



Jeff Davidson: Breathing Space

When Paper Problems Persist

Imagine staring out the window from the fifth floor of a building, facing a stack of reports at eye level. This 50-foot high stack would weigh some 504 pounds—the height and weight of paper that Americans annually consume per person; a number that’s actually down from 652 pounds in 2005. E-communications have helped, but most of us are still drowning in paper.

Having to deal with too much paper, in any form, diminishes your sense of free time. In fact, the chances are astronomical that your current struggle to control the paper flow in your life is a burning issue. The sea of paper you face at work or at home is endemic to this society – it’s not just you!

Covering One’s Own

We generate information on paper, and we feel important doing it. However, funny enough, we condone each other’s excessive use of paper. Our unspoken mottoes have become, “I photocopy, therefore I am,” and “Have laser printer, will make dozens of copies.” No birth control for reprints, just endless reproduction, a world imaging itself, memoranda infinitum.

Corporate cultures subject their employees and constituents to substantial paperwork. Firing an incompetent worker requires reams of paperwork, as do job promotions, client billing, investment analysis and fundraising. Corporate paper flow itself accounts for 70 percent of all corporate activity today.

Your Private Glut

You can try to continually confront your own paper glut. You can shield yourself for stretches, but the piles on your desk and around your office become overwhelming. Studies of paper retention show that about 80 percent of papers retained in office environments are never used. Stated alternatively, you’re probably holding on to four times the paper you need, and finding and using what you actually need becomes more time-consuming.

It’s time to clear the in-bins of your mind and your desk. Regard each piece of paper that enters your personal kingdom as a potential mutineer, rebel, or disloyal subject —each piece must earn its keep and remain worthy of your retention. Were it to speak, it would have to immediately convey its value to you, and if it failed, it would volunteer for recycling, where it at least has the chance of coming back to you someday.