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Does Your Workspace Need an Amendment?

By Kelly Lynn Anders, *The Organized Lawyer* (Carolina Academic Press, 2009)

The legal profession is busy and demanding—especially for overworked legislative attorneys. During the legislative session, it can be very easy to become overwhelmed with all of the competing projects and responsibilities. January was National Organization Month, but it’s never too late to think about what it will take to organize a workspace.

More Work, Less Space

Working in the field of law requires the management of an enormous amount of information, a skill seldom addressed in law school. We’re tuned in, online, hooked up, and essentially accessible 24 hours a day—and challenges with information overload promise only to increase. However, unlike other professionals, lawyers cannot simply choose one method of communication or information storage over all others because the law is practiced in all forms due to tradition and necessity. As a result, records must be kept in print, electronically, and in various forms of the two.

During the last decade, the amount of space with which we have to work has decreased. In many workplaces, offices are smaller, cubicles are the norm, and, like other professions, the legal profession lacks the stability it once enjoyed. So, not only is there more information to manage, but also there’s less space in which to do it, and because of job movement, that information is passed on in various forms of disarray from one person to the next. How does one prioritize competing interests and maintain a workspace that inspires confidence from clients and admiration from colleagues? How can legislative attorneys stay on top of the game?

Sadly, many of us are dropping the ball. Regularly, attorneys are sanctioned for misdeeds many of which can be traced back to disorganization. Often, the sanctions are for actions that are inexcusable but not malicious. Mistakes like commingling funds, failing to produce records to opposing counsel, failing to file in a timely

manner, being inaccessible to clients, and being seemingly ill-prepared to represent clients during hearings are all examples of how bad things can get when one is disorganized. Just the thought of all of the responsibilities we need to handle can be overwhelming. How does one handle everything and remain organized?

Many attorneys rely on their assistants or colleagues. But nothing replaces the confidence of knowing where things are and having a comfortable command of one’s surroundings. Not only is it essential for you as the attorney, but also it helps colleagues, assistants, and, most importantly, clients. Even though they come to you under stress from their own problems, they do notice the order (or disorder) of your office—and they make judgments about your competency from what they see.

Setting the Right Tone

No one expects to see a space that is entirely clutter-free, but most people feel more comfortable in an office that offers a clean chair, a small space to lean or set down personal items, and surroundings that demonstrate control over one’s workload. When a client comes to you for help, he or she wants to feel like you can handle it. How can a client be expected to trust you with life-impacting decisions when you don’t appear to have control of your own affairs? That may sound harsh, but perceptions matter, especially in the legal profession.

A well-organized space provides a sense of control and order, and there’s nothing like coming into your office and having a good idea of where everything is so that all you have to do is focus on the job at hand. It feels good when colleagues and clients come into your office and seem impressed by how nice it looks. It feels great when you don’t have to shove items aside to offer someone a seat in your office. These are the feelings that will keep you working to ensure your space remains organized.

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Setting the right tone also increases clients' confidence that they're working with attorneys with whom they can relate and who know what they're doing. A lawyer's reputation is, possibly, his or her most valuable asset. Your workspace is part of your reputation. In fact, it often makes the first impression. Securing the confidence of your clients is much easier to do when you're not explaining away a messy office. In contrast to misconceptions, some clients may not be impressed that you are "too busy" to clean your workspace; in fact, some may assume that you are either disorganized or too busy to handle another case and take their business elsewhere.

Office Layout Tips:

- Determine which pieces of furniture are the most useful. Do they serve as functional pieces, or merely as storage for items that you have not seen in months or years?
- Consider a layout that enables you to view the entry into your workspace while seated at your desk.
- Maximize storage options by using furniture with open and closed storage features, and consider options for vertical storage, such as bookshelves or an armoire.
- Spend at least one hour each week weeding and sorting materials, and spend five minutes each day straightening your desk before you leave. It may not seem like you are accomplishing much at first, but you will begin to see progress quickly if you keep at it.
- Consult with decision-makers in your firm or company before making any drastic changes.
- Locate images of office layouts and furniture styles you like that can guide you as you make changes to tailor your space to your needs and organizational type. Remember, it is possible to have a space that has a style that you like that also effectively meshes with the way you live and work among your things.

Considering Organizational Styles

Many books offer valuable tips and tools for creative, functional spaces, but they fail to address how different people have different ways of looking at their things. I believe we all have a particular organizational style that impacts how we view our things, live with them, and keep them organized—or disorganized. What works for some does not work for others. For example, some people need open storage, while others need closed storage. Some would benefit from canceling their subscriptions to periodicals, while others can keep them under control. These are just a few examples of how our particular organizational style influences our surroundings and can be used to our benefit in developing and maintaining an organized workspace.

How Are Lawyers Different?

Lawyers tend to wrestle with challenges privately. As the "go to" people for the problems others face, many lawyers tend to keep their own dilemmas to themselves because they are accus-

tomed to having the answers for others. Feeling required to have all the answers begins in law school. We all remember the terrible shame that resulted from being called on in class when we were unprepared and the huge embarrassment we felt when we did not know the answer to the question. We spent hours reading and preparing for classes so that we would not be caught unaware again. A lack of organization is a problem that can require the same exploration and problem solving as a case we might study. For some of us, organizing may perhaps cause even greater frustration because we assume it should be easier to organize space than to understand the law: we incorrectly think organizing involves only cleaning.

Potential Obstacles

Are there potential obstacles or rules that exist that could impact the decisions you make to alter your space? Is there furniture permanently affixed to the floor? Are there built-in bookshelves or cabinets that you must work around? Where are the jacks for your computer and telephone? If you're working in an office, does every wall have a plug? If you're working in a cubicle, can anything be moved? How tall are the walls? Are you permitted to hang anything on the walls in your office or cubicle? What is the policy for bringing in items from home? Do you have an office decorating budget? What is the general feel of the décor in common areas, and how much can you realistically stray from that without a few words of opposition from the powers that be?

Organization is a Process

Like the law, organization has many layers and nuances, and it impacts us all a little differently. We know what it looks like, but it takes time, honesty, and effort to achieve. Similarly, lawyers know how to define the law and what an effective law entails, but they also realize that these same laws took a lot of time and effort to get on the books, and they will continue to be reevaluated and fine-tuned over time. Like good organizational skills, the creation and practice of law require a process. When combined, law and organization make better lawyers and happier clients and result in fewer complaints of malpractice or other violations of the Code of Professional Responsibility.

Organization has visual and conceptual elements, and it is not enough to simply "know where everything is." There are many people who use this notion as an excuse for not doing what it takes to develop a system that looks as great as it supposedly works. The perceptions of clients and colleagues matter. It is not enough to *be* organized. You must also *appear to be* organized to receive the most benefits from this process. Good organization matters because it helps you get your work done more efficiently in a space that makes you feel more at peace and in control, which directly impact your performance, client satisfaction, and reputation as a legal professional.

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