

De-cluttering your digital life can set you free

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This Oct. 14, 2004 file photo shows computers displaying the Google Desktop search engine at the Digitallife show at New York's Jacob K. Javitz convention center. Desktop tools don't have to be fancy or expensive. Tools like Google Desktop or Spotlight allow you to search with the same ease you enjoy for the Web. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

(AP) -- We've got multiple e-mail accounts, social networks, media streams, blogs, websites, electronic calendars, instant messages, phone contacts, online bills, passwords coming out of our ears and screen after screen after screen of computer stuff to back up, share and sync.

That doesn't include the virtual reams floating in the ether, enough to fill the Library of Congress more than 40,000 times, said Douglas C. Merrill, former chief information officer for Google, Ph.D. in cognitive science and dude who wants to help us better manage our digital clutter.

"That's 32 feet of books for every man, woman and child in America.

We're drowning in information," said Merrill, who nearly wrecked his health helping to manage the details of taking Google public.

Merrill, once an information scientist at the Rand Corp., struggled with dyslexia as a kid, so de-cluttering - digital and otherwise - is a huge priority for him, so much that he's written a book on the subject with James Martin, "Getting Organized in the Google Era."

We all know about clutter offline, but our digital selves have filled up in a huge way, too. We're suffering, but we can't dig out or keep up with rapidly changing and proliferating tools. Geeks do. They track products and reviews - and have the time and skills to test them. The rest of us fret and stress.

"I have several e-mail accounts. I have several websites. I'm constantly behind returning phone calls. It's a good day if the number of unread messages is below 200," said Berit Brogaard, a St. Louis college professor and single mom to a busy 6-year-old whose life also needs to be managed.

Anybody looking for a non-urgent e-mail reply from Brogaard might be waiting awhile. She relies on a few canned e-mail responses that she stashes in Gmail and rolls out when she's swamped, like this one for close friends:

"Hey there! Miss you. I am insanely busy. Sorry for being so lame. Will fill you in soon."

Merrill, who left Google for the music company EMI, then his own financial startup in Los Angeles, said a good place to begin a digital de-clutter is accepting that our brains are lousy multitaskers, among other bad things. They need all the help they can get in clearing out space, just like our computers and smart phones.

Another good place to start is taking heart in the array and flexibility of today's tools. He offers these tips, acknowledging there's no one-size-fits-all answer:

SEARCH, DON'T FILE

Abandon the notion of "filing" and "folders" as a way to alleviate anxiety over a messy computer desktop, Merrill said. Folders, the paper and digital kind, must be maintained, and your brain must remember what you've put in them.

"The problem is we can never find the information we've stored, so we wind up with folders and folders we don't know what to do with," Merrill said. "Search is the new organization. Search can set us free from the clutter of our imperfect minds" by allowing us to get a little messy. No time is lost on meticulously filing and hunting for folders when well-defined searches are used.

Desktop tools don't have to be fancy or expensive. They're everywhere, including right there in Windows and operating systems for Macs and other computers. Tools like Google Desktop or Spotlight allow you to search with the same ease you enjoy for the Web. Quicksilver is popular with geeks.

"The goal is to keep yourself from being overwhelmed emotionally by not making your brain do what it's not good at. Computers are good at searching. You're not. They're good at remembering. You're not."

SOME PAPER'S OK

You'd think Mr. Google would have no use for paper. Not true.

"I think paper's great for certain things," Merrill said. "It's still important."

He uses huge sticky sheets that he plasters on his walls when he's brainstorming a big idea. They're easy to move around as his thoughts firm up. He also uses paper for legal and tax documents that could be scanned into electronic files only to be retrieved and printed on demand when lawyers and accountants require hard copy.

The idea of a paperless office has been bounced around for three decades. In the early days, [Google](#) itself required employees to submit a trail of paper forms for reimbursement of expenses, Merrill said.

The goal is to be more efficient, so evaluate digital tools versus paper, or digital as a backup to hard copy when trying to decide. Are you looking for storage alone? Do you need to share information with many people at work, or with a small group of trusted loved ones in emergencies? We need wills, contracts and life insurance policies on paper, but should we take the time to scan them for sharing and protection?

PASSWORDS

For the truly nervous, storing numerous login names and passwords can be done on paper, but since it's recommended that passwords change substantially at least every six months, that could be time consuming. Merrill suggests e-mailing yourself password hints.

Plenty of software power and browser tools are available for sorting dozens of passwords. The important thing, he said, is to actually change

passwords and make the changes substantial.

MINIMIZING FAKE CLUTTER

A paperless real-world desk isn't realistic at the end of each day, but well organized piles by subject, project or function will do a lot of good to relieve the stress and guilt of walking away from a cluttered work space that looks like a pile of loose ends.

Merrill suggests taking an hour each week to evaluate what's on your desk, determining what can go, what can be converted to digital, what needs to be in a physical file cabinet and what remains on your to-do list.

Some people swear by hard-copy task management planners, but the Web is full of online apps to do the same. Online to-do apps can be easily updated on the go.

Having several e-mail accounts may be another of your unavoidable realities, but they don't need to be a source of stress. Use [Gmail](#) or smart phones, for instance, to check accounts for you so you're not constantly jumping from one [e-mail](#) server to another.

"Get rid of the wasted effort," Merrill said.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Twitter, Facebook and other social networks mean different things to different people. They've become a business tool for many but remain entertainment or a way to stay in touch for others.

Either way, many interfaces - like Tweetdeck - exist to integrate our busy social network lives that often have us posting frequent updates or sifting through the output of others.

One that Merrill likes, mostly for Twitter, is Brizzly. It offers support for viewing pictures online, expanding links that have been shortened, for people with multiple Twitter accounts, and includes some features for Facebook as well.

"I don't want to clutter up my life with having to go to Facebook and do this and go to Twitter and do that," Merrill said.

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