



Tips For Getting That Pile Under Control

Let's face it, it's pretty hard to write if you can't find your computer, your desk, or that research you need for your latest article.

I can hear the groans now. Been there, done that. Right? How many of you have tried to get on some organization plan, only to have it fail after just a few weeks or even days? That's because most filing systems are put together by people who organize vertically. These are the people who actually use filing cabinets for the purpose they are intended for, not for hiding junk that doesn't fit on your desk.

However, those of us who need help getting organized are horizontal organizers. We live by the motto "out of sight, out of mind" and we need all of our stuff spread out around us where we can see it. Over the desk. Over the floor. Out where we can see it. We tend to Pile It instead of File It. Sound familiar?

Take courage, there's help!

Being a horizontal organizer in a vertically-organized world is like being a lefty. Most of the world isn't designed to accommodate you. At times, this is frustrating. According to a Steelcase survey, pilers are the minority, with only 27% of the workforce acknowledging this trait.

The problem with this method is that there is a limited amount of horizontal surface in our lives. So our desks get buried under papers and books, our floors become mazes of piles that are hazardous to wade through, we stack things on top of filing cabinets and chairs, and we can't find anything and have no room to work on anything.

But trying to force ourselves into a vertically-organized mode isn't going to work. You cannot organize in a way that does not feel natural to you.

So what's a horizontal organizer to do? Embrace the pile.

We need a method of organization that fits the way our minds work. We need to keep things out where we can find them, but in a way that doesn't overpower our desk and turn into the kind of the clutter and chaos that kills creativity.

Piles can work. Piles aren't bad. The key is to make them specific enough that you can find what you need in a relatively short amount of time.

Methods to Piling

There is a method to the madness, however.

- First off, keep your piles relegated to certain zones. Things closest to your computer or workspace should be the things you access most frequently. Then move out from there. For example, you might have a pile relating to your current manuscript or article, another for critiques you're working on. Farther out might be piles for research, writing helps, etc.
- Keep similar items in the same pile.
- Keep enough room between piles to get your hand in there.
- Don't make them too high.
- Sort your piles: keep them just to what they say. You don't have to be too detailed here, especially the farther away from your desk you get. You can have a pile on American West research if that suits your needs. You don't necessarily need to break it down into food, clothing, transportation, etc. unless doing so will save you a tremendous amount of time.
- Make a tickler file. Keep it small. I use a book holder or a typing stand. It can only hold a few pieces of paper. This is for things that need my immediate attention.
- Remember you don't have to do it all at once. You can throw a bunch of stuff into a plastic bin or tub to go through later while you're watching TV or talking on the phone or waiting on hold with the insurance or cable company.
- Realize that, by nature, piles will morph and change. That's fine.
- Take your piling system just as far as you need to so your life will feel less chaotic and you will be able to do what you need to do. If you are fine with piles on your floor and can find everything, don't worry that it doesn't look like anyone else's system. If it works for you, that's all that matters.

Use these ideas as springboards, not as something cut in stone. The main rule is to find out what works for you, so you can find what you need and be creative without feeling stressed out by chaos.

Finally, use containers that are visually appealing. Baskets, cute cubbies, trays, colored folders—find whatever is fun enough to look at so you will use it. You can stack your piles in these baskets on shelves this way too.

Oh, and in case you were wondering what are filing cabinets are for? Things you feel bad about throwing away or never want to see again.

Happy piling!

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