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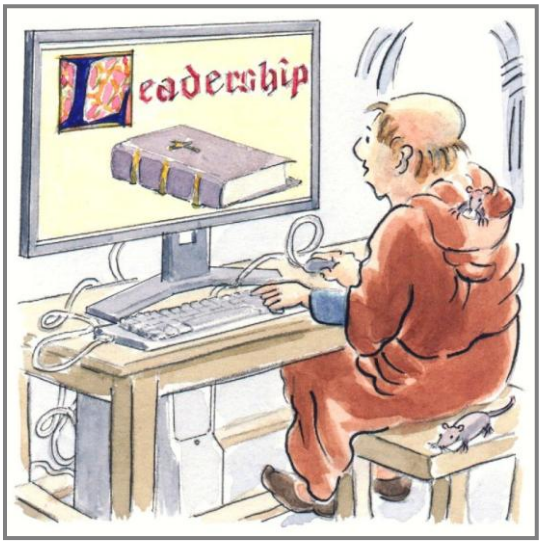

Sorting out your study

Part 1: The space in the room

A36 Articles series: Leadership

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These two articles (A36 and A37) are designed primarily for Ministers who work from home. They will also apply to other church staff who work from a home base such as youth workers, pastoral staff and musicians.

They have in mind anyone who finds administration somewhat perplexing, and especially those whose studies look as though they have just been targeted by a group of amateur burglars looking for the family silver.

So, for many Ministers and others, we are peering inside the study door, entering the room, and looking at everything there is to see. For some of you this may well be space shared with others in your household: a room where the children do their homework or even a dining-room or bedroom. But in general I shall have in mind a dedicated 'study' or 'office' in the house. You might, by the way, like to ponder on the different meanings of those two terms and how that might affect what you do there.

But for a growing number of church staff in larger churches, this space may no longer be in the home but centralised on the church site. This will also be true for most Administrators working out of 'the church office' and for interns. So everything here will apply too to 'sorting out your office' whether at church or in a Christian mission agency.

These two articles are based on the idea that we are made in the image of God and are not soul-less machines. We all work better, especially if the task is one that does not in itself give us great enjoyment, if we feel positive about ourselves and where we are. So there is a clear theological vein running through what will be a very practical setting.

This first article tackles the room itself, the second the handling of paper and, to some extent, digital files and emails. My training sessions for clergy on paper-handling follow the kind of material I cover here.

You can access the second article on paperwork at A37 ***here***. But, first, let's focus on the room itself.

A: Enjoy your study!

For most of us ***the feel of the space in which we work matters***. The factors that influence our morale will differ from individual to individual, but there will be vital aspects of the study or office which impact on our feelings, one way or the other.

Here are 20 possibilities in alphabetical order to take away any sense of hierarchy. Put a tick in the appropriate boxes for the ones that matter most to you. We are all different.

☐ 1: **Chair**

I am not talking about the CEO's executive, leather lounger. But I am concerned when I find Ministers sitting on a cast-off dining room chair, or sitting on an uncomfortable office chair that has castors or wheels that no longer work. The chair is the most important piece of furniture in the study. A good one enables effective work, a poor one creates medical problems over time and reduces output. A basic five-splay office chair is not expensive and will recover its cost in improved output in no time at all.

☐ 2: **Cleanliness**

See also No. 19 on tidiness because it is much easier to clean a tidy space. If your carpet is covered in piles of papers, getting the hoover out may be a non-starter. But many people work more effectively from a space that is at least clean rather than one where every horizontal area has a coating of dust. A simple spring-clean might be enough to transform your working area into a place where you can at least feel clean yourself – and that may well help you to work smarter. Go on, wage war on those cobwebs!

☐ 3: **Colour**

For many people working from a grey or colourless space will not inspire creativity. If you are a colourful person and your predecessor was not, you may need to get a paintbrush out (see No. 4 below). Or at least introduce colour in other ways: pictures, drapes, lampshades, a rug on the floor, ring binders on shelves in a multitude of colours, bright screensavers. Move the grey filing cabinets and revel in the colours that are 'you'. If the drab room depresses you, take action now. Never let your study be dull!

