



# HOW TO AVOID BEING AN OFFICE PACKRAT

**Checking priorities and mastering the art of creative trashing will help keep critical information accessible**

BY JEFF DAVIDSON

In a society such as ours, which speeds off in all directions, it's understandable that people like to hang on to pieces of the past. We all tend to overcollect. A desk, office, car or pocketbook could be overloaded with now useless items saved from months and even years past. This tendency, called packratism, is a problem that afflicts many office workers.

Although much of the material scattered around in odd places may be useless, quite a bit of it may include valuable records and information that's critical to a business. In order to access that information quickly, it's important to eliminate the clutter surrounding it.

To combat packratism, first recognize that you remain the primary force in preventing these piles from engulfing you. To take control, eliminate whatever clogs your system and interferes with your effectiveness.

The three principals of combating packratism are:

1. Break down horizontal piles.
2. Reread your priority list and ask key questions.
3. Master the art of creative trashing.

## **Horizontal piles**

You can't *manage* a horizontal pile (a stack of files placed one on top of another). No one can efficiently negotiate this arrangement. Information can always be found more quickly if it's filed systematically.

Horizontal piles can't be a final resting place for the items in them because you always have to do something else with them. To know in *seconds* whether or not someone is efficient, visit his or her office or home and observe whether or not he or she maintains horizontal piles.

Human beings most effectively organize printed information vertically, either in a filing cabinet with all labeled tabs facing upward or in a vertical divider with tabs facing outward. Color coding the files also helps considerably.

## ONCE YOU ADOPT CONTROL MEASURES, MAINTENANCE GETS EASIER AND EASIER



### List priorities

Next, wade through each of your files and ask yourself four questions:

1. Have I used this information in the last year?
2. Are there any consequences of not retaining it?
3. Does it support me, my office, department or company?
4. Is the information irreplaceable?

Feel free to retain the items if you answer “yes” to any of the above questions. Nevertheless, it’s likely that much of the information you analyze

will generate four “no” answers.

### Creative trashing

In addition to cleaning up your office, these techniques can be helpful at home. What can you toss right now?

Which books can you give away? What information is “old hat” to you but would be welcome to a new member of your organization?

How many bags and boxes of old clothes and books can you donate to the Salvation Army or Goodwill? What about the hospitals, schools, libraries and retirement homes in your area? It’s a lot easier to let go of items when you know they’ll benefit others.

In a closet, pantry or other area, place a box where you can see it and add to it as you discover clothes that don’t fit or items you choose not to retain. When the bag or box is full, drop it off at the charity you’ve chosen. In addition to reducing the clutter in your home, you’re contributing to a worthy cause.

Consider every piece of paper, unsolicited mail, note, document, book or article of clothing. Then toss out anything that doesn’t support your priorities. Declare your freedom from the packratism that’s endemic to 20th century man and woman.

Once you adopt control measures, maintenance gets easier and easier.

At least quarterly, reexamine *everything you own* and practice creative trashing. This will get easier and go faster each time you do it.

Prune your holdings 1 week before your birthday and again near New Year’s Day. The realization of years passing prompts you to toss what doesn’t support you.

If you have to, allow yourself one file drawer, closet or storage locker as a dumping ground for whatever mess you want to accumulate. But remember, if you don’t get rid of the stuff eventually, your executors will, and they’ll charge your heirs for doing it!

### Overcoming second thoughts

Suppose you know you’re retaining too much but instinctively you seek to hang on to everything. You may be asking yourself: What if I need this later? Shouldn’t I hold on to it just in case?


To overcome second thoughts on tossing, try this approach: View the item(s) or information on 5 separate days. If the item is best retained or is of value, you’ll intuitively feel this during each review. At any point, you may toss the item. After five reviews, feel free to retain it.

### It’s no use

If you absolutely can’t bear to part with what you’ve collected, here are some options:

- Set up your own “informational-retrieval plan.” Copy the title pages, cover pages, mastheads, addresses and/or phone numbers onto single pages. Then add them to data-base software programs or scan them.
- Develop a single file or use a three-ring notebook and label it “Just in Case” specifically for these one-page files. Now you can find references quickly.
- Box and store items “of possible future use.” Remove them from your office, home or immediate work area. Mark the box: “Review contents in January.”

Whenever you want, feel free to box and store items “of possible future use.” Mark your calendar for a 6- or 12-month review but get the box out of your office or home.

Only you can prevent packratism from engulfing you. 

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