

Get **ORGANISED!**

Struggling to conquer your to do list? **Michael R. Young** explains how to organise your time and tasks efficiently for a less stressful life.

Do you ever wish that you could be more organised and more in control of everything you have to do, both at work and at home? What does being 'organised' actually mean? On the one hand it can mean 'Making arrangements for an event or activity'; on the other hand it also means 'To arrange in an orderly way'. I think being well organised is about making sure that the things that need to be done are done when they need to be done.

I want to begin by looking at how and where 'organised' fits into 'Making arrangements for an event or activity'. Organised, or organising, is the second part of the management process, whether it is managing inside or outside the working environment. The management process breaks down into four simple stages or steps:

1. **Planning.** First you decide on a particular course of action to achieve a desired result
2. **Organising.** Then you gather together all of the resources that will be needed to achieve the result
3. **Implementing.** You then get other people to work together smoothly and to the best of their ability as part of a team to do the work
4. **Controlling.** Finally, you monitor, review or measure the progress of the work in relation to the plan and take steps to correct things if they are off course.

To be really well organised you have to first know what it is you have to do; you need the resources that will enable you to do the job; you also need information about what it is

you have to do. If you don't have all of the information, or if you are not sure about what it is exactly you have to do, find out.

Well organised people don't carry their diary and 'to do' list around in their head! So whether you use an electronic or a paper-based organiser, you should get into the habit of recording and of writing things down. Your diary is for keeping a record of where you have to be at specific times, such as meetings and appointments. Your to do list might include items in your diary, but it should also include other non-time-specific tasks. Your 'to do' list should be broken down into 'urgent' and 'non-urgent'. Each item on your 'to do' list should have a note beside it telling you by when the item has to be completed. You will need to make a note of tasks that you couldn't complete until others have provided information or resources that you have requested. Don't let others let you down and get in the way of this new well organised you.

For more complicated tasks or projects, you should use Gantt charts (www.ganttchart.com) or computer software that allows you to monitor the progress of the work. Some software has the facility to move and reschedule individual components of a project if one of your dependencies is delayed. Even for fairly small projects, Gantt charts are a good way of allowing you to map out and visualise how everything fits together. For relatively straightforward mini-projects, setting everything out and forcing yourself to carefully think each stage through, helps to develop good organisational habits.

Don't start a new 'to do' list every day or week; develop one that allows you to remove items from the top as you complete them, and add ones at the bottom as they crop up. If you feel that each day you are confronted with a very long 'to do' list, then try to do some of the quick-win tasks first. This is a great way of making you feel better and of shortening that list. If you can, delegate as much as possible. It is human nature to put off doing the things you don't want to do; don't! Get the so-called unpleasant things out of the way as soon as you can (they probably weren't that bad after all), leaving you free to work your way through the rest of the list. Don't let yourself become one of those people who is forever

thinking about what they have to do, and focus on doing them.

The ability to manage your time is an essential component of being well organised. It was Edward Young (no relation) who said that '*Procrastination is the thief of time*', and in the same vein, Thomas Jefferson is credited with having said '*Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today*'. Perhaps Mark Twain was nearer the mark with '*Never put off till tomorrow what you can do the day after tomorrow*'. The point of all of these quotes is that you should do things *now* and not put them off, because doing so simply adds to the list of things you will have to do tomorrow and the day after and so on. Aim to get to work that little bit earlier so that you can deal with any pressing issues *before* you have to start work. Aim to clear 90% of your to do list every day.

One of the reasons why people are disorganised is because they don't have enough time to think. Constant interruptions destroy your concentration; you make mistakes and forget to do things. The solution is to set aside blocks of time when there are to be no interruptions. Tell those around you that you are busy and that you do not want to be disturbed. Don't give in to the time thieves.

There are of course many problems that get in the way of excellent time management, for example, if you are always trying to do too much at once. The solution is to set priorities (back to the 'to do' list!); it might sound obvious, but only do one thing at a time. Learn to say 'No!' when people try to give you more work.

I've already mentioned that you must have information before you try to do anything. Being able to lay your hands on files, letters, documents etc, and generally being able to easily retrieve *any* piece of information is a crucial part of being well organised. In this respect, filing systems can be your nemesis. Having a filing system (electronic or paper based) that is made up of well-labelled folders, and with information stored in the correct folder, goes a long way towards reducing the time it takes you to find whatever it is you are looking for. Folders should have broad, generic headings and all headings should be nouns.

* Michael R Young is the author of the Diagram Prize winning Managing a dental practice the Genghis Khan way (reviewed on page 12). He has over 20 years' experience of managing a dental practice and his practice was one of the first in the UK to be awarded the BDA's Good Practice. He taught clinical dentistry at two dental hospitals but was forced to retire from dentistry because of ill health. He is now a writer and business consultant. www.thegenghiskhanway.com

If you are still using a physical filing cabinet, the cabinet only needs to have three drawers, which could be labelled as follows:

- Working drawer. This is for things that are ongoing, current year etc
- A-Z drawer. This is for other things that are not necessarily being dealt with at the moment, but which need to be kept handy
- Storage drawer. This is for things that are out of date or which are not used very often, or which are awaiting shredding.

If you reach the point where you think you need a bigger filing cabinet you are probably keeping too much paper, so go through each file regularly and dispose of unwanted papers. You need to be able to tell the wood from the trees.

Everyone working in a dental practice must be well organised. One badly organised employee will disrupt the smooth, well organised running of any practice. Dental nurses, receptionists and treatment coordinators therefore have to learn how to be well organised and how to manage their time. They are all part of the process of effective and efficient patient management, and so must take full responsibility for the efficient organisation and running of their own particular working area.

Away from work, and thinking about an 'event' you might have to organise, for example, friends coming around for dinner. If you are not organised, it is likely to turn into a disaster. You have to decide on a date, who's to be invited, food and drink (what have I fed them all before?), any special dietary requirements, and draw up a time plan for preparing and cooking the meal. You probably already do all of this subconsciously, but nevertheless, you still have to think about it and write it down so that your organised get-together does not become disorganised.

Being well organised means you know what you are doing and when and where you have to do it. The why and the how are still obviously important, but they should have been finalised well in advance of the doing. Help to reduce your stress levels by taking control of your life. Organising yourself both in and out of the workplace is not difficult, and once you are well organised you will find that life becomes a little less stressful.



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