

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

Business Section

## DIGGING OUT

*Getting Organized at the Office*

### How to handle buckets and buckets of work

**A human-resources manager has wide-ranging duties, so the key to getting organized was breaking the job into categories, or "buckets."**

By Jane M. Von Bergen  
Inquirer Staff Writer



BOB WILLIAMS/Inquirer

Organizer Barbara Bergeron (left) told Trina Lewis that clutter is "delayed decision-making." The first step in getting organized, she said, is to think of the various aspects of a job in broad categories, or "buckets."

Early in their first meeting, organizer Barbara Bergeron asked overwhelmed human resources manager Trina Lewis an important question: "What are your main areas of responsibility?" The two sat in Lewis' cluttered office at Union Packaging L.L.C. in Yeadon.

"Safety, benefit administration, recruitment and hiring, employee relations, policy creation and implementation, and training," Lewis answered quickly, as Bergeron, who runs SOS Organizing Services in Chester Springs, took notes.

No wonder Lewis is overwhelmed. Since she started in 2002, the number of employees at Union Packaging has doubled to 85. Her boss, the company president, upgraded Lewis' title from supervisor to manager and gave her more responsibilities but no more help.

Lewis, 33, still handles everything herself, with one assistant, who is also the receptionist. There's more to Lewis' problem than clutter, and the consequences aren't just embarrassment over an untidy office.

Her lack of organization has the potential to affect the company's employees, and through them, Union's expanding business of manufacturing boxes for the quick-serve industry (McDonald's, Burger King and Wendy's).

Bergeron liked how Lewis readily listed her responsibilities. "You were able to do that quickly," she said. "Not everyone can. This is going to be a big step in getting you organized, because you are already thinking in these buckets."

Bergeron explained that "clutter is delayed decision-making." The first step is making decisions easier by sorting everything, from computer files, to e-mails to paper files, into broad categories, or "buckets." Within those broad categories, there may be many individual files or subfolders. For example, the employee-relations bucket would include individual files for each employee.

Lewis nodded. "That bucket thing," she said, "that's big." She saw immediately how the bucket system would help with a persistent problem of losing documents on her desk or in her computer.

Bergeron also quickly narrowed in on one of Lewis' biggest strengths, which is also one of her biggest weaknesses. Lewis is a people person, so she's highly susceptible to interruptions, especially when she's doing the dull, but important work, such as writing a crisis-management policy.

"That's when you lose productivity," Bergeron said, explaining that interruptions can erode productivity by 40 percent. "We have an open-door policy," Lewis began in defense, launching into a litany of interruption complaints. Bergeron let Lewis talk until the truth emerged.

"I don't mind being pulled in 50 different directions," Lewis finally admitted. "It's just the consequences of being pulled that bothers me." Bergeron kept listening. Lewis kept talking. "I probably *could* take an hour a day to close my door," Lewis said. "But I don't. Why don't I?"

Bergeron had an easy answer. "Because you'd rather be with people." She said that given Lewis' personality, a daily hour of quiet time would be too much. She suggested 45 minutes - with the provision that Lewis' experienced assistant interrupt if necessary.

"The goal," Bergeron said, "is to improve your productivity and reduce your stress."

#### **And the winner is...**

**Human Resource Manager:** Trina Lewis, 33, Folcroft

**Company:** Union Packaging L.L.C., Yeadon.

**Background:** During college, Lewis worked at a car-rental agency part time, handling ever-more complex assignments, including hiring and training. When she graduated, she taught English in the Bahamas and later administered 401(k) plans for Vanguard Group clients. She started at Union Packaging in 2002.

**The Fixer:** Barbara J. Bergeron, SOS Organizing Services, 44, Chester Springs.  
www.SOSorganize.com

**Background:** After graduating from college, Bergeron worked as a paralegal, then at a building-materials cooperative. She started her own medical billing company, but a side assignment as an organizing and productivity consultant proved more interesting, so she switched businesses in 1996. Her clients now include Merck & Co., Inc. and Duane Morris, a Philadelphia law firm.

**The problem:** The number of employees at Union Packaging has doubled to 85 since Lewis started, but she still handles all human-resources responsibilities herself with the help of one assistant, who is also the receptionist. She reports to the company president, who has increased her responsibilities. Lewis serves as the safety officer and must also write most of the company policies and procedure manuals. Her inherited desk doesn't have drawers, her file cabinets are full of outmoded papers, and her office has been a catch-all for company clutter, so she often can't find the documents she needs quickly.

#### **The solution:**

- Move all files, whether on the computer or in file cabinets, into six "buckets": benefits administration, recruitment and hiring, safety, training, policies and procedures, and employee relations, which would include current employee records.
- Think of the computer table and the front of the desk as "beachfront property" too valuable for old files, aspirin bottles and paper clips.
- Move a two-drawer file cabinet next to the computer table. Clean out junk so it can house current action files. Shift other furniture to accommodate.
- Shift a bookshelf so it faces the desk and can be used to store reference material that is needed often.
- Distinguish between reference files, often useful, and archival files, which must be saved for legal protections. Move archival files away from desk, and, if possible, out of the room.
- Get baskets or boxes for personal items, food and small office supplies. Remove them from prime real estate on the desk.
- When there is an important project, shut the door for 45 minutes, letting the experienced assistant serve as gatekeeper.
- Spend only 15 to 20 minutes a day decluttering, and don't feel bad if the time is interrupted.

#### **Will it work?:**

**Lewis:** "I want it to work and I need it to work."

**Bergeron:** "Yes. She has the capability, but she has never been taught the skill set."

#### **Biggest obstacle:**

**Lewis:** "It's like weight loss. It's easy to take off the pounds, but maintaining the system will be the hard part."

**Bergeron:** Lewis' "finding the time to implement what she learns quickly enough."