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Business Section

Past the mess "I have a better sense of control of my job," said one who got organized.

By Jane M. Von Bergen, Inquirer Staff Writer

For the office of a supposedly organized person, Trina Lewis' work space was a hall of confusion.

Her in-box held a foot-high stack. A pile of files teetered precariously on top of a cabinet, and small stacks of papers sprouted in random places on her desk and floor. There was even a box labeled "Put Me Away" stashed under a chair.

This was the office of a person who eight months ago had won an Inquirer contest asking readers to confess their messes. Lewis' prize was several sessions with an organizer, Barbara Bergeron.

Bergeron's suggestions helped Lewis, a human resources manager at Union Packaging L.L.C., of Yeadon.

But in August, life intervened and, for a number of reasons, Lewis' job became even more difficult than it had been. "Everything went crazy," Lewis said.

Yet when Bergeron checked back and visited Lewis' office last week, she pronounced it excellent.

"Cleanliness and neatness are not how you define organizing. So yes, you have some clutter about, but you are getting more done, you are more functional, and you feel less stressed," said Bergeron, of SOS Organizational Services in Chester Springs. "The appearance is the weak link, but what's behind it is an awful lot of work."

Lewis nodded. "I have a better sense of control of my job."

Lewis needed to gain control. In the four years she has held the job, the number of employees at the plant has doubled, yet her assistant continues to work as a receptionist and general clerk.

To make it worse, Lewis' disorganization had the potential to hurt the plant's workers, because she is in charge of maintaining their

employee files - including their benefits, vacations, sick time and disciplinary records.

Following Bergeron's advice, Lewis made tremendous progress. Bergeron suggested that Lewis categorize her work into "buckets," or major areas of responsibility. That helped Lewis, 31, of Folcroft, organize her files and reduce clutter.

"I learned you really should deal with things immediately," Lewis said. "I always remember what Barbara said: 'Clutter is delayed decision-making.' "

Bergeron had encouraged Lewis to rearrange her office so the "prime beachfront" area on her desk would be reserved for current projects and not old files. And, most important, she suggested that Lewis tackle the backlog of e-mails, files and piles for 20 manageable minutes a day.

In the process, Lewis cut her e-mails from 4,000 to about 250 and set up a calendar system that kept her on track with meetings and assignments.

All was going well until August, when Lewis' assistant left early on maternity leave. A succession of temps followed until one settled in. The production manager also left, and Lewis had to recruit someone for that key position. In addition, she picked up extra management tasks.

Even though her overall system continued to function, details began to slip. The number of e-mails in her in box rose to 800, and Lewis did not have time, every day, for the 20-minute cleanup that kept her desk tidy.

"I don't think I went back 10 steps - maybe two or three," Lewis said.

"You shouldn't feel bad about the two steps backward," Bergeron said. "The fact is that you are eight steps ahead."

Bergeron suggested that Lewis replace catch-as-catch-can 20-minute sessions during the week with 10 minutes of cleaning at a regular time daily. "The real key to organizing is consistency," she said.

The Fixer

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