

Time is right to declutter your workspace

In tough economy, a messy desk could give the wrong impression

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When Maiken Scott was assigned to a new position at WHYY, a Philadelphia public radio station, the move to her new office was a breeze.

Why? A professional organizer who had been a guest on a show had recently helped organize her workspace.

It was a stroke of luck for Scott, who otherwise would have been faced with organizing stacks of books and piles of paper at a time when she could least deal with it as she was transitioning to her new gig.

"When I moved to a new cube it was great — everything had already been cleaned up," she says. "Everything was so organized I could focus on training people and moving into my new job as behavioral health reporter."

We've all thought about cleaning up our desks from time to time, but in this economy it pays to declutter now. You have to be ready to move, be agile, and the last thing you want is a pile of junk weighing you down.

At a time when companies are cutting back and employees left behind are asked to do more, stuff is going to pile up, especially if you tended to be a bit messy before. More than 90 percent of **business** professionals rate their workspaces as cluttered, according to a poll by CableOrganizer.com.

"It's a natural human tendency when we're under stress to be less orderly," says Karissa Thacker, a workplace psychologist.

But it's a bad idea to be messy, she says.

"You want to be doing things so you appear organized and efficient," she explains. "You don't want to be sticking out as having the most Frappuccinos on your desk."

Sure, many people with cluttered desks are highly productive, but "impressions are everything," says Todd Dewett, associate professor of management at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio.

"In what is now a recession, there's a premium on not only being organized but managing the impressions people have of you," he says. "One of the best predictors of getting a promotion or good evaluation are the impressions folks in power make about you, even based on things linked to productivity, like clutter. I'm not saying it's fair. But it's no different than work attire."

Aside from the impression, disorganization can indeed impact your productivity and job performance, says Monica Ricci, author of "Organize Your Office in No Time" and organizing adviser for Office Depot.

A warning sign that clutter is hampering productivity, she says, is when you start missing deadlines or losing important information.

Ricci, who is also a professional organizer, has seen firsthand how a messy desk can paralyze workers.

"One of my most memorable clients had three years of mail on his desk," she says. "Some of it was open, some was not. At least this client did call and say he had enough. I spent 35 to 40 hours helping him organize mail, shredding. It was not an easy project."

A [real estate](#) agency recently hired Barb Bergeron, a professional organizer who runs SOS Organizational Service, because its offices were so messy an agent had lost a critical contract.

"In this market you don't want to be the person people are afraid to give things to," she says.

And sad to say, but with layoffs in the air it's not a bad time to organize your desk just in case. Who wants to be sorting through piles of paper when they're handed a pink slip and given five minutes to clean out their desk?

"Most people take personal items when they leave," says Tom Morris, a career outplacement expert who is hired by companies going through downsizings.

Morris' advice: "If you think a RIF [reduction in force] may be coming, sort through things in your office now."

While many companies have rules when it comes to confidential or client information, there's probably a lot of work-related information you'll be wishing you had when you are out looking for work.

Don't take anything related to trade secrets or client lists, advises Lewis Maltby, president of the National Workrights Institute. But you have to think about the next job you'll be interviewing for, he says. You may need documentation from a project, or you may need e-mails or phone numbers of contacts.

"If you print out your Rolodex or a list of contacts and take it home when you think you're about to get fired, no one will ever know or care," he says. "If you try to take it on the day you're fired you won't be able to."

Getting organized may seem overwhelming.

The key is to "start small," says Barry Izsak, a professional organizer with Arranging It All. "Break the job up into small manageable pieces. If you think you're going to organize every file you'll end up giving up."