☐ 4: **Decoration**

Closely linked to colour is the quality of the decoration. I visited a patient in hospital recently and the decoration in the ward had not been touched for some time – it made me feel tired and flaky (hardly a healing environment). So if the study has yellowing paintwork and marks all over the walls, a quick run over with a paintbrush might work marvels. A newly decorated room can speak of freshness and vitality. One that has been left well past its repaint date can engender gloom and despair.

☐ 5: **Equipment**

A computer that is getting old and slow can waste hours of time over a year. A copier or printer that is forever jamming or dropping excess toner creates frustration. A telephone system that does not do what you need it to do will not only delay you but annoy you too. These are issues for a church office but just as much for a clergy study. If you feel fed up with the constant irritations of equipment that is not working well, you are not going to enjoy your administration.

☐ 6: **Friends/family**

While not wishing to commend clutter in any way (see 17 below), some people find it improves their work efficiency to surround themselves with reminders of their friends and family. Examples include that theological college group photo, mementoes given to you by those you love, your six-year-old's self-portrait in a frame on the wall, and of course photographs of a spouse or friends to spur you on when you are in the middle of that difficult task.

☐ 7: **Furnishings**

Much though I resisted the change, I worked better when my threadbare carpet (to which I was very attached – literally sometimes when my chair wheels got caught in it) was replaced by something new. If the curtains and chair covers have seen many years of use, they may help you to feel older than you are and to work more slowly as a result.

☐ 8: **Furniture**

The desk should be as big as makes sense in the space but, unlike the chair (see No. 1) it does not need to be new. A sofa in the study may be vital if you entertain visitors there or if your creative juices flow when sitting informally in comfort, but it can equally distract from the desk for some workers. Is the quality of furniture reasonable enough to fulfil your needs? If it is getting you down at all, it is time to invest in something new. And if there is more than you need, it's time to take some of it to the recycling people.

☐ 9: **Heat**

I once worked in a suntrap office where the temperature often soared on a July afternoon and effective work became almost impossible. There are of course legal requirements about such matters but they will not apply to a room in your private house. But a cold room in winter can be just as bad. A range of fan heaters and portable fires may not always make for excellence in safety. It's a key area of comfort, so get the heat as right as you can.

☐ 10: **Library**

Some Ministers feel naked without their books all around them. If this is you, and they are not just there to show off to your visitors, having tidy, adjustable shelving so that your books are easily accessible and helpfully sorted can create a feeling of someone with their resources on tap. If you have too many for the space, it's time to prune, build more shelves or move house.

☐ 11: **Light**

Most people will find a room full of daylight better to work out of than one with a pokey window high up and artificial lighting the main source of illumination. But when you need that artificial light, is there enough for you to work well? A reasonable lighting level throughout the room augmented by a desk lamp may well be best, but it is not good on your eyes to have too harsh a glare or too weak a glow.

☐ 12: **Maintenance**

I was recently in a church office where damp was getting in. This does not do the books and papers on shelves against the walls much good but, more importantly, it makes the working environment depressing. It can also give the impression that the church is not prepared to pay to get the walls repointed, the roof repaired, or the gutters unblocked. Some Ministers' studies seem to have been built into medieval, stone vestries so it can be difficult to match present-day requirements. But if the building is well maintained, at least that is a start.

☐ 13: **Music**

Many people feel better if there is background music, just as many feel better if there isn't! If you work in shared space this will only be an option with headphones, and that may well be frowned on, but in your own home study you have more choice. For some it will be Radio 2 or Classic FM but these have continuity announcers that can be distracting. For others CDs of choice in the background make work less of a chore.

☐ 14: **Pictures**

I have covered colour (No. 3), family photos (No. 6) and furnishings (No.7) but pictures still deserve their own category. These may be posters, paintings, photographs or screensavers. I have lots of screensavers of the Scottish Highlands on my computer to remind me of God's creation (and my holidays!). You may have pictures to encourage you or to make you laugh.

☐ 15: **Safety**

Personal safety is becoming a big issue for many Ministers and church staff. If you are on your own in the house or office on a dark, winter's evening and the doorbell goes, how much can you discover about who is there? It's not much fun working from a study or church office when you do not feel secure because you are on your own in an isolated building. Consider CCTV, a good entry-phone system and alarms you can activate if necessary.

