

The Organized Lawyer

By Larry N. Zimmerman, Valentine & Zimmerman P.A., Topeka

When I told a colleague that I had just bought “The Organized Lawyer” by Kelly Lynn Anders, he questioned, “Is it satire?” Looking around my office at a spread of documents on the floor and a desk only an archaeologist could love I muttered, “I sure hope not.”

Anders, associate dean for student affairs at Washburn University School of Law, joins a growing chorus of attorneys concerned about the impact of poor personal management and business skills on the profession. She writes, “Attorneys are regularly sanctioned for misdeeds that can be traced back to disorganization, such as commingling of funds, the failure to produce records to opposing counsel, late court filings, being inaccessible to clients, and seeming ill-prepared to represent clients during hearings.”

“The Organized Lawyer” is her attempt at drawing attention to the issue and providing attorneys with a means of finding their own system to better organize our hectic lives. Anders begins with a brief test for self-evaluating personal organizational style. Questions about current behavior aim at helping the reader see objectively how they view, store, and retrieve information. My own self-analysis revealed that my tendencies overlap several categories. The “Stacker” in me has piles of documents on floor and desk organized by issue, but my current project is spread out on the desk so I can see and touch everything at once — true “Spreader” behavior. My “Free Spirit” has added “The Organized Lawyer” to a bookshelf overrun with titles about a broad range of seemingly unrelated topics. Finally, my inner “Packrat” is trying to hold the line against a corner of my desk where personal trinkets threaten to break loose into my “professional” zone. You too will probably discover there are pieces of you scattered between her categories but one set of habits will be closest and personalize the framework for Anders’ chapters on office and desk arrangements, filing, finances, and calendaring.

The most dramatic advice offered by Anders comes with her guide to getting through the first day and week. I went through a “first day” with David Allen’s “Getting Things Done” and am still scarred at the sight of an inbox piled to three feet awaiting my two-minute next actions. Anders’ approach is a more practical work study.

Clear the entire surface of your desk but for your phone, a notepad, and your computer. Every file, paper, tool, and gizmo goes in a box that will sit at your feet for a week. As you work through the week pulling items from the box, you document on the notepad what was removed (and returned back to the box). By the end of a week, you have the serenity provided by a clear work surface combined with detailed knowledge about what items deserve priority space in a metal step-file holder that will become your office’s smooth-running Union Station.

I had undergone this system a few years back when I moved offices and recall it working well. Everything of importance has long since been worked, while what was left in the boxes are the unimportant distractions that had cluttered my prior office. As a beginning step, I find this a much better approach to establishing the organizational habit than other systems that require a decision on each item immediately. Where I still struggle with Anders’ system is figuring out how to apply it daily going forward from the first week.

She does a good job of explaining her own folder system and wisely recommends that we choose our personalized system carefully. However, some may want a bit more explanation of what each day might look like in the first weeks and months of their new organizational habits. As she says in an interview with The Topeka Capital-Journal in December 2008, “Organization is about you setting rules that you are going to stick with.” Supplementing “The Organized Lawyer” with other helps like Leo Babauta’s “Zen Habits” (zenhabits.com) can help ensure your new habits stick.

The second half of “The Organized Lawyer” focuses on extending application of her system beyond the office to home and mobile offices. My only complaint would be that their tone seems to feed the view that a 2,200-billable-hour week is inevitable (it is not). On the whole, Anders has put out one of the best books on organization for lawyers by a lawyer. Look for it in the nonfiction section of your bookstore. ■

About the Author

Larry N. Zimmerman, Topeka, is a partner at Valentine & Zimmerman P.A. and an adjunct professor teaching law and technology at Washburn University School of Law. He has spoken on legal technology issues at national and state seminars and is a member of the Kansas Collection Attorneys Association and the American, Kansas, and Topeka bar associations. He is one of the founding members of the KBA Law Practice Management Section, where he serves as president-elect and legislative liaison.



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