

"Organizing for Today, Tomorrow, and the Next Day"  
by Tys Sniffen

Getting organized is hard. If it weren't, we wouldn't put it off until it got even harder. There are hundreds of books out there on how to get organized; they have ideas on how to work in your garage, in your living room, in your mind, in your job. They offer every sort of idea for every sort of situation... but you know what happens to most of those books? They end up in the middle of some pile on our disorganized tables and desks.

What we need is some simple, applicable ideas and systems that we can start applying today. Here are my suggestions that I've come up with after working with all different sorts of clients and situations.

First of all, get an 'information assistant' (IA) that you can carry with you throughout your day. A paper-based daily planner, a personal digital assistant (PDA) like a Palm Pilot, or even a simple notebook where you keep everything written down (those are harder to keep organized, but don't think you need to spend a bunch of money on this tool).

Once you have that IA, use it. Have it be your calendar, your address book, your notebook, your reference page, your task list. Use it every day, and keep it up to date. I now always recommend a digital solution (like a Palm) if you already have a computer as these are much easier to keep updated, and are generally easier to carry around. I love that I can carry mine in the breast pocket of my sports coat. I used to have a paper planner, but I'd never take it with me in the evenings. Kind of hard to 'hit the town' with a notebook under your arm. More importantly, more and more of our lives are connected to the internet, and this flood of information will only grow. In addition, the data on a PDA can be backed up almost instantly, so if you lose it, there's no loss of information.

It takes a bit of time to get used to these tools, and of course you run into problems setting them up. It's a bit like a computer... Once there's one on your desk, it's all set up and you know how to use it, you get a lot done... but it took a while to get used to it. Plan on learning how to use your PDA so you're not fumbling around with it.

Now that your information is organized, let's look at the other important aspects of getting organized. Look around your office or home: what disorganized stuff is bugging you? If there's one particular room, or corner, or drawer that really bothers you, tackle that now. Try to deal with this one space until it's cleared, but if you can't finish in one or two hours, don't worry, just come back to it again, until you've got that biggest 'monkey' off your back. Once you feel the lightness from that, you will be more ready to tackle the next one.

How do you tackle that spot? By applying two main rules to each and every piece of paper or stuff: (1) **If it takes less than two minutes to deal with (to file it, to act on it, or to trash it), do it now.** If it takes longer than two minutes to deal with, "contain" that project (meaning file/box it), and put it on your calendar to deal with it in the next week. (2) **If you haven't used it in over a year, toss it.**

An example of this might be a crafts table, piled high with craft ideas, old mail, maybe a couple of shoe boxes of photos. (Sounds sort of familiar to many of us, doesn't it?) Well, for example, take those photos, put them in a container that they just fit in, and put on your task list/calendar a time when you will get to that project. Now, you'll probably not find the 7 hours you'll need to put those photos in order all in one block, so plan on spreading that project out over time. Keep going through that pile using these two 'golden rules' of organizing.

The first step for 'tomorrow', Day 2: Managing time.

A great way to figure out 'where the time goes' is to spend a day tracking where you spend your time. You'll be surprised at how much of that day is spent on things you didn't expect. Your work can be full of interruptions, distractions, problems, moments of relaxation, etc. Try to keep track of what you're doing for one whole day, in 15 minute increments. Do you really intend to spend 3 hours a day responding to email and/or surfing the web? Set up systems that allow you to focus on your priorities when you want to. Do things such as:

- Set your email program to only check for email 3 times a day, not every minute. That way you won't be tempted/bothered when that latest email 'dings' into your inbox.
- Don't answer the phone. Let the machine get it, and return calls all at once, on *your* schedule, when you're ready. Plan an hour in the morning, and an hour in the afternoon.
- Be smart about messages and emails you do send. Don't just call back and say, "yes, let's talk about that".. Say, "Yes, let's talk. I'd like to follow up on point A before we talk, and if you could handle point B and just CC me on the email, that'd be great. Call me back at either 4pm Tuesday or 11am Wed." In other words, move the conversation along, and give others options to choose from that work for you.

## Step Two for Day Two: Setting priorities and scheduling review

We've all heard about setting goals and breaking them down into manageable, achievable chunks... Now it's time to prioritize those chunks and get them on the calendar. Then add a weekly review onto that calendar so you can look back at what you did in the last week, and what you'll do in the next week to meet those goals.

The big issue disorganized folks have is that they work really hard to get organized, then in a couple of days or weeks, it's all back to normal, and those great goals and lists are buried. A solution might be to share your weekly priorities with a friend or colleague who will hold you accountable... And you do the same for them. (You could make a bet that if one of you doesn't get through your list, you have to buy dinner that week.)

Setting priorities and sticking to them is really hard for all of us. This is why organizational tools that spread your 'core' values into your everyday consciousness are such good organizational tools. Steven Covey's 'Seven Habits of Highly Effective People', the Franklin Planner's goals and values process, and it's why I suggest looking at your long term goals at least once a week during your weekly review. You need that reminder on a regular basis.

And the next day: Future steps.

As your systems start to fall into place, and you start to feel the benefits of getting organized, build on that momentum and start looking at what your overall life goals are, and what influences you. When you start working smarter and more effectively, you have to ask yourself what you're going to do with the extra time? Are you going to work more to accomplish more? Or do you want to take that time to do something else? You certainly haven't become more organized just so you can do more sitting in front of the TV have you?

Where do we look for models of how we want to live once we get the clutter out of our way? The following three cultural influences can be excellent guides for helping us focus our goals.

### *Zen and martial arts*

As you gain mastery over your time and your 'stuff', look to become a master of whatever you do. The cultural precepts of most Asian martial arts, from Tai Chi to Kung fu closely follow precepts of Zen philosophy. As I attempt to understand what they're about, I read it as 'practice what you do until you can do it effortlessly, automatically. Do it in a reverent, loving way. Once you have mastered that action, move on to the next level, and focus again, on the present action.' Once you see the connection between your focus, clarity and the need for a clutter free, prepared environment, you will not want to move back to the old ways of distraction and stress again.

### *American 'Can Do' digital age*

There's always a better way to do things, and American culture is always trying to invent it. There's much in the American way that can distract you from your new-found organization, like consumerism and greed... But you can also use this influence to always be looking at how to bring more efficiency to all your projects. Is there a paperless way to do what you have in mind? Do you need to carry all that computer equipment? Can we do a 'virtual meeting' instead? Adaptation and absorption is the norm in American society... Use this opportunity to do more in less time.

### *La Dolce Vita*

The Mediterranean culture has long had a handle on 'the sweet life'. From Morocco to Jordan they have always prized time with family, time for art, music, food, for life. Italians are aghast when they learn Americans only get two weeks of vacation... Turks struggle to understand how American male friends don't spend time together discussing politics, art, and relationships... A two hour lunch with your family on a workday is not an indulgence, it's expected. Let the Mediterranean culture influence your new found time. Focus on life, and living, not simply working more.

The goal of looking at these different important influences as you look to get your life organized is to create a \*lifestyle\*, a way of living that allows you to focus on what's important, to do more, grow more, and to live better. Get started today.



Tys Sniffen, Founder of Idea Mountain, has helped hundreds of individuals and small businesses deal with what's slowing them down. Working nationally, he consults both in person and 'virtually' with clients to help them be more organized, work better, and get more out of life. Please visit [www.ideamountain.com](http://www.ideamountain.com) for more information, or call 415-606-7746