What does it take to make New Year's resolutions a reality?

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(PhysOrg.com) -- So you have a New Year's resolution: get your books and papers organized, plan a vacation your family can afford, or find a new job in a new town. How to keep track of all the details necessary to get the project done?

Research from the University of Washington Information School shows that only a few basic systems work, and that whatever is chosen must fit well with the person's habits and ways of doing things, even as new demands quickly pile up. The system must be in view and close at hand. It also helps if the system makes its user look good in the eyes of others.

With those factors in mind, iSchool professor William Jones and his team designed and are testing the Personal Project Planner. It may be downloaded for no charge at Keeping Found Things Found: kftf.ischool.washington.edu/planner_index.htm .

Jones and his researchers designed the tool because participants in their studies complained that their day-to-day information is parked in too many places: multiple computers, multiple phones, multiple e-mail accounts, multiple software tools and Web applications. And that doesn't count all the paper documents that float in and out of people's lives.

"Our research shows that people are continually experimenting with new ways of managing their information," Jones said. "Some organizing systems never take hold or are quickly abandoned. Others fail over time

as the amount of information increases from a trickle to a torrent."

Jones and the Keeping Found Things Found group wanted a way people could use their existing tools, especially software, to stay on track.

The Personal Project Planner expands and reshapes as information is added. The planner works with existing software applications to organize not only documents but also email messages, Web pages, informal notes and other kinds of information.

The planner is particularly good at managing multi-step projects because it uses the logic of storytelling. For example, if a manager must decide where to cut an annual budget, she might write initial notes into the planner: Which job projects have priority? To complete them, which people and resources must we have? What can we do without?

A trip to China might begin with notes and Web sites about hotels, continue with documents discussed and insight gained during meetings in China, then finish with a report regarding the trip.

Along the way, the user may have grouped tasks, set deadlines, and sent e-mail without leaving the Personal Project Planner -- and without being distracted by irrelevant messages. People who have tested the planner say they especially like the way it keeps them on task.

Jones finds that writing notes often produces insight that improves the project.

"Everyday planning is a lot like telling a story," Jones said. "Along the way, the planner can help people to organize the information they need to make their story come true."

Keeping Found Things Found is a research project focusing on personal

information management. It is funded by the National Science Foundation.

"With digitization of our workplaces, homes, even our cars, so many things are pulling our information apart," Jones said. "Organizing that information is the way to focus on what's really important."

Provided by University of Washington