☐ 16: **Security**

Most church staff will be handling confidential information from time to time, so how secure are your records and, in particular, your IT files? If visitors come to your study, what could they bring up on your computer screen if you popped out for a couple of minutes to make a cup of coffee? If your window looks out onto a public space or road, what can people see if they peer in? How well protected is your computer from viruses and hackers? You will work better if you know that your data is as safe as can be.

☐ 17: **Space**

Most of us work somewhat better when we can breathe! But many clergy studies and church offices are piled high with clutter, or are used to store anything from old files and ancient computers to all-age service visual aids and items for the next jumble sale. Although related, this is a different issue from tidiness (No. 19 below). Being able to move round the study without having to step over boxes and piles of paper will help unclutter the mind. The study is a work area and should be a clutter-free zone.

☐ 18: **Symbols**

Many people find visual reminders of their faith help focus the mind on the real meaning of what it is all about. This may be a cross hanging from the ceiling, candles on a table, or pictures or icons on a wall. You may be doing 'business' in this room, but it is all part of ministry. After all, administration and ministry have the same root.

☐ 19: **Tidiness**

I don't insist on this when clearing a Minister's study because some people can happily live in a mess because they know exactly where everything is within that mess. But for most people a tidy study enables a tidy mind and a more efficient way of working. So it can be productive to spend 30 minutes tidying rather than moving on to the next 'to do' task.

When did you last see your carpet?

For clergy studies in a mess I used to offer my 'black bin sack' session in days before my retirement. We spent half a day, or more, sorting it all out in a way that I shall show you in these two articles which allowed you and others to carry on after I had left.

☐ 20: **View**

The view out of the window can have a powerful impact on your feelings. You don't even have to look out (or waste time doing so!) provided you know it is there and have it in the corner of your eye. I chose a room in my house overlooking the back garden for my study, rather than a larger room looking out on a main road at the front. It makes a big difference to how I feel.

So there are 20 ideas that impact morale when working in the study or office. You may have others to add to the list.

Now check your ticked items. Are there ways you could improve in these areas to create a space that is more pleasant to work from? You might be quite surprised how much payback there can be in improving just one or two.

B: Lay out the room

So you have now made some changes to the room to make it feel like a better place to work from. I now move on to consider how you arrange the various items in the space that you have. This will be more an issue for some than others, but my idea is to enhance your working environment and to improve effectiveness at the same time.

This might be a good opportunity to review your present room layout; even some small changes can help you enjoy the space more and work better within it. Layout matters almost as much as the feel of the space. In fact the layout will be one more feature that impacts the feel of the room.

Serve your purpose

Your study or office may be any combination of the following:

- an office or administrative work station for yourself or shared with others;
- a study room or library;
- a chapel for your own use or with others;
- a place in which to meet with and counsel people;
- an area for formal meetings;

- a space for dealing with enquiries in person, by telephone, or email;
- a space for the use of equipment and stationery (eg. printing);
- a space for keeping files and records;
- a room that is shared with the family in some way.

It is immediately apparent that some of these clash with each other. I once noted a senior clergy study with highly confidential, personal records that doubled as open space for the owner's teenage children.

I have noted many clergy studies where visitors, some of whom may be in distress, have to wait while papers are taken off the only possible chair and a floor space cleared, or where the Minister sits in authority on one side of the desk and the visitor humbly on the other.

If the study is to double as a 'chapel' in some form, I would advise creating as much 'distance' as possible between this and other uses. You may want to have a table with appropriate symbols but make sure when you are there you are not distracted by a computer screen nearby or sight of papers requiring your attention. So a seat facing a wall or window rather than into the room may be wise.

A similar principle applies if you have visitors who need to sit comfortably without visual distractions – but you don't want them facing into a wall!

The purposes I have listed have different measures of openness to others, ranging from the public space in some church offices through to the private shed at the bottom of the Minister's garden.

The point is to know the priority purposes and ensure the layout serves them as best as possible. So two identical spaces with different purposes may need quite different configurations of furniture and other items.

Position the desk

It won't always be the case but usually the desk will be the key item of furniture to position in the room.

