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Three Habits to Improve Workplace Productivity

By Karen Sladick

"Productivity is never an accident. It is always the result of a commitment to excellence, intelligent planning and focused effort."
—Paul J. Meyer, American leader in the personal development industry

The American workplace has often been called a "rat race." Workers are known to do whatever it takes to get ahead and earn the prized promotion. If we stand back and view it from afar, working is in fact similar to a race. Runners who excel consistently train, work through the tough times, have a positive outlook and are committed to putting in the effort required to perform their best.

In the work environment, some workers will place well in the race because of their excellent organizational skills, strong productivity and high level of focus and energy. Other workers will perform poorly because of consistent disorganization, lack of productivity and inability to stay focused. What causes this apparent difference? Habits. Good habits versus bad habits. Fortunately, bad workplace habits can be replaced with good workplace habits. Here are some strategies you can implement to encourage good habits and discourage bad habits.

Eliminate Distractions

In order to improve productivity, you have to improve your focus. To improve your focus, you have to eliminate distractions. All the stacks, gadgets and clutter sitting on your desk are huge distractions. Worse, clutter is contagious! For example, have you ever sat at your desk, determined to work on a specific task, then moments later, find your attention shifting to a stack of work sitting on the corner of your desk? Did you stop working on the first task and start a new task from the other stack? By the end of the day, you have three or four partially completed tasks and a feeling of not having accomplished anything.

It may not seem like a big deal to toss a piece of paper in a stack on the corner of your desk, but stacks turn into piles, and piles turn into highly distracting, energy-draining stress-producing clutter. When your desk is a mess, you are less likely to care if a few more items are tossed into the growing piles. If things are in order, you are more likely to keep them in order. When it comes to clutter, you need to sweat the small stuff. Small stuff turns into big stuff!

You might have tried to get rid of those stacks in the past, but for some reason, you abandoned the project before you had the chance to completely finish it. You had great intentions and got off to a great start, but the clutter eventually overwhelmed you, and you gave up. This may have happened because you didn't understand there are different phases of getting organized, as well as a definite order. This may sound too simple, but you have to take an organized approach to becoming more organized. In turn, this process will increase your productivity.

There are five phases for eliminating clutter to become more focused, organized and productive.

1.   Pick the area in your work environment that will make the biggest difference in your productivity. For example, let's start by clearing off your desk.

2.   Gather all the stacks, papers and tasks you are currently working on and put everyting in one stack in the middle of your desk.

3.   Work through the stack and eliminate everything you absolutely do not need in order to complete your work responsibilities.

4.   Prioritize the remaining papers and tasks by placing the most important items on top and the least important items on the bottom. Use deadline dates to help determine the order.

5.   Place the most important task on your desk and place the rest of the items by order of importance or deadline dates in a file labeled "Pending". When you finish the first task, go to your "Pending" file and pull out the next task. Continue this process until the items in your "Pending" file have been completed.

It is important to keep each phase separate and do the tasks in the proper order. Putting your stacks in order of importance or deadline dates must come before you start the first task. Don't get anxious and start working on a new task before you complete the current task. Stay focused, watch the clutter disappear and your productivity improve. It's likely your stacks will grow again. Often, this happens at the start of a new week or month. No problem. Before you get overwhelmed, stop for a few minutes and go through the five phases mentioned above to get back on track. The good news is you recognized you were