# [***How to simplify your work life: Is your workplace clouded by clutter, confusion and chaos? Juliet O'Neill presents a plan for clarity based on a tidy desk, control of e-mail and one-touch paper handling.***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:47KF-3V70-01D6-P27H-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

How to Simplify Your Life: PART 7 of a special citizen series

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How is this relevant to me?

If that question grabbed your attention, then work simplification expert Bill Jensen is right about one thing.

Never mind (for the moment) the cornucopia of tips on clearing the clutter from your desk, being brutal with e-mail, making "do" lists and scheduling meetings just before lunch when everyone's keen to keep it short so they can go eat.

Not that Mr. Jensen would diss any of the tried and true methods of smart time management and wise use of technological toys. Even his wife doesn't have the number to his ***cellphone***. "I use it for outgoing calls only," he says.

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But he has concluded, during years studying business organizations, that while most of us are tempted to blame technology and other people for the complexity in our work lives, it really has to do with a widespread lack of clarity that plagues management and workforces across North America.

Mr. Jensen, the author of Simplicity who heads a New Jersey communications company, the Jensen Group, advises companies to "compete on clarity." That's clarity of purpose, goals, organization and communications.

In an interview, he singled out the simplifying power of five "behavioural communications" questions for which workers -- from top brass to junior support staff -- need the answers to make decisions and get stuff done.

(And he recommended the five as a structure for this story as well.)

1. How is this relevant to me? He says this is essential in the "attention economy" where people are inundated with too much information. "We're drinking from fire hoses" in search of one drop of meaning at work as elsewhere in our lives.

2. What specifically do you want me to do, and how do I get started? In this case, get interested in simplifying your work by reading this story.

3. What does success or failure look like? Your desk will be tidier, your goals more well defined, your priorities staked out, your e-mail less distracting, and your communications so clear that nobody will be left guessing what you need, want them to do or have to offer. You will, as the simplicity buzz phrase goes, "work smarter, not harder."

4. What tools and support are available? Checklists, Web sites, day planners, how-to books, seminars, videos, tapes, software or, simplest of all, good old common sense and the comfort of being in good company.

5. What's in it for me or us? Less stress, more accomplishments, more satisfaction, and more free time for your family, friends, and leisure activities.

Don't simplify just for the sake of it, Mr. Jensen advises. "Do it because you're passionate about life," he says. The one thing you can't change is the fact there are 1,440 minutes in a day. What you can change is how many of those minutes you can claim "for what matters most in your life." If that happens to be your work, that's fine by the way.

If your managers and co-workers aren't about to start practising companywide clarity to help simplify your work, you can still take your own steps to reduce clutter, confusion, chaos and careless use of time.

One tactic Mr. Jensen recommends is "blowing off the stupid stuff" such as e-mailed memos with instructions or queries that contain no time frame or deadlines. "Go ahead and delete it," he says. "Be militant." The chances are you'll see that memo again and again before it contains a deadline, making it genuinely important.

That's a big key to simplicity: focusing on what's important and not wasting time on the rest. However you decide to simplify your work, it has to be a conscious effort, says Alice Kubicek, an Ottawa-based human resources consultant. "It's naive for people to think it'll just happen."

For example, many us have heard the golden rule that we shouldn't handle a paper on our desk more than once. The challenge is to actually start doing this.

How to do it? The folks at the 123sortit.com Web site recommend a five-basket system with the following labels: to do, to read, to file, today, trash. Simplify that by being totally honest; more paper will wind up in the recycle bin, as might your stack of "how to organize" books since you'll be simplified down to this newspaper clipping and some Web sites.

The 123sortit.com advisers not only recommend taking before and after pictures when you declutter your desk, but provide step-by-step instructions and testimonials by others about their voyage from the depths of disorder.

If you're not sure whether your desk is truly a disaster zone, you can take Canadian time management guru Harold Taylor's "disorganized desk test" at [*www.taylorontime.com/desktest.html*](http://www.taylorontime.com/desktest.html). Mr. Taylor has neat formulas for getting things done pronto. One is DASH: Do it. Assign it. Scrap it. Hold it. Be warned that his site is designed to lure you into ordering such "time management products" as an $89.95 deluxe leather planner ($69.95 if you skip the planner) or a video tape, How We Waste Our Time/ Set Goals and Priorities, for $195.

Or skip the Web test and take this advice: If you can barely see your desk top, have papers overflowing on the floor, often can't find what you're looking for and find people frequently make snide remarks about your work space, well, you know what to do. (Editors excluded.)

Ms. Kubicek says her own decision to simplify "was an unconscious thing" that happened when she found herself juggling a business and teaching career, a family with two children, and volunteer work in the human resources sector. She didn't want to give any of it up.

