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Article of the week from Michigan Lawyers Weekly:

Maintaining an organized office essential to success Increased efficiency leads to enhanced profits

By Sheryl M. Vassallo

Managing Your Practice

Piles of papers stacked high on your desk. Hustling about trying to find where that client file is. Feeling anxious. Knowing you're not being as productive as you'd like to be. For many lawyers, these events are a daily occurrence. But they don't have to be.

In this practice management article, Lawyers Weekly goes straight to the sources of ultimate organization — professional organizing specialists — to uncover the easiest and most effective ways attorneys can become more efficient, productive and, in turn, less stressed.

Stop stalling

Does it seem as if maintaining an organized office environment is a never ending battle? Experts say the act of getting organized is easy to put off because of seemingly more important tasks that require immediate attention. According to organizing specialist Alita Marlowe of Marlowe & Associates Business and Efficiency Consultants in Southfield, the most common reason attorneys put off getting organized is it wasn't taught in law school.

"Procrastination and clutter is actually delayed decision making," she maintained. "Time management skills are also usually underdeveloped." Marlowe added the biggest mistake attorneys make is putting blame on a single person in the firm for the disorganization that "actually is the result of a faulty or nonexistent organizational system." Additionally, Rita Wilhelm, professional organizer with Cluttergone in East Lansing — a firm that specializes in residential and small business organizing — pointed out another stumbling block is the commonly held, but erroneous, belief that there's not enough time to devote to becoming more efficient. "It's not the most exciting or fun activity," she sympathized,

but noted that a lack of time is precisely the reason why it's so important to strive for efficiency through organization.

To drive home the point of just how costly inefficiency can be, Marlowe gave the example of an attorney who bills \$220 an hour. According to her calculations, if that attorney encounters six distractions per day at 30 minutes per distraction, there is \$660 of lost productivity in one day, \$3,300 in one week and \$13,200 of lost productivity in one month. "Poor time management and disorganization costs at least \$13,000 per month and causes lots of stress," she contended. "Being organized and efficient is critical to the success of the law firm because lost records and inefficient systems mean wasted time — and time is money. Also, poor time management results in calls not getting returned and missed deadlines. Clients and potential clients become angry and could file a grievance or find another attorney."

Return on investment

Likewise, Janet Kester, professional organizer and owner of The Productivity Coach in Northville — a professional organizing firm for home and business — stressed that spending the extra money to become efficient ultimately does pay off.

"Speedy retrieval of information is critically tied to a business' success," she declared.

"An organized business saves time and money, increases its productivity and is able to provide excellent customer service."

Kester believes the top contributors to inefficiency are:

- inconvenient storage of files and supplies, such as putting file cabinets more than an arm's reach away from your workspace;
- not having a "home" for each item;
- a failure to return items to their assigned "home" after use;
- the belief that organizing is boring; and
- the speed of life and technology.

"Wrapped up in the fast pace of today's work world, many people feel they cannot find, afford or make the time to get organized," Kester said. "People need to understand that because of today's fast pace they cannot afford not to be organized."

Mount Pleasant attorney and past client of Rita Wilhelm, J. David Kerr, saw firsthand the benefits that becoming organized afforded his firm. Major improvements he has seen include "a desk which is usually clean every night, an office entrance that is improved, much less searching for files, and enthusiasm instead of discouragement when I sit down to work." Moreover, he stressed that he is gaining much more than what he had to put in initially, claiming he is saving significantly more hours than the consultation took, as well as making more money. "Sometimes complaining about the money [involved in getting organized] is just an excuse not to do something," he noted. "We hear the same thing from our clients about spending money." Since working with a professional organizer, Kerr believes his firm is benefiting from a financial standpoint as well as experiencing far less pressure.

"The expense was insignificant compared to the benefit," he declared.

Where to begin

Is it possible to become more efficient without the help of a professional?

Wilhelm, who said it can be done — provided the attorney is committed to making a change — believes the best place to start is your desk. "Go through all the miscellaneous papers and find a 'home' for them," she advised. "File them in the appropriate folder, take some action on them or discard in the circular file. Also consider arranging the desk so that it doesn't face the door — this will cut down on the amount of distractions and promote better concentration."