Assuming the desk is large enough to work from comfortably (more about this later) but not so large that it cannot fit easily into the room in question, you need to consider both its position and the direction it faces in. Both impact on each other so you need to consider the two together.

Here are some possible points to consider.

The purpose of the room (again!)

If the room needs to be used for staff meetings each week, the desk may need to be away from the centre to create enough space for a meeting. If you are a public church office, having your back to the entrance point may not be helpful. And so on.

The location of the window(s)

You do not want a computer screen to have direct sunlight on it at any time of the year. Natural light coming in from the side is helpful (from the left side if you are right-handed). Depending on the view outside the window you may want to look at it directly if the view is inspirational, or not look at it at all if there are distractions such as traffic or people movements.

The location of fixed items

As well as the window you may find that there are wall radiators or fixed bookcases to consider. My home study in my previous house had recesses on either side of an old chimney-breast which were ideal for shelving but that then restricted where the desks could go. The position and direction of opening of the door matters too.

Other large items

It may be that the space is small but you really want to have a sofa included so that people you are talking to can sit in a relaxed setting. So you cannot consider the desk without taking into account the sofa too as this will have a considerable impact on the room.

Spaces for more than one person

If you have more than one person working from the space, it is better to have some kind of barrier between them if two desks have to face each other.

Minimise clutter

You would be surprised what I find in clergy studies! There is often plenty of 'stuff' that belongs anywhere other than the study itself. Here are some examples in case you recognise some of these as you look round your room.

- Odd chairs and tables that were put there because they were not needed elsewhere in the house and the study had a square of carpet with nothing on it at the time.
- Lost property from church and unwieldy visual aids from an all-age service four years ago that you don't want to get rid of just in case you want to repeat the talk.

- Boxes of papers of dubious value that need to be stored somewhere (or do they?) but have been left in the study for years.
- Piles of magazines/newspapers or theological tomes to be read at some point.
- Personal items, children's pictures and toys, part of your OO-scale train-set.

You simply cannot sort the layout while this mess lies everywhere. Risk lack of harmony with whoever else lives in the house with you and move it out – or hire a skip or recycle it forthwith. In particular get rid of any furniture that does not belong there. This is a work-room not a junk cupboard.

In particular, seek to remove from the study anything that is 'stored' (ie. filed but you only need to find it rarely). I'll return to this point later but for now be aware that it may be that more than half the papers and other physical objects in the study would be much better elsewhere out of the way – if elsewhere exists.

Go vertical

Many people see layout as a horizontal affair. In other words you take a plan of the room and fit things onto it. But your room is 3D and it often makes sense to go up the wall, if you follow me. Look at any blank walls to see if there is space there that could helpfully be used.

Shelving

Have you got stuff lying around on the floor that could go on shelves, if only you had enough? So where might it make sense to add some shelving, preferably of adjustable height, whether in the study itself or elsewhere in the house? You want to restrict the floor area to items that have to sit on the floor.

Trays

I have one set of trays that are ten high sitting on a metal stationery drawer set. This puts them at the right height to use them well, as well as using vertical space efficiently. I have one old desk I use for my printers to sit on, and then I can use the space under it for other trays. I have a small study so I need to use every bit of space in a highly efficient way.

Work safely

While you are sorting the desk, filling your walls and discarding clutter, you have at the same time to consider issues of common-sense safety. Here are some of the obvious points.

Wiring and sockets

Most computers still rely on the spaghetti principle so that even a simple system for a PC and a printer or two all linked to a router means a few hundred connections and plugs. We are not completely wireless yet. So the location of your fixed IT equipment and the ability to hide the wiring out of the way is a key issue. As is the location and sufficient number of sockets so you do not end up with unsafe adaptors. Desks with equipment in the centre of rooms are tricky unless you have floor points.

Linked to this is where you site your printers or other equipment that needs to be linked to a computer or telephone line.

Weight at height

Having advised you to go vertical, there could be an issue if you put too much weight high up. Your botched DIY shelving might collapse one day (mine did once, years ago, on a plasterboard partition wall). Getting heavy items off high shelves might prove dangerous too.

Floor accidents

My wife used to work for an expert witness on slipping accidents so I am more than aware of the number of problems caused by unsecured rugs and carpets, slippery floorings, and so on. But consider too if you have a filing cabinet: what is the layout when a drawer is open and what space or passage-way does that close off?