She moved her consulting work to her home, eliminated commuting time to the office, and got her children, five-year-old Emma and 11-year-old Alexander, to pitch in by becoming more organized themselves -- hanging up their coats when they come in and setting the dinner table -- to free mom's tidy-up time for more fun time with them.

Ms. Kubicek has a business phone separate from her personal phone and never gives out her ***cellphone*** number. "I load up my time," she adds, with back-to-back meetings and errands scheduled together. And she banks by Internet. "I really hate waiting," she said in an interview. "I'm very careful how I structure my time."

Her piece de resistance is a briefcase filing system. She keeps the papers for each client of her company, AK Performance Solutions, in a separate brief case. "So if I am working on a case or running off to a meeting with them, I just grab the appropriate briefcase," she said. "It works all the time."

Once a week, for at least half a day, she devotes to business administration. Her e-mail management is tight: delete all spam on sight and organize e-mail into an instant filing system, so it never gets out of hand and she knows where to find things. Real and virtual desk tops: same rules.

She is efficient about requests on her time, pinpointing what's important to her and having the courage to say 'no' when she's reached her limit. "People respect that," she says.

In consulting and teaching, she often helps her clients and students simplify a complex task by breaking it down to smaller parts with which they can feel comfortable. "Often people look for far too complicated an answer to a problem," she finds. "They want to jump to the answer before they understand the situation."

She tries not to work weekends and regards as "horror stories" the tales of colleagues who, unable to unplug from their work, take their ***cellphones*** and laptops on holidays. "Leave it at home or switch it off," she says. "Take time for yourself, for your family. Try not to mix business and pleasure. Make that decision and stick to it."

Mr. Taylor, a Newmarket, Ont., author and consultant, isn't so strict on that point. He wrote in a newsletter about how his son was appalled that he checked in at the office daily by e-mail when he went on a holiday cruise last year. Guests on the cruise were allowed a maximum of 15 minutes a day each on the Internet.

"I can only say that after running my own business for 35 years, it's difficult to let go completely," he wrote. "And the 15 minutes of e-mail allowed me the peace of mind that enabled me to enjoy my vacation."

It also showed him how much could get done in only 15 minutes on e-mail. Extolling the joys of brevity, he vowed to discipline himself to short e-mail sessions when he got back to his office.

Efficient e-mail management is highly recommended by Susan Ward, a Vancouver businesswoman who runs an excellent Web site on simplifying work, aimed at small business but useful to anybody: [*http://sbinfocanada.about.com*](http://sbinfocanada.about.com). "Answering e-mail on demand, or even looking at it, can seriously interfere with whatever other tasks you're trying to accomplish, " she warns.

Ms. Ward recommends turning off your e-mail arrival announcement sounds or symbols and scheduling a specific time each day to handle e-mail -- and not your best time of day when you're most creative or productive. In an interview, Ms. Ward said people who are embarking on simplifying their work should start with small steps, stick to it and get a friend, family member or workmate to help keep you on track, even if it's just an inquiry whether you managed to pull off your goal. If it seems overwhelming, pick one thing, give yourself a deadline and get it done. "It's like dieting," she said. "You have to follow through with it and get support."

Simple stuff to try: one week without taking personal calls at the office; buy a spare hard drive so you won't be in a panic if yours breaks down; resist forwarding lame e-mail jokes to 10 other busy people; answer all business calls within the same day.

If you know you need to simplify, but don't know where to begin, Ms. Ward recommends keeping a record for a while of how you actually spend your work time and you'll see how you're complicating your life or wasting hours.

After identifying your problems, set goals for solving them, and a plan and schedule for reaching the goals. Problem: too much time on e-mail. Goal: a limit on e-mail time. Plan: deal with e-mail once a day for one hour at 4 p.m.

In your overall work, she recommends writing down your goals, ruthlessly prioritizing your tasks, setting a schedule and sticking to it. And don't waste time waiting: Put it to good use reading a report, planning a meeting or making ***cellphone*** calls.

Above all, she says, "know thyself." Figure out your "work clock" -- when you're most productive -- and schedule your activity appropriately. If you work best in the evening, and have the option, work in the evening, for heaven's sake. Ms. Ward does. She works mornings and evenings, taking afternoons for family, exercise and errands.

"I'm a workaholic type myself," she admitted. "I'm the sort of person that even Christmas Day, is checking e-mails to see what's come in. But I've chosen that. You have to adopt the strategies that work for you. It's a myth that you can manage time, but you can manage yourself."

Of course, you could always simplify your work by quitting. But then that would complicate the rest of your life.

**Graphic**

Photo: Hulton, Archive by Getty Images; (How to simplify your work life)

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