Moreover, Cynthia Ivie, master simplifier and owner of White Space, a Chicago professional organizing firm specializing in delivering balance, order and simplicity to their clients, believes if someone has been "organizationally challenged" for some time, it helps to have an objective third party assist. "One may need to make adjustments to their daily routines, establish new habits," she said. "A well thought-out organizational system should suit the user and be organic to their personal style." Ivie suggested a professional organizer can provide a different perspective and offer effective solutions, tailor-made for an attorney's own personal challenges. As for cost, she explained the hourly rate can range anywhere from \$25 an hour to \$250 an hour, but emphasized it is well worth it. "The average American worker spends the equivalent of six weeks annually looking for lost documentation," she stated.

Meanwhile, according to Debbie Tebbe, professional organizer and owner of Organized Happy Helper, a Saint Claire Shores firm specializing in home and office organization, a good place to start is with four boxes labeled "keep," "donate," "purge," and "shred." "Start with a pile of papers and put them in these categories. Keep them organized so you can try to organize a half hour or hour each day. Once the boxes are filled, file or organize the 'keep' pile, drop off the donations to a charity, throw away the purge bag and shred the important documents. You will make progress as time goes on," she advised.

Finally, Marlowe recommended the first change that should be made is reducing distractions. "Each interruption costs 20 minutes of refocusing time plus the time of the original distraction," she said, recommending attorneys use self-assessments, self-help books, personal coaches and instructional videos to develop a unique organizing style.

Plan of attack

Marlowe explained that becoming organized and efficient is much more than simply arranging files and grabbing the label maker — it is a change in behavior and a way of life. "It is a process, not an event. It is never complete. Life changes, business ebbs and flows, employees come and go and systems need refining, redesigning, implementing and reevaluating," she observed. Marlowe suggested attorneys identify their own learning style — whether they are visual, kinesthetic or auditory oriented — and base a process around their individual needs. "Learning style, or sensory preference, can be defined most simply as your brain's most efficient way of processing information," she noted. "By five to six months of age, babies have developed an innate sense of learning style." Moreover, Marlowe advised against attempting too large a project the first time you dive in. "Pick one area of improvement and limit your efforts to that space," she recommended.

Marlowe said that because the most typical areas to lack efficiency are paper flow, client file flow, client communication, court schedule communication and billing, it might be best to start by focusing on an empty space and filling it according to what and how often

items are needed. On the other hand, Wilhelm suggests "thinking vertical," recommending items such as a hutch that fits over the desk or a shelving unit to hold excess files. However, she said, there's no substitute for the run of the mill "in" and "out" boxes for keeping papers organized.

Kester agreed, but also prescribed a box labeled "to file" for items to be filed at the end of each day — thereby reminding attorneys to routinely clean out these boxes "to prevent them from becoming clutter bunkers" — as well as utilizing color-coded hanging files with white labels for easy identification at a glance and a professional, crisp appearance. Meanwhile, Tebbe suggested utilizing magazine holders, storage baskets and plastic bins to house old records and files to give an organized feel to the office.

Whatever an attorney chooses, the bottom line is that the appearance and efficiency of your firm directly influences how the client views your proficiency, she stressed. "Your office should be a pleasant environment. If it looks cluttered, clients may think that your work will be unprofessional," Tebbe concluded. "Uncluttered, clean spaces with storage solutions and filing systems in place will give your clients confidence that they picked the right lawyer."

Professional organizers can offer objective advice to disorganized attorneys

Wilhelm's quick efficiency tips

- Use a "Do Not Disturb" function on the phone.
- Limit the amount of times per day you check your voicemail.
- Place your phone behind you.
- Keep your planner open on your desk.
- Take a later lunch and work while others are on break.

Kester's best organizational tools

- Bookends
- Colored hanging file folders
- A step rack on your desk for "hot" files, current projects or transient papers
- "In," "Out," and "To File" boxes
- Magazine holders

If you would like to comment on this story, please contact Sheryl M. Vassallo at (248) 596-2700 ext. 17 or sheryl.vassallo@mi.lawyersweekly.com.

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