A safe environment

Your layout needs to ensure heat sources are in safe places, that low beams in old church offices are not a hazard, and that wall-cupboard doors are not going to create some nasty bruises.

Equipment within reach of children

This will be an issue for anyone with young children in the house. If your three-year-old can reach the paper guillotine or pour water into an electrical socket, beware.

Fumes

Larger copiers and printers need to be given ventilation by their fans, and preferably sited in a different room.

Security

I have already mentioned security in terms of what visitors can see on computer screens that might be sensitive, or what is visible through the window from the street outside. So any layout will have to take such matters into account.

Let work flow

Here are some points to consider to allow work to flow naturally within your space, avoiding unnecessary people-movements.

- Desks and files should be arranged so that you can reach as much as possible without having to get up from your chair. For example, it helps if you can take sheets of paper off the printer without having to walk across the room. Having said that, some physical exercise in the study is welcome.
- There needs to be enough desk area for you to work comfortably, without having to balance papers awkwardly on ledges. Specific attention should be paid to layout, chair height, desk, screens etc. for all working at computer screens, following all best practice to minimise risk of RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury).
- Collating areas should be close to copiers/printers and at kitchen worktop height.
- For regular tasks (eg. printing a weekly sheet) try to arrange the furniture and equipment so that work flows as naturally as possible along a line.
- Most of us acquire extra filing items at a pretty continuous rate. In many cases these should replace something else already there, but for many people their bookshelves go on growing. If this is true for you, allow for expansion as far as is possible, so you do not end up with piles of books on top of those on the shelves.

Plan the layout

If you feel it is worth considering layout with real care, you might draw a scale plan of your room showing windows, doors and other fixtures, and then cut out scale shapes for the main items of furniture so you can move them around and see what might work. Be aware though for my previous point about going vertical.

I prefer to stand in the room quietly for several minutes and look carefully around. I search for what is not working well with the present layout (unless starting from scratch) for any of the points I have listed above. Then I ask the person who works there questions about how the room is used, about the way they work, about other spaces outside the room that might be available.

If the room is large compared with what is to fit inside it, there is not a problem and you will be able to place the desk correctly and fit other items around it.

If, however, like me you have a small study or office, every square centimetre needs to count and you have to be precise. It may be necessary to experiment somewhat, although moving heavy items around too much may not be an option. Remember my clutter point: most offices and studies have far too much in them.

Finally, you can consider unfixed items and where they might fit best: WPB, small items of equipment, filing trays.

Whatever works on paper may not fit the person that is 'you'. The study or office may need to be a formal work-station but if you are using it for creative work, it needs flashes of its own creativity to inspire and make you feel at home.

C: Place the desk

So far I have argued that it really does matter how you feel about your working space and I have given you 20 ideas which could enhance your morale. In Part B I moved on from there to consider the layout of the whole room. Now I want to focus down from that overview to the centre-piece of most studies and offices: the desk. I start with what may at first sight appear to be a silly question.

What is your desk?

The key to effective deskwork lies not in the practicalities of systems and tidiness, of sorting and filing, of techniques in handling paperwork as such, but in your mind. Understand what a desk is and you are half way home. I need to justify such a strange statement so consider the following.

Most rooms in your house have a desk – but it's called something else.

In the sitting room it's probably called a coffee table, in the dining room it is clearly the dining room table, in the bedroom it's the bed, and in the kitchen it's the work-surfaces. In other words, it's the horizontal surface at which or around which an activity takes place.

So desks are perfectly normal. Apart from the name they are not particularly different from many other items in the home. But in one room which is not the study the language is spot on: the kitchen.

So let's be different and borrow the kitchen language and talk about a work-surface. That is important because lurking within most of us is a belief that a desk is a useful horizontal surface for putting stuff on. That viewpoint is very dangerous.

No, the purpose of a desk is to be a surface for work not a surface for store. Repeat that mantra ten times every morning and things should start to improve.

On a computer the principle is the same. We talk about a 'desktop' and many people dump stuff there – so it is full of icons. Again, it becomes a storage area rather than a working surface, the one main difference with the wooden variety being that it is nearly vertical rather than horizontal.

