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### ORGANIZING YOUR BUSINESS AND HOME OFFICE: *Transcript of podcast*

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**Karen Klein:** This is Karen E. Klein, Smart Answers columnist at businessweek.com. Today I'm talking to John Trosko. He's an organizational expert, principle of OrganizingLA. He works primarily with entrepreneurs and small business owners and home office business owners. And thanks for joining me John.

**John Trosko:** Well, it's great to be here, thank you very much.

**Karen:** Hey, why do entrepreneurs need to get organized other than the obvious benefit of not having piles of mess everywhere? What's the benefit?

**John:** I call it pile destruction. I would say, let's look at the cost of a minute. How much you're being paid. I think if the average home office entrepreneur is paid \$50,000 or \$60,000 a year, what is that equal to per minute? And how much time are you wasting with tasks that have nothing to do with running your business effectively. I think people don't really think about that.

I'm not talking about emergency tasks, I'm talking about tasks like dinging of your email and getting interrupted at the door for incoming mail. Those kinds of things. I think that when you're looking at the effectiveness of your schedule, what things are you doing that you can eliminate?

**Karen:** What kind of organizing jobs have you done? Give us some idea of who calls you in to come and organize their office?

**John:** Oh, gosh. Generally it's people who are on the go. It's men and women that have small businesses, a lot of the businesses are in their homes. I've worked

for people who have run bakeries, restaurants. I've worked for a fluff-and-fold, a lot of writers (because in Hollywood we have lots of writers.) We have makeup artists, costume people. I worked with a school superintendent, and a lot of realtors and a lot of mortgage brokers who manage a lot of information. A lot, it comes and goes and they need to pull a great deal of various sales materials together to track everything and make sure that they're being effective.

Clients can't pay for an entrepreneur's lack of disorganization. If you can't find a file and you charge by the hour, that money has to come from somewhere. And it usually comes out from your bottom line. So they recognize that and they'll call me and say, "I don't know what to do."

**Karen:** Is there a common denominator? Do you often find that people who are just terribly disorganized have similar things in their backgrounds or have something in common? Anything like that?

**John:** I would suggest that they may be a perfectionist and maybe they don't know it. Or maybe they do know it. I think that people who have a view of the way something should be take a lot of time to get anything done and it's not really about getting it done, it's about making it look a certain way. And I think that's kind of destroying a lot of entrepreneurs.

They could be waiting for the perfect desk. They're working from their kitchen table and it takes forever for them to get the desk. And so they'll never have a desk. I have clients that it takes a year to get a desk,

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and it shouldn't. Then they also don't really dedicate any time at the end of the day to get organized for the next day. Ten minutes could be great, if they did it.

**Karen:** That's a very good tip, just to spend a few minutes preparing for the next day. What other tips would you give small business people for organizing their space? And I know a lot of people that work at home don't have a lot of space.

**John:** Right. There's so many different tips I could give. There's electronic organizing, there's time management organizing. Then there's your physical space, so a few tips could be... I would suggest, do not multi-task so much. Put limits and section off your time in your office. An hour for emails and no more. They actually have email programs now that will shut your email down so you can't use it more than an hour a day or something. I've heard of it, but I haven't used it. And definitely turn off that email dinger.

I would suggest put in reading time each week. An hour making networking calls. Some other suggestions I would tell you, the biggest thing is paper sitting on a client's desk. That's generally the biggest reason why somebody calls me in as they don't know what to do with the paper. And especially the small business person who works from home, they've got their personal mail and they've got business mail all mixed together. They're trying to sign their report cards or things for their kids to take back to school and everything is just everywhere.

So, one of the very first things that I do is usually the papers—their trouble spot. We take everything off the desk and, I mean, take all the paper and dump it in a box and we get out of the office. I think getting a fresh perspective on their office and how it works is better when they just move out to do some of the work. Especially when they're just trying to go through things. And that way they're not getting distracted by other things in the office like their computer and things like that.

Then we move to the dining room table or sometimes out on a patio by the pool, if we can, and we go through things. We dump it out and then we start making piles. I'd say more times than not that that's really effective for a business person to do that.

