



Clear your clutter!

TN57 Training Notes series: Administration

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Many of us fail to recognise the danger of clutter whether in life, on the computer, in the office/study or even in our minds.

But the impact is serious. First you waste time searching: where are your keys, the minutes of the last meeting, the number of the person you had to phone back, your pet tarantula? Secondly you feel stressed ... or depressed, and this affects all your work ... and life.

Clutter is an untidy mess of stuff which is in the wrong place, where the right place will often be a skip (or shredder, recycling box, charity shop). So it is more than simply untidiness.

These notes focus on the work-place (office or home). Much will be paper-based, but clutter also includes:

- odd bits of furniture and furnishings;
- equipment such as an old printer or three redundant staplers;
- miscellaneous plastic bags and used envelopes;
- various items of lost property from church;
- dirty plates and coffee mugs.

EXERCISE: Stop reading now, look round wherever you are and identify three items of clutter. Deal with them.

Well done! This is serious stuff. Did you know that there is a UK Association of Professional Declutterers and Organisers (APDO)? These notes seek to create a clutter-free zone for you. Here now are ten pieces of advice with a sample action for each one.

1 View this as a spiritual discipline

This is going to be tough and you need help. It should rank alongside fasting, prayer and giving. It is all about simplicity. Clutter stifles effective ministry.

- Pray for resolve to distinguish sentimentality from reality and to be willing to let go of your baby blankets.
- Repent of time wasted by the clutter in your life as well as in the work-place.
- Be ready for a spiritual battle – and for this to take time.

ACTION: *Delete the entire contents of your computer's Recycle Bin and discard one significant but unnecessary item currently on your desk. Thank God for two small steps! (PS If I receive a letter from your solicitor claiming damages for what you have now lost, I regret that I am not worth very much....)*

2 Turn off the tap

It makes sense to stop clutter reaching you in the first place.

- Never let anyone else use your space as a dumping or storage area for anything. Try the airport approach: 'baggage left unattended will be dealt with by the security staff'.
- Ban notes left for you on post-its or backs of envelopes: have a permanent book.
- Deal with spam so that it no longer troubles you (ask for advice).

ACTION: *Register with the Mailing Preference Service (and the telephone one too though it does not always work) on www.mpsonline.org.uk. That stops most unwanted junk-mail (but not hand delivered items). GDPR has not completely solved this problem.*

3 Diarise the time

There are two lines of attack here. First, a one-off launch event. Then regular work fitted in to your normal programme. You'll also need an annual clear-out at a quiet time of year and specific projects to sort out books, filing cabinet, emails, etc. But to start, focus on the room.

- Block out time for a half or full day event. The idea is to clear the desk and as much of the room as possible – but see point 4. Focus on what is visible (so leave drawers and cupboards for now).
- Then diarise (as though an appointment) something like half-an-hour a day, or two one hour sessions a week, for the next few weeks. You need to keep at this – so the diary is the discipline to ensure it happens.
- Expect to have additional sessions every day (eg. five minutes last thing before you leave / go to bed), and every week or month (half an hour to keep on top of it).

ACTION: *Fix the launch event in the diary now, even if a month ahead, and the next two weeks' after that too.*

4 **Take extreme action**

If your space is in a really bad way, starting in one place will not work. Instead, aim to clear the whole room in a couple of hours.

- First, clear everything on your desk into a grocery box or plastic crate and place it outside the room. No stopping to read all those letters and newspapers, now!
- Next, clear all the clutter on the floor and all other horizontal surfaces into other boxes, leaving them outside the room. Now dust and Hoover the clear room. You are there!
- Each subsequent day, bring back one box and sift through it. But the only items that come back into the room are things that you know where to place. Everything else goes.

ACTION: *Get hold of some boxes or crates, then as for 3.*

5 **Appoint a partner**

Most of us cannot do this alone and succeed. You need a 'clutter-buddy'! This needs to be someone you are in awe of and whom you will obey – a mother-in-law is ideal if you are married. Without this person, most people fail.

- You work together for the launch day and your buddy then sets out your schedule for the next two or so weeks.
- You become accountable to your buddy and report back after this time.
- This person stops you picking up everything and reminiscing, or reading your school reports as they come to light. If in doubt he or she is taught to intone, 'Get rid of it!'.

ACTION: *Phone this person now and bribe them to help you.*

6 **Deal with clutter as it appears**

Note: this is not the same as point 2. This is clutter that arrives with genuine stuff. Here are some examples.

