

Taming Your Office Clutter/Desk Monster

By Randy Dean, MBA

The E-mail Sanity Expert®

(As featured in his November 2018 **Timely Tips** E-Newsletter – see information on how to subscribe below.)

Author Note: *The following article is actually a brief preview excerpt from my upcoming book, with a title to be announced soon. It is part of a broader chapter on the distraction of clutter in your workspace and provides tips on how to regain control of a messy desk and office quickly.*

Do you feel a bit overwhelmed attacking your office clutter beast? I like to share a strategy for a more efficient office clean-up process I'm pretty sure I was exposed to about 30 years ago by David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done*, at one of his intensive workshops. Obviously, I've modified this a bit over time to fit my own personality and work style, but it always helps me get my "stacks and piles" under control quickly if I've lost a bit of control of my desk.

(Wait a minute Randy ... you sometimes lose control of your desk? I figured you'd have a spotless office.)

Hey, I struggle with this stuff a bit too. I just have strategies and regimens I use to help me get back in control quickly in these situations. Let me explain:

I run a small business that has me traveling 150-200 days a year, delivering sessions at 75-100 client events/programs per year. When I get into a crazy travel streak, as I did last May/June (I was basically on the road about 40 out of 50 days – just home on the weekends most weekends for more than a month), I pretty much come in from my trip, turn around laundry, get the dry cleaning ready, and dump all the papers and receipts I've collected on the road into a big stack of stuff. I then also quickly go through all mail I've received while on the road, pull out the checks and any critical items, and dump the rest into the same pile. And I, like you, now have some big stacks and piles on my desk and in my office.

Now, the beauty of my May/June travel streak this year – I KNEW it was right before one of the soft spots on my schedule – the week around the 4th of July Independence Day holiday. That is almost always empty of any client events and travel (and thus is a time to get caught up on several things, including my office papers.) And I followed this following process to quickly take my mess and turn it into progress (like how I did that?)

First, get a small pack of sticky notes (no kidding), perhaps a box of empty file folders and labels, a pen and/or marker, and create a big open space on your floor or a nearby table.

Now, grab every single loose piece of paper on your desk/in your office and build ONE BIG PILE. (I call this the **Grand Mother of All Piles Clean Up Strategy**)

Then, lay out the five sticky notes in your open space (to create different paper piles), with the following labels:

1. Active
2. To File

3. To Review
4. Shred
5. Recycle
6. Toss/Trash
7. (Optional) I also had a sticky labeled “Accounting/Bookkeeping” for the invoices and receipts I had to forward on to my bookkeeper.

Now, start quickly sorting every piece of paper into one of the piles. Go fast – don’t overthink. If you still need to do something with it, it goes in “Active”. If the only thing you need to do is file it for later reference, into the “To File” pile it goes. If it is something that isn’t critical but you’d like to read or review, add to the “To Review” pile. And the last three are self-explanatory: Shred, Recycle, and Trash.

This shouldn’t take much time to go through your big pile. (I went through a couple of months of papers, receipts, mail, and documents and sorted into one of the named piles above in about 15-20 minutes.) Once through, then take immediate action on the Shred, Recycle, and Toss/Trash piles. Those are quick actions -- Do those now! (I’m betting more than half of your paper clutter is now probably gone.)

Now, do you have time now to do the filing? If yes, do it now. This is where you’ll already want in place your file folders, labels, hanging folders, markers/pens, and available file cabinet space. Make it easy and make it fun. Get your favorite non-alcoholic beverage (time for more coffee!) and turn on some of your favorite music. And as a first pass, go through your “To Be Filed” pile, and simply put away any and all papers that you have ALREADY made a folder for. (I’m betting you once again knocked a pile down by about half!) Then, start making and placing new folders for any leftover items. Make the folder, put it in an appropriate hanging folder in an appropriate file box or cabinet. MAKE DECISIONS. This is not a time to deeply question yourself or try to make everything “perfect”. If you don’t like the way you labeled a folder, or where you physically put it, you can change that later. Just get that file/those documents to a “home for now”.

The quest for perfection has stymied many a positive act or deed. - Anonymous

I am a big believer in the “Ready, Fire, Aim” philosophy at this file creation/management stage. (No, that is not a mistype – I meant JUST THAT – Ready, Fire, Aim. What I mean by this is that you can’t overthink – you just have to act, and you can fix any mistakes later. How much does a manila folder cost, or a label? How hard is it to move a hanging folder from one box or cabinet to another? These are basically zero risk actions, which means your focus should be on initial speed and efficiency, not necessarily perfect accuracy.) Make your files, then fix the files that you make. *Focus on progress, not perfection.*

And while you are at it, consider if you might instead be able to scan some or all of those “to be filed” items to PDF, and then get rid of the paper. (I’m personally trying to scan 3-5 items every day to my electronic file cabinet so I can greatly reduce my office paper.) And you could possibly outsource the scanning too – hire an office temp to come in and do your scanning/create your physical files at your direction. Far too few people consider this option – if you are starved on time, but have a bit of money,

seriously consider hiring a temp for a couple days to help you out. You do it for the oil changes on your car and whenever you have a plumbing issue – why not have someone help you with the busy work of getting your office back together?