**Karen:** Yeah, it's interesting how some years ago we were told there wasn't going to be any more paper and it seems like ever since that prediction was made we have more paper than ever [laughs] to deal with in our lives.

**John:** Well there's an interesting statistic that I know. The average American receives over 49,000 pieces of mail in their lifetime. And a third of that, I think they've realized, is junk mail. So, there's over 16,000 pieces and that's about 3.8 pieces a week if you live till you're 80. That's a lot of mail. That's a lot of paper.

You've got to eliminate it before it even comes in and it really means one of the things that I tell clients is you need a trash can where you open your mail. If you're opening your mail by the front door, you've got to figure out a way to get a trash can in there. Even if you use a drawer in your credenza for a trash can just so you can separate the payment envelope and the outside envelope so you just have what you need, you can staple it together and then you're done. You have 50% less mail instantly because you've reviewed it all quickly.

**Karen:** Instead of letting it all pile up and getting back to it some future date which may never come.

**John:** Right. A lot of people call me, because I work with people in their homes and a lot of people see me as a luxury. Some people call me a hand holder and some call me some sort of organizing messiah. But a client generally calls me because they're just really stuck and they need to get to the next level. They need some sort of transformation of their space.

I tell them that it did not take them ten minutes for them to get to where they are right now and it's not going to take ten minutes for them to get out of it. And they need to be present and participating. I think generally, in most cases when I work with a client, it's a lot easier and the client to organize an office because there's not a lot of sentimentality in the office. It's about getting the job done. It's about clearing the space, going through the papers and coming up with a system.

I think people are more willing to invest in their office because they're in there so long and maybe not invest in their garage or linen closet or their pantry because they can just go in there, grab what they need and then just deal with it. But, an office is really important.

The office is tied to monetary productivity, too. If you're more organized, you can actually make money. So, I hope people transition through that.

**Karen:** Right. Like you said, it's not as painful as

going through the kid's art projects or the old photos and things like that.

**John:** Definitely not. Definitely not. And one thing I have noticed, too, is that there are a lot of things missing in people's offices that they don't even think about, things, like using a labeler. I think a labeler is one of the best items that you can buy for your office.

**Karen:** Huh!

**John:** Dymo makes a great one. Yes. Dymo, Brother, P-Touch. People don't have file folders. I recommend file folders that are third-cut, one-position, very easy. You write that down. You take that to your office supply store. They'll help you find it, or you can get it online.

Scissors, scotch tape, stapler, a lot of people don't have that stuff. And, there's something I love, incline mail sorters. So, if you have manila folders, you can create some sort of hot file system on the top of your desk.

**Karen:** Mm-hmm.

**John:** A lot of people don't have a hook for their coat.

**Karen:** Oh, OK.

**John:** So, their coat goes on the edge of the chair. If you're meeting with clients and your stuff looks really sloppy, 3M makes great hooks now that don't require any nails on the wall or any kind of anchor system. They just go on with a special Velcro and glue, and they don't leave any mark if you take them off.

Shredders are great. People don't really think about the amount of personal information that they have in their office, personal information of part-time employees, of clients.

I'm in a position of public trust, and one of the first things we do is we talk about confidentiality of their information where I'm concerned, when I leave their office. But, what are they doing to protect their clients' information? They don't really think about that.

**Karen:** That's a big one when we're dealing with somebody making payments, credit card numbers and that kind of thing.

**John:** Yes. And, start in someone's office where the

problem is the worst. Like I said, grab a box, grab paper, and sometimes you just need to throw a big, giant hula hoop in the room and let it land somewhere. I definitely suggest you get everything off the floor. Don't have anything on the floor. If it's on the floor, then you don't have the right kind of system for it to sit and live somewhere.

There are several kinds of storage that I tell clients about. There are four. One of them is hot files, which I mentioned before. Hot files are like a Ticker File System, really basic things that you need every single day to be effective at your desk.

