

How do you get the boss to organize his desk?

Question: "My boss just piles work on his desk willy-nilly. I organized it once, but now he expects it again. How do I get him to tidy up his own desk?" — *Anonymous*

ADDMouse December 14, 2010 at 6:42 pm

Wow – if I had to organize my boss, I'd be collecting unemployment! I can barely keep myself organized, much less do it for others. I have every book on the topic, including those for people with ADD, and have concluded that Google Desktop is the cat's pyjamas. Started using it in 2004 and it's saved my bacon and made me look like the organized professional I long to be. (Just don't look at the top of my desk or in my filing cabinet.)

Lisa June 16, 2010 at 12:02 pm

"through away" or throw away? I hope his office looks better than your communication is. It is also not an assistants job to house clean after a boss. They need to take responsibility for their work area along with their work ethic. It is a team effort to keep things flowing smoothly.

Andrea September 23, 2009 at 5:48 pm

Heather, this is very interesting. I seem to be working with a piler and try to adapt my style, but haven't quite found a working system yet. May I ask what the method is you found to be most useful, that you are using now?

Deirdre July 9, 2009 at 11:54 am

thank you all! – I feel like a kid in a candy shop having found this very useful website. I'm Irish but work in Italy and finally found what I've been looking for – nice to be able to have an input from others and know you're not alone! :-)

Jocelyn June 15, 2009 at 9:54 am

Here the top boss, his desk actually doesn't even have a thing on it. He leaves his work in our offices. We are

responsible for getting what we need from him and then taking care of what we can do vs. leaving it on his desk. I agree that if they are that busy and overwhelmed that is why they have assistants, but work with them so they can use a system that is efficient with your time as well. Like stack trays etc. because once they learn a system your job will be easier as well.

Heather June 15, 2009 at 8:52 am

Since this is the first time it is being identified to you as something you have responsibility over, you should sit down with your boss to find out if he wants you to tidy up on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. Work out an area he can put items to file so you can just go in and pick them up. Many people had great posts about folders/bins for projects. These are great if your boss will use them, mine rarely does. I have found he is a piler so I have adapted my style of help to suit his style of working. It has taken about 1 year to get a good method down and now I am working on closets and closed shelves he is also stashing stuff. He is someone who is able to be highly efficient even if his desk does not reflect it at all times so instead of changing him, I am changing how I assist him. Take the time to figure it out and you will receive endless praise.

Tami June 13, 2009 at 9:00 am

We have tried, vertical files, bins, trays and still mounds and months of charts sit on our physician desk. Finally, everyone has been assigned a day, to grab her, get her attention and have her address everything while you wait. It has been working over the last few months. Everyone is in agreement that we have to babysit this one "delinquent" but she does sign the checks.

Anon June 12, 2009 at 3:39 pm

The first time we did a thorough cleaning for my current boss she had a fit, told us never do it again. The next time she went out of town she left a banana peel in between the papers on her desk which rotted. :-). Although I had a good chuckle inside, I ended up having to clean up and make legible copies of the now mushy documents.

Lisa June 8, 2009 at 4:47 pm

I agree with the other posters - I think part of your job as Assistant is to "assist" your boss in staying organized. I have a great resource book for you; it's called "How to Be Organized in Spite of Yourself." It's an inexpensive (\$7 on Amazon) reference book that helps people identify what type of organization style will work best for them.

The book identifies several different personality types, including "Perfectionist Plus, Hopper, Fence Sitter, Pack Rat, and Total Slob." Once you've identified the type of person your boss is, you can figure out which organizational method works best for him. You can't force a person to change their basic personality type, and buying all of the organizing bins in the world won't make him use them! But if you work with his existing personality type, with methods that make sense to him, you have a greater chance of success. Good luck!

Game hen June 8, 2009 at 12:17 pm

I see organizing your boss's desk as part of your job. If he has no objections to you doing that, then you should. I have worked for both kinds of people, those who don't want you to touch their desks and others who love it. So now that you know he likes you to organize the desk, you have an added duty. I don't look at it as a negative aspect, but rather a positive opportunity to shine in your position. We are organizers, as is the nature of the position, so why not be good at it!

Mark June 5, 2009 at 5:42 pm

I would think that keeping your boss (including his desk) organized is part of your job.

Lynette June 5, 2009 at 3:43 pm

My boss and I spend the last 5-10 minutes of our weekly meeting each Friday "digging out" as she calls it. It involves going through her in-box and out-box, digging through the files that accumulated during the week and basically just getting everything in and around her work area more readily available for her to continue her job. I do go in each afternoon to refile file folders that I know she will not need again. Since "the digging out" is done each week, there really is not an overwhelming pile to deal with and we each get to start the work week off on Monday with a clean desk.

Fellow Admin Assistant June 5, 2009 at 3:42 pm

That's just the way he is and I doubt he will change. You can set up trays and label them and try to see if he'll actually put things in them. I haven't seen the surface of my boss's desk for some time now! I warn him when he's leaving town for a week or more that I'll be going in there and tidying up and it freaks him out. I still tidy it up anyway and weed out the dates that have past to lessen the piles. I've organized all his journals to keep to a specific bookshelf and just put them there instead of on his desk and he can retrieve them as needed. Be happy he appreciated you straightening for him. It will help you in the long run when something is missing and it's buried under his elbow. Good luck!

Jenn June 5, 2009 at 3:41 pm

I work in municipal government as the EA to the City Manager. My former City Manager had a cluttered desk, and part of my duties was to organize it - I would go through the papers strewn about his desk and organize them into piles with the most important items on the tops of the stacks. My current City Manager has her own "system" of piles. If I touched them, she wouldn't be able to find anything. Each manager is different, but I agree with Tess, as the assistant, our job IS keeping the boss organized, and if that means sorting their desk, then we do that.

Gohughes June 5, 2009 at 2:41 pm

That is unusual – based on my experience – that someone would want someone else to organize their desk. Most managers may have what looks like a cluttered or disorganized work area to others but it works for them. If he is efficient and gets the job done then I am not sure I would feel it my place to organize him. However, if he stays confused, inefficient and unable to find things because of his present system, or it is your responsibility to locate documents in the heap on his desk, maybe you could teach him a simple little filing system, a couple of folders, that would help both of you. Good luck!

Lynn June 5, 2009 at 2:38 pm

You committed the cardinal sin of organizing it the first time. Don't ever do anything like that unless you plan/want to keep doing it forever! ;-) Seriously, though, part of your responsibility is to help keep your boss organized. Try and take a few minutes each week, either on Friday afternoon or Monday morning, to get his files in order. Trays work great for the in/out box. I've found that vertical file sorters work best for actual working project files. You can put the files in the sorter with the tabs visible. It makes it easy to find the file you're looking for. It also might get your boss to start dropping the file into the sorter as well once you show him how simple it is.

Claudia June 5, 2009 at 2:26 pm

Some bosses don't like anyone touching their desks while others expect it routinely. One thing I have found very helpful in organizing their offices is finding baskets or trays that can be purchased and make sure there is an understanding as to what goes in them. Suggestion: Each project or case having it's own tray/basket. When the project is over, the tray is available for the next project. The IN and OUT trays are never a problem anywhere; it's the "I'm not ready for it to leave my desk" files that can be the real problem. Just don't show your frustration – it's just their work style and it apparently works for them.

Tess June 5, 2009 at 2:20 pm

Actually, keeping your boss organized is part of your job. I constantly tidy up and clean not only his desk, but his office as well. When he goes out of town, I take the time to file, throw away outdated mail and other items, and give his desk and office a good cleaning and organizing session. He is always very appreciative and likes coming back to a clean and organized office.