The problem is that in a study or office most of us have a lot of stuff: both physical and digital. We tend not to be sure where to put it down, so a desk surface or a desktop become attractive places to dump it.

So you come in at 10 pm. from a church business meeting. There are files, loose sheets, a couple of books, a tablet – you get the idea. There waiting to greet you is …. a horizontal surface with 'Use me' written all over it. So you dump it all down to join everything else that is already there. Next morning you add to it – and so you go on.

It's the same in people's kitchens. Although it is called a work-surface some people still use it as a storage area for dirty washing up, tins, mugs, food, plastic bags, and so on. But in this article the desk is going to be what it should be called: a surface for work.

So, most of your work-surface needs to be clear except when you are working there. I make some exceptions shortly (hence the 'most') – just as in tidy kitchens. But the principle is: you cannot work and store in the same place and manage both tasks well.

Sitting at your desk

How do we work at this work-surface? Normally, by sitting on a chair – although it is worth noticing that kitchen work surfaces assume you work at them standing up (so they are higher up than a desk). Some people like a desk at that height so they can stand at it or sit on a stool. Here are three key issues to consider.

Chair

The most important piece of furniture in the room is the office chair, as I mentioned in Part A. It is worth investing in a good chair because it can have a significant impact on both your work output and your health. A good chair does not have to be large or expensive: a basic typist's chair is fine – a dining room cast-off is not.

It can be quite simple (most of us don't need chair arms) but the important features are:

- five splay feet with good castors;
- gas lift to provide adjustable height;
- a good and adjustable back rest (for height and tilt);
- in excellent working order;
- something you like and feel good when sitting in.

If the choice for quality is between desk and chair, go for the chair every time. A good one costs between £50 and £150 (be careful with cheaper ones) and is money well spent.

Light

In Part B I noted that it is good if daylight can come from the side of the desk but you need light in both daytime and at night to enable you to read small print and study items for some time without straining yourself.

Given that the kind of light you find best is an individual matter. I prefer a general ceiling light that is not too bright and then a desk lamp which I can focus on different parts of the desk if necessary. I keep this on for most of the day as the room is shaded from the sun.

General health

Sitting at a desk for long periods is not good for the human body (which is why some people prefer desks they stand at). The NHS give specific advice for desk-working on their website but here is a summary of key points. It recommends and assumes a PC not a laptop.

- Ensure the chair supports your back: knees should be level with hips.
- When using a keyboard wrists and forearms should be level and elbows beside your body with the joints at right angles.

If you are concerned about your health in working at a desk at home or not visit NHS at: https://www.nhsemployers.org/articles/health-safety-and-wellbeing-homeworking-guidance

- Feet should be flat on the floor with legs uncrossed – use a footrest if necessary;
- The top of your computer screen needs to be at eye level (tablets and most laptops are too small for long periods of work);
- The keyboard should be 100-150 mm from the edge of the desk – use a wrist rest if helpful – and keep the mouse as close to you as you can.
- Ensure there is no glare from the monitor – adjust the brightness or contrast as necessary.
- Have computer glasses if you use bifocals or varifocals and find these difficult.
- Avoid cradling a phone between ear and shoulder – this strains muscles in your neck.

For me, a mouse mat with an integral wrist pad is essential because it is so much more comfortable than one without.

Designing your desk

Most of us have a rectangular desk. In general the bigger the better (at least 1300 mm x 750 mm if you can) which gives room for one set of drawers and enough leg room for both depth and, more importantly, width.

Many prefer an L-shaped desk so you can have one area for working at and another for computer monitor and other items (see below). But there may not be room for this, especially in a small study that needs a second work-station too.

Assuming this is at normal desk height, try to incorporate another work-surface at standing height too if your room is large enough. This can be useful for sorting papers, stapling, guillotining, etc. which are best done standing up.

While a new chair is important, your desk can be second-hand provided it is still in good condition. The finish is not that important, provided you enjoy the look of it. Sometimes you find that local firms are refurbishing and getting rid of perfectly good desks for free.

Aim to find a desk that has at least one set of drawers (on one side). You can also have 'double pedestal' desks but make sure these are not at the expense of plenty of wriggle room for the lower half of your body under the desk.

