

Bright people, messy desks

Getting organized can boost productivity

BY MELANIE J. DAVIS
GANNETT/NEW JERSEY

I like to think of the mess on my desk as a colorful representation of my life, including:

- A broken Girl Scout pin.
- My mother's birthday gift.
- Two research books.
- Three phone books and notes for four articles.
- A checkbook and ATM receipts.
- My calendar and Rolodex.
- A printer cartridge awaiting recycling.
- Post-It notes on my computer monitor.
- My daughter's un-cashed paychecks.
- The warranty card for the storm door.
- Tax-filing instructions.
- A bag of bird seed the bird hates.

On second thought, my desk is a mess.

"Every one of my clients is really bright, yet the desks I've seen are dreadful," says Tracy Coan, owner of Organizing Other People's Stuff (OOPS) in Mountain Lakes. "They're so bright, they get bored and move onto the next thing, dropping the first."

The explanation sounds much nicer than blaming my desk mess on lethargy, but I'm uncomfortable with the results of an informal poll conducted in 2001 by Iogear, a California-based computer company.

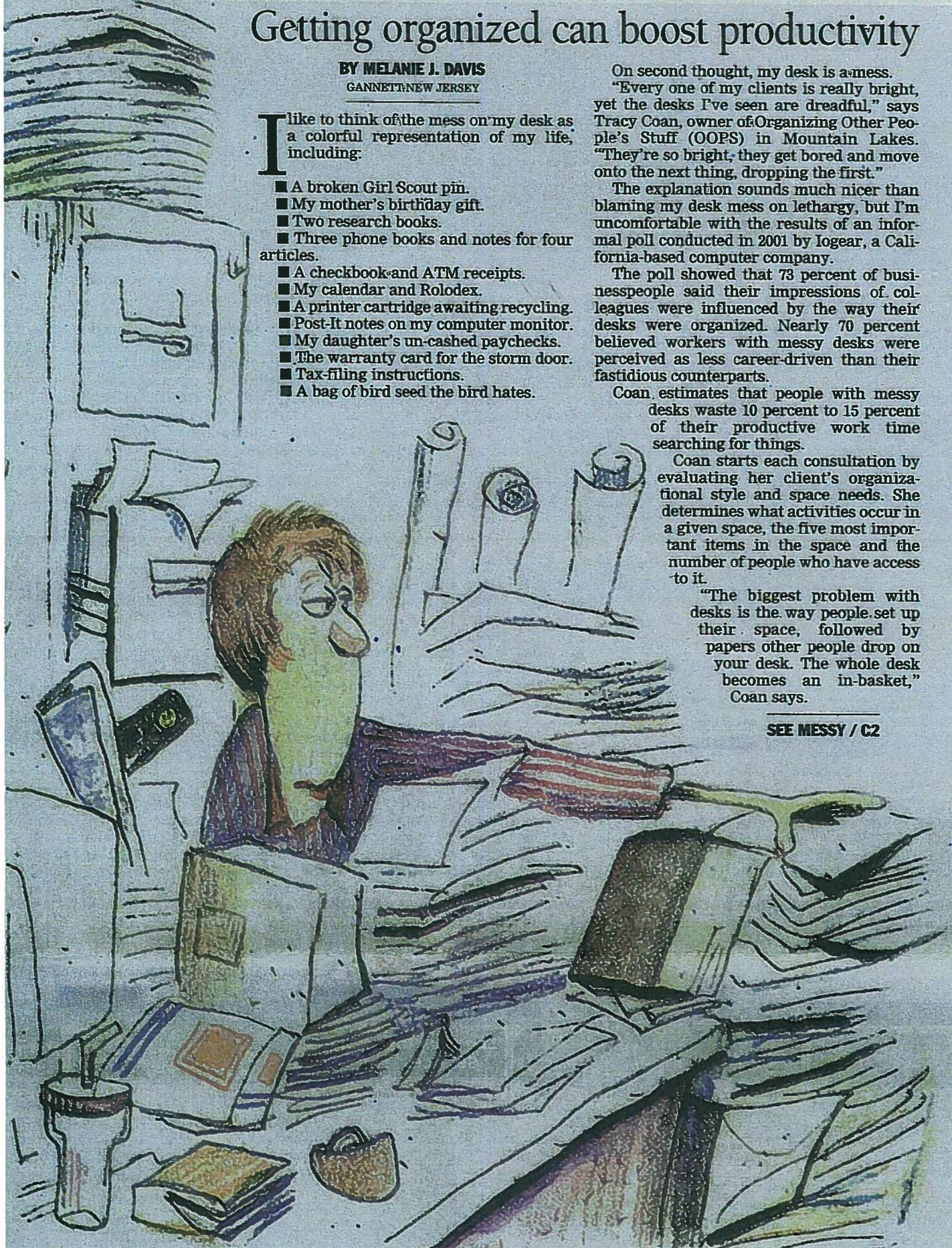
The poll showed that 73 percent of businesspeople said their impressions of colleagues were influenced by the way their desks were organized. Nearly 70 percent believed workers with messy desks were perceived as less career-driven than their fastidious counterparts.

