenever possible, such as during dinnertime. Do you really want to be that person texting through a meal with family or friends? Give yourself permission to disconnect from work for a few hours and reconnect with yourself and loved ones.

A cluttered workspace—physically, mentally and digitally—can seem like an insurmountable mountain you'll never overcome. Luckily there are ways to deal with information overload so you can pave the way to your goals. Clearing space will make you more organized, efficient and emotionally “lighter”.