I considered cabling earlier but it is worth repeating here. Using wireless equipment cuts down the cabling on the desk if you are not using a laptop but there will still be plenty of cabling under the desk at the back. So it is worth tidying this up as much as you can, bunching wires where this makes sense, ensuring enough power points and keeping printer cables out of sight round carpet edges so they are not a tripping risk.

Organising your desk

So much depends on the kind of person you are, but here are some general ideas.

1 Allocate part of your desk (area at the back, possibly one side) where you will allow permanent equipment and stationery items to be kept. The rest, which should be well over half the area, is what you aim to keep clear when not working.

2 The clear area is what you have when you complete one task and go out, move to another task, or shut up shop for the night. It is a symbolic way of saying that you are now not in office-mode.

3 The permanent items will normally be a computer monitor/keyboard/mouse, a desk lamp, your telephone, one or two (no more) items of small equipment (such as stapler, hole punch, desk tidy with pens), diary (if you use a paper one), in-tray or small set of trays for 'in' and 'holding'*. I also have a pad of lined paper.

4 Use desk drawers well. The ideal may be a shallow drawer for pens, paper clips, etc., a normal drawer for stationery bits and pieces which you need regularly, and a filing draw for your most frequently used files.

5 Within an arm's reach of where you sit, but not on the desk, should be (ideally) your printer, 'holding trays'* if not on the desk, recycling box, WPB, shredder, and other items you need most frequently.

6 It is worth using vertical space effectively. If your desk backs on to a wall, you may have space for a calendar, a wall-based phone, a small shelf for stationery items, etc.

7 But the golden rule is never to put paper or other stuff down on the desk unless you are about to work at them. It's a work-surface not a storage area!

**Note that the idea of a holding file is covered in Article A37. It refers to a file that you need most days or which is current for you this week.*

Decluttering your desk

For every article I read about how essential it is to have a tidy and empty desk, I see another reminding me that many of the most creative people had a desk that was in a real mess. I have been reminded today that Albert Einstein, Mark Twain and Steve Jobs all had or have untidy desks.

But most church staff need to work effectively and find things quickly – so I feel that a desk that fulfils these needs (it does not have to be perfectly tidy if that is not you) is what is required.

What matters more than tidiness is clutter: stuff that should simply not be there, if anywhere. I would recommend for most people the following.

The desk as working surface not storage area

This means that it can have all kinds of things on it as you work but as none of them are stored there, they return to their proper places when the activity in over. This 'clear desk' principle applies to the area of your desk reserved for this (see previous page) and I suggest that the clearing forms a useful end-of-day process which helps close the day down in your mind and allows you to relax whether that is at 5 pm. or 8 pm. or midnight.

Look at your desk now. If there are items there you have not used in the past week, they do not belong there.

Protect it from pirates

Not everyone will operate as you do, and unhelpful people will drop papers off on your desk so you see them on your return. Be brave! Have rules! Threaten punishment if you have to! But put an in-tray in place and help people to use it.

If you are in real trouble

In my black bin sack days with clergy studies I sometimes find that the desk is hidden under several layers of papers built up over years not just days. Most of this is now clutter. So drastic action is called for because to start sifting through it all will get you nowhere.

If this is you, clear it all off into large boxes and place them outside the study. Within half an hour you have a clear desk. Now start again. Each day allow half an hour to bring some of the items in the boxes back in but expect that 90% will be for the bin.

Summing up

In this first (of two) articles the focus has been on the study itself as a space within your house (although most of it applies just as much to a church or mission office). It is important that you feel good about working there, that you lay out the room in a way that is going to enable effective work rather than hinder it, and that you treat the desk in the right way as a work-surface not a storage area.

In Part 2 at Article A37 which you can access ***here***, I tackle how you handle paperwork and other media within this space by looking at the two key ideas of Sorting and Filing.

This article is available at https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index then A36. It is based on a series first written for *Maintenance and Equipment News* and on John's training courses for Ministers on deskwork. See also Articles A1, *Pass or file*, and A25, *Working from home,* plus Training Notes TN57, *Clearing your clutter.*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A36 under Leadership (with a link to Administration).

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