

up beat

Wipe the slate clean

Keeping your workspace tidy has many benefits, writes **Ann-Maree Moodie**.

A quotation often attributed to Albert Einstein puts the question: if a cluttered desk signals a cluttered mind, what does an empty desk mean?

Its link to Einstein is questionable but the gist of the quote is this: if history's greatest maths and physics mind was able to re-define the laws of the universe working from a notoriously messy desk, what's the benefit of keeping your own workspace clean?

It's a pertinent question as office redesigns push more managers into open-plan workspaces where their desks are on public display.

Is it better to be tidy and organised or cluttered, messy and suggesting you're busy working?

Melbourne's Lissanne Oliver, a professional organiser and the author of *Sorted!* (Hardie Grant, \$19.95), says she can see advantages to both arguments.

"A tidy, streamlined desk can imply someone in control; someone who's good at maintaining the status quo," she says. "But it can also be perceived as someone who doesn't have enough to do. A desk overwhelmed with piles of paper can often be taken as someone who's very busy; too busy to stop and clear the decks and too busy to take on more responsibilities."

Rebecca Mezzino, of Adelaide professional organiser Clear Space, can see both sides and says having a well-organised workspace may not feel natural for everyone. "Some people get anxious if their

stuff is hidden away from their view," she says. "It can be argued also that you lose time getting your work out again the next day. But I'm sure that the time will be made up in not searching for the piece of paper that got accidentally put into a pile belonging to a different project."

She says encouraging organised and uncluttered workspaces is important if desks can be seen by clients. If the organisation wants to portray an image of professionalism, efficiency and productivity, desks piled high with old newspapers and empty takeaway containers is unlikely to do the trick.

There is also a security issue to consider. Confidential documents, customer databases and personal correspondence are just some of the items which, if stolen, could mean your company breaches privacy laws as well as other legislative requirements.

clean up your act

Keeping your desk in order needn't be an ordeal. Get into the habit at the end of the day of removing rubbish, replacing pens in holders, returning borrowed books and other items to colleagues, putting away reference books and files and throwing out old notes.

The most common challenge for desktop organisation is removing accumulated piles of paper, which seem to be shuffled endlessly from one side of the desk to the other.

"Keep your paperwork vertical and grouped logically according to your work activities, and have your active paperwork within arm's reach," says Rebecca Mezzino of Clear Space. "I like to drill into my clients' minds that, 'If you're not reading it or writing on it, it needs to be vertical.'"

"Magazine folders are perfect to store active papers at the end of the day, ready to be used again in the morning."



Neat and greet ... Lissanne Oliver has built a business out of teaching others to be organised. Photo: Rodger Cummins

The leaking of confidential information pertinent to the company's products and services, its customers and other market-sensitive data such as computer security codes, also could occur if documents are left unattended.

One way to counter these risks is with a "clean desk policy" which states how the company expects its employees to manage their workspace. At the most basic level, such a policy would state that important documents be secured at the end of the day in a lockable desk drawer or filing

cabinet. A clean-desk policy shows that the organisation is taking responsibility for the personal and confidential data in its care – and it's an example of best practice corporate governance.

"At the end of the working day, or when leaving the office for a major part of the day, the employee is expected to tidy their desk of papers and any files with personal information enclosed," says a clean-desk policy implemented by a national park authority in Britain. "This also includes business cards, paper and stick-it notes stuck to computer screens or noticeboards."

A clean desk policy should be written to be flexible as not everyone takes naturally to organising and tidying up.

A blanket policy is likely to fail; compliance in the spirit of the policy will be more successful.

"Being organised and productive involves time management, planning, focus and strong decision-making skills," Oliver says.

"Unfortunately, we're not often taught these skills and not everyone has a natural inclination to be organised.

"Implementing a clean-desk

policy can put these people under pressure to simply do a cosmetic clear-up and scoop everything into a drawer instead of making healthy decisions about the status of the work on their desks. If a clean-desk policy is implemented, it should be backed by training for staff so they are able to execute it with confidence."

Some people love being organised but many of us live and work in clutter, convinced we don't have to time, skills or motivation to make changes.

"The benefits of having a clear desk are not immediately tangible; it's largely subjective until you actually do it," Mezzino says.

"We know we'd feel better with an organised desk greeting us each morning.

"For a start, we're not being greeted with a list of 'to-dos'. We know the to-do items are still there but when they aren't on the desk in piles we don't feel as intimidated. We can breathe easier and start the day with a clear head."

Ann-Maree Moodie is a management educator and the Managing Director of The Boardroom Consulting Group.

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