

Help for the Pack Rat in You



by JEFF DAVIDSON

As society dumps more information on our plates, more of us are hanging on to more papers and files. To combat office "pack-ratism," first recognize that you remain the primary force preventing what you're saving from engulfing you. To take control, eliminate at the top whatever clogs your system and interferes with your effectiveness.

You probably need to toss most of what's in your files, but we'll go easy for now. Keep in mind the three principles of combating pack-ratism:

1. Break down horizontal piles.
2. Ask yourself critical questions.
3. Master the art of creative trashing.

Break down horizontal piles

You can't manage a horizontal pile; indeed, no one can efficiently negotiate this spatial arrangement. 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.

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 office or home and observe whether or not he maintains horizontal piles.

Ask yourself critical questions

Wade through each of your files and ask yourself these questions:

- Have I used this information in the last year?
- Are there any consequences of not retaining it?

- Does it support me, my family, my job, my community, etc.?
- Is the information or item irreplaceable?

Feel free to retain the item if you answer yes to any of the above questions. Nevertheless, in light of what you now know and the surrounding environment of information overload, is retention warranted? So often, the answer is "toss it." So, it makes sense to do so.

Master the art of creative trashing

What else can you toss right now that barely exceeds the criteria for retention? Which books can you give away? What information that is old hat to you would be welcome to a newer member of your organization?

How many boxes of books can you donate to the Salvation Army or the 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.

Consider every piece of paper, junk mail solicitation, document, or book that you retain, which doesn't support your priorities and is hazardous to your breathing space. Declare your freedom from the clutter syndrome. Once you adopt a control measure, maintenance gets easier and easier.

At least quarterly, re-examine everything you have in the office and practice creative trashing. This will get easier and go faster each time you do it. If you have to, allow yourself one file drawer, closet, or storage locker as a dumping ground for whatever mess you want to accumulate.

Overcoming second thoughts on tossing

When you want to toss something, but are getting weak in the knees, recall how good it felt to toss other items and how months passed without you missing them. Then, remember that in the era of information overload, injudicious attachment to information can become a detriment to your career.

Here are some parting options:

- Set up your own "information retrieval plan." Copy the title pages, cover pages, mastheads, addresses, and/or phone numbers onto single pages, add them to your database software program, or scan them.
- Develop a single file or three-ring notebook labeled "Just in Case" specifically for these one-page files. Now you can find references quickly if you need to while not being bogged down.
- Box and store items for "possible future use." Remove the box from your office or immediate work area, and mark it "Review contents in April."
- Whenever you want, feel free to box and store items for "possible future use."
- Mark your calendar for a six- or 12-month review, but get the box out of your office.

Remember, you're the primary, and indeed, *only* force that can prevent pack-ratism from engulfing you! 5

Jeff Davidson, MBA, CMC, based in Chapel Hill, N.C., helps organizations and individuals overcome the relentless burden of information and communication overload. Visit www.BreathingSpace.com for more on Jeff's keynote speeches and seminars.