- Post: the moment you open an envelope it goes in your recycle box (or whatever), you extract any advertising matter and do the same, you minimise what comes in to only what you need. Nothing gets placed on the desk (see point 8). But go paper-free where you have the option.
- Magazines: when a magazine, newspaper or catalogue arrives, place it in its correct rack and immediately discard the one it replaces. If you have not read the earlier one, too late! Recycle the wrapper film (at major supermarkets).
- Never add stuff to your computer desktop – place it in its correct folder and keep the desktop icons to one column only.

ACTION: *Chuck now any old magazines, newspapers, downloads and catalogues and start from scratch today. (PS The one exception of course is anything you have downloaded from this website.....)*

7 Create an in-tray for pre-sort

If you've been trained by me on deskwork you will know I emphasise the action of SORTING. An in-tray is for anything coming in which you have not yet sorted. So it should not have anything that came in a day or two ago unless you have been away. Once you skim the item you then sort it to a correct location which is not the in-tray.

- Once sorted this stuff will belong in one specific place. It does not come back to the desk until you need to work on it (so you need a system to remind you – I use a 'To Do Diary' as referenced at the end of these notes).
- The same applies to stuff waiting to be unpacked, such as when you return from a committee meeting. Always budget 'unpack time' after any event.
- Your email inbox is not a store area. Aim never to have it longer than one screen's worth – each time you get it empty reward yourself with a treat.

ACTION: *Make yourself an in-tray for physical stuff if you do not have one. If your email inbox has hundreds of emails in it, move them all to a new 'To be sorted if I ever have time' folder and start with an empty inbox.*

8 Guard every flat surface

Beware anything that is flat: desk, carpet, chairs, table, window-sill. They attract clutter like a pollen-rich flower attracts bees.

- Make it a rule that everything belongs somewhere, and any horizontal surfaces are either work-tops (kept clear) or clearly marked for certain items only.
- Create places that make sense for their objects: a key cupboard or hooks, stationery shelves or cabinets, etc.
- Clear the desk each night before you leave the office or shut the study door – sweet dreams! By all means have a computer, lamp, telephone etc. on the desk but mark out the main area for a working surface and clear it daily.

ACTION: *Designate or make a reading tray and move everything to be read to it (books, newspapers, papers, etc.).*

9 Create external storage spaces

You 'store' stuff (including papers) that you need to keep but only need to reference very occasionally if at all. That should be more than half your paperwork and other items. There is no need to keep them in your room if you have space elsewhere. What is left is so little that you have no problem in finding all you have 'filed'. 'Storage' and 'filing' are two separate groups of items.

- If you are frightened to throw too much paper away, place it all in labelled boxes and leave them in a dry garage, shed or attic. If you don't need them for a year, you probably never will. You can chuck the box and refill with the next lot.
- Move stuff away from your working area the moment you have finished with it. So take the coffee cups back to the kitchen after use, rather than leaving them on the side. More journeys perhaps, but it works better.

- It is wise to have generous provision for storage – more than you need for filing.

ACTION: *Designate a storage area in the office or house but outside your room or study.*

10 Aim to get rid of more

Most of us are squirrels so when training on deskwork I always advise people to keep discarding until they get to a place where they regularly find they have deleted or thrown something they should have kept. Someone else will usually have a copy!

- If there is a pile in the corner that has been there for two years, or a box of stuff which you have never unpacked in five years, check it does not contain the family silver and then discard. You won't find it if you don't know it's there anyway.
- Have a time limit for keeping sentimental stuff: those sea shells you collected off the beach, palm crosses from the last 14 years, the DIY pottery that is supposed to hold liquid.
- Reduce stuff in the desk tidy on a regular basis: do you really need four green biro's, seven pencils, three sharpeners, five odd post-it notes, etc.?

ACTION: *If all else fails, move office/house. It's the best decluttering trick around.*

Having done all that you can now learn to declutter your mind by having a 'To Do Diary' and writing every action you think of into the day you feel you can actually do it (see Training Notes TN23 on this website). Then move on to declutter your life: try *Decluttering* by Andrew Barton, Grove spirituality series No. 97.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN57. See also Articles A36/37, *Sorting out your study*, and Training Notes TN23 as mentioned above. For much more detail on using a 'To Do Diary' see Article A51, *The 'To Do Diary' guide*. Also, TN53, *A simple email filing system*, TN62, *Know what distracts you*, and TN67, *Stress and the Christian worker*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN57 under Administration (with a link to Leadership).

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