Now, you could also save the filing option for later if time isn't available now or if you feel pressure to take action on your "Active" pile first. If you don't have time to file now, consider blocking some time on your calendar in coming days to attack that pile (maybe in 2-3 more manageable filing sessions?) Some people I have advised instead decided to dedicate 15-30 minutes a day for the next week or two to knock down their "To Be Filed" pile – whatever works for you! Now, if you want to go after your Active pile first, here is what I recommend you do:

First pass: quickly go through the pile and do ANYTHING that will take a couple minutes or less. Your goal here is to get rid of the "quick little things" you have been sitting on. Get that form filled out. Put a stamp on that envelope that is ready to send. Check out that on line offer you've been sitting on and decide "Yes" or "No". Turn around the quick little question your coworker has been waiting on. Then file, delete, or shred that thing! Now, depending on how big your Active Pile is, it might take you an hour or so to get all of these little things done, but DO IT! It is time to take focused action and either get those things done or decide to get rid of them.

Next, start sorting each individual paper/file/document in your "Active" pile from most important/urgent on the top to least important/urgent on the bottom. Do this quickly and don't overthink – the simple test is for each document: is it more important or urgent than the one directly below it or above it? And quickly get them into order, with most important/urgent on top.

Now, I'm going to give you a bit of "radical" advice: seriously consider taking the bottom third to half of the pile, and discard/shred/recycle most or all of it. (You might want to do this one page at a time!) Let me explain my rationale: most likely, these are documents or items that have been on your desk for weeks or even months with no action. And, you pretty much haven't gotten in trouble for not doing them. And, by your own sorting, you have determined that these are the least important items on your desk. Maybe you just don't have to do them? Maybe you just don't have to do them!

They are by your own sorting and admission to be low priority/urgency items. They have been sitting there forever (or at least a long time). One of the key strategies I'm hoping for you to adopt is that of making better decisions with both your focus and your time. If these items are not that important, then get rid of them. As a matter of fact, if you CAN'T get rid of them, I have to wonder if you might be suffering from a bit of a hoarding issue? Why can't you let go of low value, low priority items that are causing you clutter and distraction? You have yourself identified these items as low value through your own sorting actions, but you can't let go?

The squirrels will not go away if you don't make them go away. They will stay, and they will multiply. It is time to become a squirrel chaser. It is time to become a squirrel tamer. It is time to own your mess, and get rid of your mess, and put your time and effort on the more important things. Make decisions. Get rid of the clutter. Chase away the squirrels.

Now, assuming that you did give your Active Pile a “bottoms up haircut”, and you also did get rid of as many “quick little items” as possible, that Active Pile should be MUCH more manageable. I know when I did this recently after my big travel streak, my Active Pile was small enough to fit easily in a single standard-sized manila folder. And then, in a coup de grace, I took several of the items in that pile, scanned the actual papers to PDF, attached those electronic PDF files to my related electronic task list or calendar items, and got rid of even more paper!

Next, I went after my items in my Accounting/Bookkeeping pile. This was pretty easy. I simply had to sort the receipts and invoices by client/date, write a few notes on them for clarity for my bookkeeper, put them in an envelope, and get them to my bookkeeper. (And, I really needed to do that – she had been waiting for them for a while!)

Finally, I went after my “To Review” pile. As you remember, that was basically magazines, newsletters, articles, and documents that I would simply possibly be interested in reading, but I clearly didn’t really NEED to read. I had built a pretty impressive stack. Professional journals. Marketing magazines. Printed e-newsletters. Speaker guides. Membership letters. And more! I had the best of intents to read all of it, but, having a couple pretty good years in a row, I just kept building a bigger and bigger stack of stuff I began to realize I was likely going to never read.

So, I took my giant stack, and spent about 45 minutes literally going through each and every item – magazine, newsletter, article, document, etc. – and I ripped out the articles and items I found most interesting. I literally went through the pages of each item, pulled out the most relevant items, and reduced the pile by 90%, recycling pretty much everything I decided was neither relevant nor important enough. And, I took what was now left, put it into a single manila folder that fits beautifully in my laptop bag, and now can carry around with me the focused items I’d like to read, and I try to read one or two items every time I’m waiting for a plane, waiting at the doctor or dentist office, just drinking my coffee on the weekends.

I also decided at that time to end my subscriptions to a couple magazines and newsletters that no longer seemed to have much value to me. I liked them, but I just didn’t have the time (or at least wouldn’t make the time) to read them regularly. I will now not have to store these items for a time that I’ll likely never see, and I’ll save a few bucks too!

