

What's Right *with* Your Messy Desk, *and* Other So-Called “Bad Habits”

By Dr. Ann McGee-Cooper, Ed.D

Have you ever had days when you thought it would be easier to quit your job and start over elsewhere than it would be to make sense out of the piles and stacks huddling layers deep all over your work space?

And, when is the last time you went in on a weekend to clear out that avalanche of paper, only to leave hours later having "done lots of work" but the stacks seem to remain the same in number and in height? The only real change was you became painfully aware of all the work you hadn't gotten around to!

Or, worse yet, can you remember really clearing out the junk piles and spiffing up the office for a visit from an important client or the top brass? Then, for the next two weeks, you paid a great price in frustration because you couldn't find much of the stuff you needed to put your hands on quickly.

Or, have you experienced the ultimate frustration: to search endlessly for an important document only to have some well-meaning work partner

smugly hand it to you fresh from the place it is supposed to be kept.



I confess! If I put it back where "it belongs," I probably can't find it unless it's visible! Laugh and make cruel jokes if you must, but our research on brain hemisphericity not only sheds a new perspective on what has been called a lack of follow-through or poor professionalism, but it also reveals the benefits and overlooked gifts of these strategies. Yes, they really can honestly be called strategies even if they aren't at a conscious level. They work within the memory systems of

a good many people and they have several other benefits as well.



If I've just described you and your work place better than you wish, here's the good news: **Think of yourself as a divergent processor with visual/spatial memory, rather than a slob. And think of your work space *not as a mess but rather the nest of productivity in motion* .**

Here's how and why it works:

About one-half the population (those with right-hemisphere preference) remembers and processes in a visual/spatial way. In other words, they remember leaving a certain file folder "under the green cup," or "half-way down in the stack next to the phone." But, if the same file folder gets "filed properly," it may as well be lost forever. It's not that we visual/spatial processors can't decide on a file name or, label a folder and jam it in a drawer between other crowded folders. That's easy enough, though boring at best. But, due to our divergent nature, we might file this article under "T" for Time Management, "W" for Website, and "O" for Organization. Then, when we need to get back to it, we might search under "B" for Bad Habits or even "R" for Reforming Bad Habits. You can see in this that our brain processes DIVERGENTLY, in all directions at once, rather than CONVERGENTLY to a single place, thriving on consistency.

Divergers love variety! Convergers thrive on consistency!

The very trait which contributes to our abundant creativity, sabotages our use of a commonly-touted organizing system, the file drawer.

If you are still tuned in and are curious, this all makes perfect sense.

Whereas the secret of successfully using a filing system to organize and keep up with your stacks of papers is based on convergent consistency and abstract memory, people who leave things out so they can find them typically have divergent, visual/spatial memory (always returning to the same place.)

The spatial part is evident if you use space as a memory cue. For example, you leave your lunch and briefcase in front of the door so you can't leave for work without them. A proposal needed for a conference call this afternoon is left next to the phone for quick reference. Above the phone if you are waiting for a call back, below the phone if you plan to call them. And folders on the far top corner of your desk are there to remind you of an annual report due in three weeks. Its presence reminds you to be thinking about how you want to approach it. Without this fertile incubation time, you won't be ready when you do set aside time to draft it.

So (1) being able to find your stuff when you need it, (2) remembering to get it done, and (3) incubating a variety of options prior to beginning just by the visual reminder of work standing before you, are all highly beneficial outcomes of a system that may appear to be simply a hopeless mess to others.

"If you can find most things in 3 minutes or less, your system is working," writes Dr. Dru Scott in her book *How to Put More Time In Your Life*.

What's Right With Your Messy Desk,
And Other So-Called "Bad Habits"

And when you find yourself lost in your own divergent clutter, you'll know it's gone too far. Simply stop and regroup.

But don't continue to waste precious energy and ego strength expecting yourself to perform well from one of those sparse, traditional desks with only a phone, PC, blotter, one folder and a pen in sight. Because of your need for visual stimulation and because you receive nurturing from having lots of resources to choose from, you will become bored (from sensory deprivation) and wither in such an environment. Learn to appreciate that what works wonderfully for a person with one set of gifts will drain and block a person with an opposite profile. And, in this new era of high performance teams, even if you thrive on a traditional, "less-is-more" setting, it's imperative that you appreciate your work partners, clients and family members who need an opposite set of conditions to thrive.



The best news is that it doesn't have to be either sparse or cluttered. With a little creative synergy, you can add colored file folders, a few interesting containers (to keep the piles aesthetically in view), some interesting visual planning tools and a few items just to keep work fun and energizing. These props can transform an unsightly mess into an interesting collage of work-in-motion which becomes both efficient and fascinating, organized and spontaneous.

We have learned from several thousand highly successful engineers and executives that they can more than double their productivity by synergizing their work space with creative, visual/spatial planning that contributes order AND fun. One secret is that color and visual cues expand memory. The other is that color, novelty, and fun invite a divergent brain into making structure a game. Hopefully, by now, you've shed 20 years worth of guilt and are appreciative of the creative genius often disguised as slobism.

If we've turned on a light of awareness around what you thought were simply bad habits in you or others, and if you want to learn more and be able to apply "Brain Engineering" to your entire office, team or family, we suggest you look further into our book, *Time Management for Unmanageable People*, Available through AMCA.com.

On the back of my chair is a playful quote which cheers me on particularly hectic days. I have no idea where I first saw it, but it goes like this: "My desk is like the weather. It clears off from time to time!"

Seminars and additional resources are available from Ann McGee-Cooper and Associates, Inc. 214 357-8550 or visit us at AMCA.com