Clutter Control: Reclaim Your Desk, Refresh Your Image

What if your look is impressive, your skills are incomparable, your manner is impeccable, but your desk is…inexcusable. Does the order (or disorder) of your workspace really matter? In a word, yes.

The work that you do sends an important message, but the *way* that you work sends an important message too. Show a careless disregard for papers and files, and others may perceive you as someone with a careless disregard for their interests, their records, their accounts. Present a workspace that is disorganized, and others may perceive you as someone who is disorganized, muddled, ineffectual. And this perception could actually be closer to fact than we would want to admit; a study conducted at the University of Texas found that people with messy offices were indeed, less efficient, less organized and less imaginative than people with clean desks.

The bottom line? Appearances matter, and your desk and your office are as important to your image and your credibility as the clothes you wear. Take the time to adopt professional standards in the way you work and in the space you occupy, and you'll realize significant dividends, not only in terms of personal fulfillment, but in terms of enhanced client relations. Just think, you can show every client your attention to detail, your commitment to service and your appreciation for their business…without ever leaving your desk.

Ready to get started? Here are tips for clutter-proofing your office, once and for all.

- Set aside time on your calendar--at least an hour--for accomplishing the task. Organizing your workspace has the potential for increasing your client base; consider it as important as any appointment you might make, and don't "cancel" out at the last minute. Consider staying after hours or committing some time on a Saturday morning to completing the project.
- Get comfortable. Accessing papers, moving papers--even sitting on the floor to read papers--requires the ability to move around easily.
- Begin with completely clearing off your desk and dusting the surface (it will need it!). Then set up three containers or boxes and label them: (1) "to do"; (2) "toss"; and (3) "file".
- Pick up each item on your desk, read through it, and determine an appropriate action for that item. Continue until everything in the room is sitting in one of the three containers (except for very large items, of course).
- Arrange the "to do" items neatly in your workspace. If they don't belong in your desk or in your office, re-direct them to an appropriate space. If they do belong, display them, shelve them or enclose them in a storage unit. What about making neat piles atop the desk? Not an option. "Neat piles" soon turn into unruly, unsightly piles; the goal is to find a home for each item.
- Store the items contained in your "file" container. The breadth of storage options is limited only by the imagination these days. There's a filing cabinet or storage compartment for all manner of items.
- "Toss pile"? Toss!
- Has the time for this task expired before the job is done? Don't sweat it. Keep your items compartmentalized and schedule another date and time on your calendar to resume.
- Last step: Promise yourself you will never let your workspace overwhelm you. Shun chaos, and make friends with order. Remember, the manner in which you handle volumes of paper, speaks volumes about you and the work you do!