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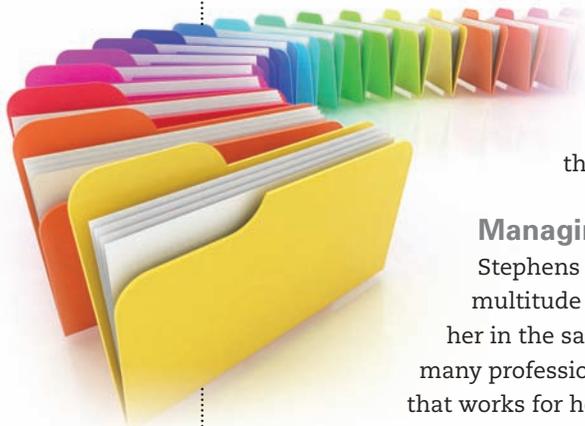
Yes, you really can be organized

As far as editor Sara Stephens is concerned, getting organized — like making any long-term change — takes a certain mindset.

It requires confidence in one's ability to make substantial changes and a belief that those changes will be worth the effort. "It comes down to taking a leap of faith," Stephens said. "You really have to believe in your organizational methodology as you're setting it up. Don't mutter to yourself, 'Yeah, like that's really going to happen.'"

Last month, we presented a practical list of suggestions for organizing on the job. This month, we will continue to explore the topic from another perspective in the publishing world, with an emphasis on scheduling oneself.

Stephens has fine-tuned her organizational skills during more than 20 years of writing and editing work. Her professional experience includes serving as managing editor for several consumer magazines, trade publications and online media. Today, Stephens operates as a freelance communications professional with several clients, and she is managing the production of a non-fiction book.



Managing multiple tasks

Stephens relies on her organizational skills to stay on top of the multitude of tasks she must complete on any given day, which puts her in the same boat as most people in the publishing world. And like many professionals, it took her considerable time to fine-tune a process that works for her.

In Stephens' case, she has had to learn to create schedules for a real person, as opposed to an editorial superhero. Her approach today not only makes her more effective on the job, it supports the quality of life she wants for herself.

"My organizational eyes used to be bigger than my organizational stomach," she explained. "In my enthusiasm for projects, I had a tendency to take on more than I could produce. These days, I carefully link my projects with real-world work schedules. This way, I don't overbook myself by factoring in weekend time or late hours."



continued from page 1

Stephens isn't shy about dropping names when it comes to the tools she employs to organize. Her favorite, she said, is a Microsoft product.

"As a managing editor, Microsoft Project is my best friend," she said. "I started using it when I managed the editorial cycle for *Windows* magazine, and it remains an indispensable tool in my management toolbox."

The software works, she said, because it allows her to account for real-life details while developing a schedule. "You can kick off the scheduling based on a known deadline, start date, budget — even labor resources," she said. "Then all you have to do is enter the tasks involved in the project, along with their anticipated duration times and how they relate to one another."

For instance, Stephens explained, perhaps "Task Two" won't be able to begin until "Task One" has been completed.

A realistic schedule

Not only does scheduling this way require one to analyze the nuts and bolts of a project, it helps the user develop a realistic schedule custom



tailored to his or her needs, Stephens said. "By following the project's critical path, you can stay on top of the final deadline. Any time the status of a project task threatens the critical path, the software lets you know. It's a robust program, and it really makes sense."

It can be easy to fall into the habit of being overly cautious when scheduling with software, day planners or any organizational tool, Stephens warned. That approach only creates more problems down the road, she said.

"Don't cushion your schedule with a lot of extra time between subtasks to account for the unknown," she said. "It's the management equivalent of an alarm clock snooze button."

Effective scheduling, like sticking to a healthy diet or exercising, will require a firm commitment on your part.

"Set a real schedule, jump into it and stick to it," Stephens said.

On the other hand, she said, it is reasonable to give yourself permission to make changes. This safety mechanism can apply to a specific project schedule or your overall efforts to organize yourself. "You can build in a process review date early on that's associated with a 'Plan B' if your new system just isn't working for you," she said. "Knowing this bail-out option is there frees your inhibitions about diving in head first." 

Organizing pays off in spades

Hilda Montejano, owner of Professional Organizer Houston, says organizing oneself in the office is more important than ever today.

"With technology being the way it is, information is coming at us in all directions," Montejano said. "It's hard to manage everything."

Making time to develop systems for organizing our time, our workspace and our data is worth the effort, she said. "When you're organized, you can find things," she said. "It saves you time. It reduces stress. Whatever you're working on, it will be easier."

And for those who find organizing overwhelming, or who just don't know where to start, it can be a relief to turn to a professional organizer for help, Montejano said. An organizer can recommend and create systems for you, whether it's materials for filing papers or a process for handling electronic data.

A number of clients seek her guidance when they're preparing to make a major change, such as expanding their staff or implementing new technology. "If your business starts growing, and you're not ready, there will be disorder."

Some of Montejano's clients leave the organizing efforts entirely to her. Others chose to work with her to develop or improve their own organizational skills. Helping people adopt or fine-tune organizational systems consistently is rewarding, Montejano said, because it produces satisfied clients.

"I love my job," she said. "Clients tell me I made a difference in their lives. You have to be organized to function, to think clearly, and to be productive."



One on one

JPA profile: John Langer, machine operator
Number of years with JPA: 13 ½

Why he loves JPA: Langer says he enjoys his work with JPA. "I get to run many different machines, so it breaks the monotony of the day," he said. He also likes tackling the day-to-day challenges that can arise, and he likes being part of a small work crew. "It's a good job."

Family life: Langer is a single dad of three. His children are Isabel, 15; Jordyn, 12; and Jake, 11. Langer shares many of his interests with the kids. "We like the outdoors, camping and fishing," he said.

Hobbies: When his schedule permits, Langer loves hunting, fishing and woodworking. It's been a few years since he's had



John Langer



Jake, Isabel and Jordyn

time for deer hunting, he said, but he would welcome the chance to try it again. When he delves into woodworking, Langer usually makes items for the house, including cabinetry. "I do it here and there when I'm able," he said. "Between work and having three children, it doesn't give me a lot of time."

Langer is not a big fan of cooking, but he does enjoy grilling for his family. He mainly makes steaks and pork chops on the gas grill, using a medium heat.

These days, he's been experimenting with

some of the different marinades on the market. Ideally, he recommends marinating meat for about a day, but in a pinch, one or two hours will work.

One cool fact: Because of the naval career of his father, Chuck Langer, John traveled quite a bit throughout the United States as a youth. He grew up in the state of Washington, but also spent time in Virginia, Connecticut and a number of communities on the West Coast. He remembers taking a cross-country trip from the West Coast to Minnesota on his own at age 14. "I spent 2 ½ days on the train," he recalled. "I wouldn't want to do that again. I didn't get a lot of sleep. You make a lot of stops. It takes forever." The train itself got old, he said, but the view along the way was beautiful. 

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RECIPE

Cheesy cheese ball

- 8 oz. garden vegetable cream cheese
- 8 oz. roasted garlic cream cheese
- 4 oz. shredded sharp cheddar
- 3 green onions, chopped
- 2 cups roasted pecan pieces

Mix all ingredients well, then shape into a ball. Serve with crackers.

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