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A CLEAN SLATE FOR A NEW YEAR

By Karen E. Klein, In Box Column, Business Section, Los Angeles Times

Question: I have some downtime this week and need to get my home office organized. Can you offer any suggestions on where and how to start?

Answer: Unless you are a retailer or restaurant owner and swamped with holiday business, this is a great time to devote some uninterrupted hours to clearing your desk and getting your business records in order.

First, figure out what you want to accomplish and set a realistic deadline for finishing. This will help you avoid embarking on a never-ending project that bleeds into the new year.

In addition to cleaning up your office, you might think about backing up your computer data and reassessing your business priorities and goals, said John Trosko, owner of OrganizingLA, a Beverly Hills-based consulting firm.

Take everything but the essentials off your desk and sort papers into "hot piles" such as bills to pay, letters to write, invitations to respond to and catalogs or publications to read, he advised.

"Remove all the items from your space that you no longer need or use, and get rid of anything that you don't use now and can easily replace," Trosko said. "Once you stop hoarding staples, you can weed your supply pile down to a manageable level."

Spend a few hours with your computer technician backing up your electronic data. "While you're at it, look through all those USB cables, dusty keyboards and outdated software packages you've got lying around and toss them too," Trosko said.

After that, you can sort what's left into categories (supplies, snacks, personal belongings and so forth) and then put them into labeled containers.

"While you're digging through your papers, sort your tax receipts and send them to your bookkeeper," Trosko said. "If you donate unwanted holiday gifts before the end of the year, you can grab the tax write-off too."

And when you are done, reward yourself for making tough decisions. Disorganization is a seldom-recognized overhead expense for entrepreneurs, who may waste hours every month searching for information in messy desks and computer files. Organizing your office is an investment that will save you money and make your work space more pleasant.

"Remember how good it feels to have your office organized," Trosko said, "and then be diligent about keeping it that way."

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