**Karen:** Like?

**John:** So, to do file, to mail file, letters to write, bills to pay, people to call, business cards to enter into your database, that kind of thing.

**Karen:** So, something that's going to take your attention at least once a day.

**John:** Right. Exactly. Then there are project files, which is another section, generally last week's, this week's or next week's files that you have for clients. So, that way they're accessible and you can grab them.

The third category, which is usually the biggest, is reference files. Those are all the things that you don't really need to get to very often. And the last one is deep, dark storage. Those are old tax records and those kinds of things.

Now they have great services out there that can take a box of tax records. And they can shrink-wrap it. You can inventory it. They'll take it away for you, and you pay a fee each month and they'll hold onto your tax records or whatever records you have or receipts or something like that.

And for a small business owner, like you were saying, if they're in a small room I suggest that they use outside services whenever they can for storage so they don't have to keep absolutely everything in their office because really quickly their garage can become their storeroom. Then they can't even park in their garage.

**Karen:** There are so many great services and so much outsourcing that's available now. One other thing I wanted to ask, for a company that's a little

bit bigger and has some employees, how do you get the employees motivated either to help you set up a system or to keep a system going?

**John:** Totally. Totally. The big question I ask clients when I do a needs assessment is, "Who is going to maintain this space?"

**Karen:** Right.

**John:** And they're saying, "Me or my assistant." If it's their assistant or even their housekeeper, if it's something simple, then we need to bring them in when we're creating the system so they have a little bit of ownership, like the client does. Then they have some input and they feel like they're part of the process. They're not just being told what to do.

I think that works really well. I also think that businesses should spend half a day a year; a full day would be great, even once a year; every six months actually would be ideal having an office organizing day. With the explosion of personal organization in the U.S., I've recently gotten calls from large businesses, non-profit organizations that want to schedule a day. So, I try to do some sort of education for the employees so they know what to do, how to do it, how to get organized in a general way. And then I'll do hands-on training all through the office that day.

But when I walk into a business, sometimes the boss walks away and the employees talk to me and they say, "We've been wanting to do this for a long time." But, they don't want to do it and I feel bad. So, privately later I'll tell the client this, and it's something that they never realized. I'll say, "I can create highly functional, amazing systems, but your employees have ownership of this space. Get them in your office break room. Get them in your filing cabinet. And don't be afraid to ask your assistant to hover over you to get you to do tasks."

**Karen:** Mm-hmm.

**John:** I really believe that. I think managers and clients have this view that they're impermeable and they're supposed to look perfect and not ask for help. I think it's OK if your assistant comes in and sits with you while you go through your mail. And that way maybe there are some pieces of mail that they could learn to open on behalf of you to have you save time.

**Karen:** Oh, absolutely! A lot of times, like you said, if the entrepreneur himself or herself is a perfectionist

and has a lot of trouble, an employee may not be a perfectionist and may be much more suited to keeping things running.

Thanks a lot for your help, John. I think the idea of an organizing day once or twice a year is a super one. And hopefully many of our listeners will agree.

**John:** Well, one thing I wanted to say, Karen, if I may.

**Karen:** Sure.

**John:** I have a blog online, and it has great tips. There's actually a section for small businesses, business organizing tips, and people can check that out, too.

**Karen:** Super.

**John:** Great.

**Karen:** And is that under OrganizingLA?

**John:** [www.organizingla.com](http://www.organizingla.com)

**Karen:** Wonderful! Thank you so much for joining me.

**John:** I appreciate it. Thank you.

**Karen:** This is Karen E. Klein for [businessweek.com](http://businessweek.com).

### Resources mentioned in this podcast:

**Dymo:**

<http://global.dymo.com/enUS/Home/default.html>

**Brother P-touch:** <http://www.brother-usa.com/>

**3M Command Metal Hooks:**

[http://solutions.3m.com/wps/portal/3M/en\\_US/Command/home/us\\_en/products/metal\\_hooks/](http://solutions.3m.com/wps/portal/3M/en_US/Command/home/us_en/products/metal_hooks/)

**Velcro:** <http://www.velcro.com/index.html>

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