Now, I want you to look at the last few pages, walking through my process to take back control of my desk/office and deal with my “Grand Mother of All Piles”. I did these actions piecemeal, with sessions of 30-75 minutes a few times over a few weeks. I tracked my time. I spent a grand total of about 5 hours doing everything above. A pretty big mess I had accumulated over a couple of months of intensive travel, as well as legacy items I’d been sitting on much longer, and in 5 hours, spread over a few weeks, my stacks and piles completely disappeared. My To Be Filed pile is now gone. It is all put away. My Active Pile is small and manageable, and prioritized! (And some of it is now in electronic PDF form.) My To Review pile fits in a single manila folder in my computer bag. And I got rid of about 80%-90% of the paper in my office. I chased away one major squirrel. (By the way, not surprisingly, by doing this exercise, I realized I was also sitting on some old shipping materials, inventory, and electronic items. I’ve already blocked some time during the upcoming end-of-year holiday season to go into and reduce these items also.)

I promise you – I am going to personally try to better stay on top of the items to file (and hopefully keep turning more of that info into scanned electronic files) – but knowing how much I travel, I fully expect this to happen again. I will get too much stuff on my desk. I sort of hope it happens, because it means my business is thriving! But, I also have a system for regaining control and chasing away these squirrels. And I just use it in whole or in part depending on the situation, and I'm always ready to go after my desk and office whenever I see a slow spot on the schedule.

If this is one of your biggest squirrels hunting you, I recommend you stop reading right now, and start executing the plan for reclaiming control of your desk and office. Chase away this squirrel, and be ready to chase it away again in the future if it sneaks back into your office!

And by the way, I actually have a [YouTube video tutorial](#) on this clean up process. I recommend you check out this 15 minute video in conjunction with your efforts to regain control of your desk and chase away your office clutter squirrels! It will save you some time in this process.

Now, Go Ahead and Mess Up Your Desk Again! (Wait, What?)

A fascinating recent study found that people that had somewhat messy desks we're actually often more productive than those that had very clean desks. It found that highly productive people with a bit of a mess on their desk had a messy desk because they were actually getting work done! The mess was work in progress! Those with too clean of a desk were spending too much time being organized. Hearing this, I could see a few of you being a little upset with me for having you go through all of the effort of cleaning up your stacks, piles and clutter the last few days. But hear me out: your effort was not wasted!

I am now giving you permission to make your desk a bit messy again. But here is how I want your new mess to be different: make a mess and spread out when you are working on an active project. Do what you need to do to get things done. It is your space! Use it! Never let your organization get in the way of your productivity.

Starting today, feel free to spread out when you are working on something active. But when you are done working on that thing for now, put it away in its home. Then, get out the next thing, spread out, make a mess, and get more done.

I want you to be free to do what you need to do to get done what you need to get done. Take up space, spread things out, get creative! But when done for now, put it away again. It is that simple. Don't leave a mess for the next day or in the way of your next project. Any mess you make should be related to the single project or goal you are trying to complete or accomplish. I just want you to avoid having multiple messes all out on your desk at the same time -- THAT is where you lose traction and productivity (and let loose the squirrels!)

I cover some of these strategies in my new workshop program, "From Distracted to Productive". If you'd like to learn more about this program and my other programs, as well as see a little video snippet of one of my presentations, please visit my web site: <http://www.randalldean.com> You can even get access to recent full-length webinar replays on many of my programs (for a fee) here.



Randy Dean, MBA, *The E-mail Sanity Expert®*, has been one of the most popular expert speakers on the conference, corporate, and university training and speaking circuit for several years. The author of the recent Amazon e-mail bestseller, *Taming the E-mail Beast*, Randy is a very popular and engaging time, e-mail, and technology management speaker and trainer. He brings more than 25 years of speaking and training experience to his programs, and has been very popular with programs including *Taming the E-mail Beast*, *Finding an Extra Hour Every Day*, *Optimizing Your Outlook*, *Time Management in*

"The Cloud" Using Google and Other Online Apps, and *Smart Phone Success & Terrific Tablets*. Learn more at <http://www.randalldean.com>.

You have permission to reuse, reprint, and/or edit this article for space if you include the paragraph above.

NOTE: You can subscribe to Randy's monthly **Timely Tips** e-newsletter – where he features one time-saving tip and one smart phone/tablet featured app each month – by simply sending him an e-mail at randy@randalldean.com and putting "Subscribe" in the subject line.

You may also want to check out or even subscribe to **Randy's YouTube Channel** at <http://www.youtube.com/user/JanaRandyDean> where he often posts some of his favorite technology tips, snippets from program sessions, info about popular programs, and more.

You can join Randy on LinkedIn at <http://www.linkedin.com/in/randydean>

You can follow Randy on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/timelyman>

Like Randy's Taming E-mail Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/tamingemailbeast/>