Getting Organized: You've Got Mail….But Have You Got Good Habits?

Recently an IT consultant named Eric visited my office to work on my laptop.

As he updated my software, we chatted about our work. I explained that as a productivity consultant, I teach clients to become more organized in their offices.

"You mean, you help them learn how to clear all their papers off their desks?" he asked.

"That's part of it," I nodded.

Then Eric made an interesting observation.

"You know," he said. "It's funny. Whenever I go into a business office and I see a lot of paper and piles all over the desk and the file cabinets, right away I *know* that I'm going to find that their computer is full of clutter. "
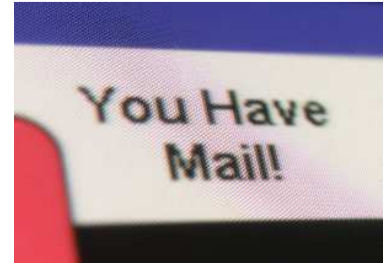
Why am I not surprised by Eric's remark?

I'm not surprised because the person managing (or not managing) their electronic desktop comes to the task with the same brain that they use for managing the space in their office. If that person can't create and maintain order in the "real world" of snail mail and management reports, why would we expect them to be organized in the virtual world?

It turns out that despite the proliferation of ever more sophisticated technology and tools, it is still true that most people are about as organized as they want to be. Fancier tools are neat, but they don't boost our productivity unless we use them in the context of sound organizing principles….because staying organized is about habits, not gadgets.

This brings me to the subject of email. Depending upon whom you ask, email is either a terrific way to get things done….. or it's the biggest time waster ever invented.

How do we get the productivity benefits of email without getting sucked into countless hours rearranging electrons?

First, we have to step back and look at our own behaviors and our skills---skills that will affect how successfully we deal with not only email, but everything else that comes at us during a workday.

In conducting seminars, I teach that there are six issues that affect our ability to become organized and to stay that way. Three of those issues have a direct impact on how effectively you deal with email:

- **Handling what comes in:** Do you have a system for processing incoming items----whether it's email, snail mail, phone messages or verbal requests? If you have a system that works, email becomes just another flavor of input, and you deal with it as you would any other item that crosses your desk.
- **Rational use of time:** Do you know clearly how email fits into the larger picture of how you spend your time each day? I find that individuals give wildly inaccurate estimates of how much time they're devoting to email---for those who check every time a message comes in, those little interruptions add up fast.
- **Prioritization:** Are you doing the right thing at the right time? Are we letting email requests jump to the top of our list of priorities just because the request was delivered by email?

I find that those who have internalized effective behaviors don't struggle with email any more than they struggle with snail mail or telephone calls. Here are a few habits of highly effective email users:

- **Schedule reading your email as you would any other task.** Turn off the feature that dings every time a new message comes in. Decide when you'll check---maybe late morning, after lunch and before leaving. *Interrupting your work everytime a new message comes in is among the worst productivity drains I've seen.*

- **Get clear that spam is not the problem.** While we're all trying to keep unsolicited emails out of our inboxes, no spam software can take the place of your own commitment to delete, delete, delete. And the fact is, it really doesn't take long to delete unwanted messages without opening them. Email overload, according to email expert Mark Hurst, isn't measured in terms of the total number of messages received---it's measured in terms of the number of messages waiting for your attention.

- **Keep your inbox empty.** For some of you, this is a tall order. Think of your email inbox as a video game---your score is shown at the bottom left of your screen where it indicates the number of "items" and your ideal score is ZERO. Don't browse your email looking for messages that are easy to deal with and leave the hard ones sitting there----set aside the time to go through your messages sequentially (not cherry picking), make your decisions, move them to the appropriate reference folder if you must…but get them out of your inbox.

- **Consider re-evaluating what content is pushed to your mail box**. Use the "rules" feature in your email client program to route these messages directly to a "Reading" folder. *You really must not interrupt your work to do casual email reading at unplanned intervals.* Set aside specific time to do your casual email reading. That said, most of us subscribe to more content than we'll ever digest. Unsubscribing is like cleaning out your garage---you'll be amazed at how much space you'll discover when you move out the stuff you really don't use.

- **Change the email subject line when appropriate.** A subject line should tell you what's inside. I'm amazed at how many emails come in with generic subject lines such as, "FYI---Meeting Notes" as opposed to "FYI---Meeting Notes 3/4/06 for Smith Company Proposal." If you get an email that's poorly labeled and you must keep it for reference, change the subject line to something that speaks to you about the contents. Then move it to the appropriate folder in your directory.

- **Make sure you're using email appropriately in the first place.** My observation is that people initiate email when they want to throw the ball into someone else's court—which is fine, but email may not be the most effective channel for taking the ball any further. Just because someone initiates the exchange by email doesn't mean you are required to continue the conversation via email. Pick up the phone.

Whether we love it or hate it, it looks as though email will be around for a while because it's cheap and fast. I think most of us will agree, in many circumstances, email is a huge improvement over licking stamps and envelopes. We just need to remember that our tools are only as good as we are at using them---and that our good habits will trump gadgets every time.

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