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OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

# *IN SIGHT* for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## ORGANIZING LIFE YOUR WAY

Have any of the following situations ever happened to you? Were you late to an event because you misplaced your keys or wallet? Do you feel like you never get caught up with tasks at the office or at home? Do you start out with a “to-do” list but regularly get sidetracked by urgent matters that crop up? Have you tried to implement a popular time management or organizational scheme but gone back to your old behaviors after a week or a few days?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you are not alone. Many people struggle with time management and organization, attempting over and over to adopt someone else’s systems. Maybe you fervently wish that the next system, device, or organizational guru can provide the magic answer to get your life running like clockwork. But have you ever considered that maybe there isn’t a “one size fits all” solution?

If you feel discouraged that your situation will never change, keep reading. This article will offer a new way to think about the subject. If you have a co-worker or family member you feel is hopelessly disorganized, perhaps this article will give you a new understanding of the organizational challenges many people face.

Part of the problem that has people wrestling with the issues of time management and organization is the nature of modern society. Today, our lives are filled with a continual stream of information. In the not-so-distant past, we had to make an effort to seek out information. We now live in a state of 24/7 connectivity: information

is frequently “pushed” to us, rather than something we go looking for. Most people agree that this isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Information at the fingertips can be helpful, convenient, and fun – and we can use it to enhance our lives. However, we may not adapt to this barrage of information as well as we think we do.

Dr. Edward Hallowell, coauthor of *Delivered from Distraction: Getting the Most Out of Life with Attention Deficit Disorder*, observed that many people who seek treatment for attention deficit disorder (ADD) do not actually meet the clinical diagnostic criteria, yet exhibit traits of ADD. They may be easily distracted, impulsive, and restless. Or they may have difficulty completing tasks, be frequently late for appointments, and generally underachieve compared with their expectations. Hallowell identified these conditions as attention deficit traits, and attributed them to overload from the constant demands of high-tech devices in an information age. We have the illusion of getting more done, but actually our attention is diluted while we check e-mail, voice mail, texts, news updates, and so on.

Ultimately, we can become anxious and irritable, losing the ability to access our higher brain functions: flexibility, humor, innovation. Hallowell concluded that lawyers are particularly susceptible to attention deficit traits: “They think they’re working hard, and they think they’re being productive, but they’re not. They’re busy, but they’re not thoughtful.” Compounding the problem of information overload is the fact that most lawyers have demanding schedules and workloads, making it very

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challenging to maintain an organizational balancing act.

This problem requires a different solution. Instead of thinking about how you can cram more activity into an already jam-packed day (or even just juggle your current schedule), contemplate what your life could be like if your daily experience was trimmed down to the essentials – the things that really mattered. Designing your day around what is truly important to you is a highly individual task – everyone’s idea of balance and organization will look different. It is up to you to select from the available tips, tools, and suggestions and to customize a solution that works for you.

Let’s first take a look at what some of the experts have to offer. In her book, *Never Check E-Mail in the Morning*, organizational coach Julie Morgenstern suggests that the first hour or two in the office is the most productive for many people, yet we frequently spend it combing through our inbox, answering routine requests, and deleting spam. Alternatively, she suggests putting a header on your e-mail specifying when you check your incoming messages, and use that most-productive time for tasks that require innovative and creative thought.

Once you’ve carved out productive time, the next challenge is to identify the high-priority items in your day, particularly when the demands of your personal and professional lives overlap. Sorting out these matters can be as simple as making a list and prioritizing it according to most important, less important, and least important, or high, medium, and low priority. This type of format is favored by our logical and linear left brain, but it leaves our emotional, more intuitive right brain out of the decision-making process.

Business journalist and television commentator Suzy Welch presents a different model in her book, *10-10-10: A Life-Transforming Idea*. She considers the impact of a decision in the following time frames: 10 minutes, 10 months, and 10 years. Considering the mid-range and long-term consequences of whether to work late or go to your child’s softball game supplies a “big picture” perspective that might have been missing. Time management pioneer Alan Lakein (author of *How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life*) coined the eponymous “Lakein’s Question”: “What is the best use of my time now?” Finally, some of us may simply

choose to take the next action that seems appropriate at the time.

However you decide to prioritize your time, make sure it is your own choice and reflects your values and concerns rather than external pressures. We all have to cooperate with outside demands on our time, but consider whether you are mostly making choices that are consistent with your overall life priorities or whether you are letting outside circumstances completely dictate your schedule.

Let’s say that after reflecting on your true priorities, you see that you would like to free up some time or make your organizational systems work more effectively for you so that you can spend more time on other activities or with other people. So you decide you need to implement some changes. What is your next step? Where do you start?

A common temptation is to make big, sweeping changes, like tackling the entire office filing system, or upgrading all of your technology, or putting in place a new marketing plan. The motto is often out with the old, in with the new. But anyone who’s ever made a well-intentioned but fleeting New Year’s resolution (e.g., quitting smoking, losing twenty pounds, going to the gym daily) only to fall back into old habits within a week or two, knows how challenging radical change can be. Don’t set yourself up to fail and get discouraged. Resist the temptation to overhaul any single system at one time.

Instead, most experts advocate gradual change as the key to long-lasting results. As the kindergarten joke asks, “How do you eat an elephant?” “One bite at a time!” Consider shrinking the size of the changes you plan to make in any given time period. When your office (or closet or car) needs to be decluttered, think about a 10-minute intervention – clearing your desk or sorting out a desk drawer – instead of tearing the entire room apart for the afternoon. Visualize the changes you want, step by step, including the successful result. It’s great to have a long-term plan for major change. Just be sure you set a realistic time frame for accomplishing your goal.

Chip Heath, coauthor (with his brother Dan) of *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*, wants people to think about change in an entirely different way. He observes that the key to personal

change is the opposite of what we generally assume. Rather than *thinking* our way into change, using a logical, left-brain process, we might try to invoke a *feeling* to gain the necessary motivation, using the more emotional right brain. The Heath brothers use an image of the rider and the elephant to describe the change process. Although most of us assume that the rational rider holding the reins is in charge, it's actually the instinctual elephant who has the true power to get places. The rider takes the intellectual viewpoint and often gets bogged down in "paralysis by analysis," while the elephant simply keeps taking action and correcting course. However, the elephant does not try to cover too much ground right away, sensing that starting any endeavor for the first time is always challenging.

This simple analogy reminds us that our goals should be positive and attainable. Think about why you want to make a change in how you manage your time or how you organize your life. What difference will that change make in your life? How will you feel as a result of that change? The answers to these questions are the keys to sustaining your momentum over the long haul and creating the lasting change you desire.

Making any kind of change is difficult enough on your own, so consider asking for support. It also helps to remember your successes, not your failures. Starting anything for the first time is the hardest thing to do. Give yourself credit for small steps. Expect and be forgiving about setbacks. Keep track of your progress, and make adjustments according to what gives you the best results. You will be impressed at how incremental adjustments add up to lasting, significant change!

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*You don't have to go it alone! Meloney Crawford of the OAAP will conduct a five-week "Getting it Done" group beginning the second week of January 2012. See the box on this page for more information.*