

Time and Space Management: Declutter the Payroll Office Now and Increase Productivity!

There is a sign that you see around offices everywhere. It may be a sampler on a wall, a frame on your desk, or a paperweight. The sign reads, "A clean desk is the sign of a sick mind." But is it? Or is a clean and uncluttered desk the sign of a payroll manager who is in charge of his or her department and staff and is working at peak performance and productivity?

Research shows there is an inverse correlation between productivity and clutter. According to the National Association of Professional Organizers, paper clutter is the number-one problem for most businesses. Studies show the average person wastes 4.3 hours per week searching for papers, which adds stress and frustration to the workplace while reducing concentration and creative thinking. That equates to \$5,165.50 per year for a payroll manager who earns \$50,000 in annual salary. And that is just the beginning. Each staff member also will lose the same number of hours per week. A payroll department with a staff of five could be losing almost \$10,000 per year.

In addition, payroll departments deal with stress daily and, unfortunately, clutter can help add to the stress of the daily grind. By uncluttering the payroll department, managers will not only increase productivity, security, and efficiency, but also reduce overall stress.

How does a payroll manager go about decluttering a department that has sat with the same old monitors piled up in the corner and the same piles of paperwork waiting to be shredded for years? According to Pat Heydlauff, president of Energy Design, it can be done in one three-step plan. In her article "Reduce Office Clutter: Your Three-Step Plan to Increased Productivity, Efficiency, and Profitability," she recommends devising an information-management system, taking time to implement the system, and focusing energy to keep the system operating smoothly on a daily basis.

According to Heydlauff, your first step is to devise an information-management system, not just a filing system. Information comes from many sources, including snail mail, e-mail, text messages, cell phones, and other departments within the company. All of this information needs to be organized, put into permanent archives, or tossed. You also need to have the necessary tools to make the system efficient and uniformly useable such as file folders, filing cabinets for current information, boxes for archives, and scanners with backup capabilities for managing information electronically.

Another expert on organizing, James V. O'Connor of Clutter Control, notes that if the work area is chaotic, a system must be established before the cleanup can

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begin. Three things are needed before starting on such a project: uninterrupted time, common sense, and faith in the golden rule of organizing, "There's a place for everything, and everything should be in its place."

If employees know where items belong, they will know where to put them and also where to find them. The best time to organize is on a weekend when employees needing payroll's attention are not a distraction and the "real work to get payroll processed" is less of a concern. Before leaving Saturday morning chores and errands behind, the payroll manager and staff should make a time commitment of at least four hours. This will promote more motivation and perseverance to complete the task at hand.

Step two of Heydlauff's system requires the payroll manager to take action. Here are some steps she suggests:

Set aside time each week to manage and organize information. Adhere to that commitment like an appointment and you will stay ahead of the game.

Organize your desk at the end of the day so at least 80% of the desktop is visible. This will make going to work each morning a joy because desk stress and mental overload will decrease while your productivity increases.

Eliminate anything on top of your desk that is not used often. Put everything else into drawers, cubicles, or containers that are easily accessible. Your efficiency will double and your fatigue will decrease.

Limit yourself to only one personal photograph, placing it in the southwest section of your work area to energize relationships. This will increase focus on the work at hand, not others.

If you need to access files at a moment's notice or need a reminder to follow up on specific projects regularly, use a vertical desktop file sorter, instead of stacks, and color-code projects.

Handle information only once, whether on paper or in your e-mail inbox. Make the decision as to whether each message needs action, such as processing on the next payroll, or whether it can be filed, tossed, or deleted. You will become more efficient and lower your stress levels.

O'Connor suggests sticking to the basics. The common sense factor to organizing is making certain that necessities most often are closest to the desk and in plentiful supply. Proximity doesn't mean that all current projects should be on the desk where they can be seen. Items get lost in desktop rubble if "out of sight, out of mind" becomes a fear; the result defeats the purpose of getting organized.

Employees should get in the habit of putting things away and maintaining a to-do list, preferably on the computer's desktop. This behavior, plus keeping the immediate workspace as clear as possible, are excellent first steps.

If the current system is a mess, make a list of mandatory items. The payroll manager should identify the major categories, such as tax deposits, and then subcategories, such as Form 941, each state equivalent, unemployment insurance reporting, and Form 940. Employees who handle that particular task can then estimate how much file space will be needed for each major category.

One area that can be of concern when organizing a payroll department is the huge amount of reading material that must be processed. Many payroll departments receive five to six e-mail updates a day just from the IRS. But do they all need to be read and disseminated to the staff? Certainly not. And they definitely do not need to be printed out. Hitting the print key has become commonplace nowadays whether a message needs to be printed or not. For example, the payroll manager or a staff member could scan the new e-mail from the IRS to ascertain if it is payroll related.

If the IRS is disseminating information that the staff should have, the payroll manager needs to set up a system to do so that does not require every employee receiving a piece of paper in their inbox or having to sign off on a piece of paper and pass it around. For example, it could be posted on a common drive in a must-read folder as a Word document. At the bottom of the document, each employee's name is listed. When each has read the file, they fill in their name on the file and resave. All staff members must set aside time during the day or week to read all new information on a regular basis as part of their daily or weekly task schedule. The last employee to read the file closes it out and moves the file to the archives.

Keeping the system going is the third step in Heydlauff's three-step method. Once you have devised your information-management system and put your plan into action, you must focus energy on it to keep it operating smoothly on a daily basis. It won't become part of the corporate culture or a personal habit if you don't do more than just clean up clutter and organize once or twice.

Create a clean-desk or clean-workspace policy and establish a reward system that is handed out weekly, such as a small trophy for each staff member that qualifies, including the manager. If the trophy stays with that person for six months or a whole year, provide them an extra reward, perhaps a day off or preferred parking for a month, and recognize them at company functions.

Encourage your employees to put one personal, creative item on their desk, where stacks of paper used to be. This will serve as a reminder of how easy it is to stay clutter-free and stress-free. By decluttering and employing a clean-desk policy any payroll department can increase efficiency and decrease stress.

Editor's note: Our appreciation is extended to the following for their contributions to this article:

Pat Heydlauff, president of Energy Design, helps business leaders streamline and

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transform their companies, resulting in employee satisfaction, client retention, and bottom-line profitability. She energizes and enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of workplace environments using color, design, and organization principles. Her new book, Feng Shui: So Easy a Child Can Do It, provides change that leads to success and prosperity. Contact her for consulting and speaking at www.Energy-by-Design.com or call 561-799-3443.

James V. O'Connor is owner of Clutter Control, an office and home organizing service in Lake Forest, Ill., and author of the article, "Office Clutter? Don't Agonize, Organize: A Little Bit of Desk Tidying Goes a Long Way Toward Being Clutter Free."