Coan estimates that people with messy desks waste 10 percent to 15 percent of their productive work time searching for things.

Coan starts each consultation by evaluating her client's organizational style and space needs. She determines what activities occur in a given space, the five most important items in the space and the number of people who have access to it.

"The biggest problem with desks is the way people set up their space, followed by papers other people drop on your desk. The whole desk becomes an in-basket," Coan says.

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Messy

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Coan then clears clutter from a client's bulletin board. The quick fix provides inspiration for the more-challenging desk.

Simplicity is the key to creating and maintaining an efficient desk, Coan says.

"If your system is too complicated, you won't remember it," Coan says. "Everything should be easily accessible and easy to understand so you don't have to search for things."

Desks needn't be completely clear to be effective. Some people, like artists, find that a little visual clutter can spark creativity, says Karen Ussery, owner of Organized for Success, a Phoenix, Ariz., company.

To control paper clutter, she recommends the F.A.T. system: File. Act. Toss. She takes the action in reverse order, starting with tossing unnecessary papers.

"If you don't use it, lose it," Ussery says.

Next, act. Don't follow the "touch it once" rule for documents.

"That's for people who only do three things a day," she says.

"Ninety-eight percent of people have heard it; 1 percent follow it. The reality is sometimes you need to take it, set it aside and look at it later," Ussery says.

Coan helps clients develop desktop paper files that make sense to them, encouraging clients to think carefully before investing in files and racks.

Reaching inside

"Stacked wicker boxes look great, but you scrape your hand reaching inside. I prefer to use them for blank paper storage because you don't dig into the basket. You just lift a sheet off the top of the pile," Coan says.

Racks with graduated segments allow multiple files to be viewed at a glance, and color-coding can be very helpful. The folder containing the highest-priority project should be in a hot color, prominently displayed. Everything related to that project — from official memos to notes doodled on lunch napkins — is promptly placed into the folder.

"Have a place for everything. I did the desk of a manager for a shipping company, and he wrote notes on ripped-up pieces of scrap paper. I put of those notes on a message spike, and I sorted the other papers by type

of document. It was simple for him to maintain, which is important — you shouldn't need to take a class to learn your own system," Coan says.

Most difficult

The "F" aspect of the F.A.T. acronym, "File," can be the most difficult because people are afraid of throwing away something they'll need in the future.

"Two-thirds of everything we file, we'll never use again. Before you file, ask how much do you really need it? It's very liberating to recycle bags of old paperwork," Coan says.

Ussery recommends keeping a shallow tray on the desk to collect work that is completed and ready to file. Every Friday, her clients weed through the pile, filing the necessary documents and leaving the tray empty for the next week's work.

Margo Frey, a Milwaukee-based career counselor, suggests keeping a tray for non-essential items like work-related articles or contacts you'd like to follow up on later. When the stack reaches 1½ inches tall, it's time to file, act or toss.

Gannett News Service contributed to this story.