Digital Decluttering

Maxwell Memorial Library's Technology Class
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Chaos Regulation Theory
by Gerd Altmann at Pixabay

1. Introduction

- The inbox with 2000 unread emails…
- The desktop completely covered with icons…
- The file that seems to have been deleted (or at least that you can't remember any search terms to find it with)…

These are some common forms of digital clutter. In this Tech Program we'll look at some ways to get on top of the clutter and make it so that you can find the things that are important to you whenever you need them.

2. A vocabulary note

The main distinction between the various types of items on your computer is that between directories and files. **DIRECTORIES** are better known as **FOLDERS** since modern, visually-based operating systems use folder-shaped icons for them and open them in a way that kind of fits what we think of how a paper folder works. I will try to use the word *folder* for them, but if I slip up and use *directory*, just think "folder."

I'll use the word *file* for most items you see an icon for that aren't folders. This is not ideal since when we have a paper folder containing several documents, we tend to call that a file ("Get me the files for the Patel account ASAP!") Unfortunately, though, *file* may be the best of a bad lot for the purpose. For instance, **DOCUMENTS** generally refers to textual documents, so using that word to include textual files, photos, movies, songs, and so on could be at least as confusing as lumping them all together under the category of file.

Fortunately, though, whatever I'll be saying to do with organizing files will usually also apply to any

folders[1] that are going to sit alongside them, so I'll use the word **ITEM** whenever I can.

3. Why get organized?

Various things can contribute to a sense that you need to get your documents/folders/emails/photos/songs/… organized or that your current procedures aren't quite doing it for you:

- Too often, when you're looking for a given item, you can't find it.
- When you're looking for a few different but related items, you wind up having to search in more than 1 folder to find them all.
- Conversely, when you go into a folder that contains the item you're looking for you have to wade through several items that don't seem to have anything to do with each other.
- Maybe you need to copy several items to pass on to a friend and want it to contain everything that's relevant while not containing anything that's not.
- You have a system, but you still find it hard to declutter faster than the new clutter builds up.

4. The main problem: Moore's Law doesn't apply to the clock (or the calendar)[2]

Our machines get continually more powerful and information bombards us ever more intensely, but we still only have 168 hours each week to work with. This fact is perhaps the major limitation on how well any computer can be organized, and the ongoing workflow of staying organized is as at least as important as the method used to arrange items. Accordingly I'll start with ideas for setting a workflow up.

Workflow idea 1: Make it a habit!

This idea is pretty much essential. A modern day Sisyphus might have been sentenced to an eternity of organizing items on a computer. It is a never-ending task and it can be as detailed as you let it become, so choose a level of organization that you can maintain habitually, a workflow that suits your style, and a filing scheme that works for that level of organization and style of work.

Workflow idea 2: Clean your Desktop off

Go ahead and push the metaphor of the desktop. Just as a cluttered physical desktop impedes working on it or finding items that are piled up on it, so too a cluttered virtual desktop. The Desktop should be minimalist and only contain a few items. Those items should give you quick access to work you need to get at often.

Workflow idea 3: Have an "Inbox" that you keep small and up to date

It can be useful to have a folder where you put new items that you create or other items that come in and require just a little attention before you file them. To keep control over the folder's contents, you

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1 Or to items below the level of file. For example, what you think of as a folder in your email app is (from the computer's or device's viewpoint) probably a huge text file with the raw text of all the emails that you've saved into that folder. So it would be inaccurate for me to use the word *file* if I wanted to include individual email messages in what I was talking about.

2 **MOORE'S LAW** refers to the 1965 observation by Gordon Moore that the number of transistors on a microchip doubles every 2 years, more or less. Colloquially the term gets used to refer to doubling periods for other aspects of computer power or storage.

should not use one that software will automatically dump items into. That is why I put *Inbox* in quotation marks: in organizing your email app you don't want to use the email app's Inbox for this purpose. Similarly, in your computer's folder structure you don't want to use your Downloads folder as the "Inbox." Mark Virtue[3] looks at this folder as your to-do-soon list, so it should be kept fairly small (he suggests 30-ish items which is slightly more than will fill a 10"×7" Windows Explorer window if you have it set to display large icons) and current (if it's still there after a month and a half, it's either a bigger project or it's not really in your to-dos, so it should be filed or tossed).

Workflow idea 4: File everything *right away, and link to current items*

As an alternative to an Inbox, you can put all items into their proper places as soon as you create or receive them. Then you can **LINK** to the items that you need easy access to. The term in this context comes from the Unix world, but other operating systems have similar tools. Windows calls its links **SHORTCUTS** and Mac OS calls its links **ALIASES**. The idea is that you immediately file an item and then create a shortcut/alias/link to it that will go in an appropriate workspace.

Workflow idea 5: Set some workspace folders up

The idea is that you have 1 or 2 folders holding items[4] you use regularly. You could put all such items into 1 folder or you might separate current projects (projects that have an end point) from items associated with perennial tasks (for example, a file for keeping track of your checking account). The Current Projects folder would have new items come in and finished items go out from time to time while the Regularly Used Items folder would stay fairly static.

Workflow idea 6: Schedule a weekly cleanup

Once a week (Harry Guinness suggests using 1 of the work week's endpoints: Monday morning or Friday evening), go through your workspace folders and clean things up. File items that you're no longer working on,[5] and delete items that you now see you'll never need.

5. Organizing items: Some possible approaches

How you arrange your items depends on your own style and desires because any scheme will have features that are strengths for some purposes but weaknesses for others. You will probably want to use different approaches for different areas of your computer or for different types of items. The fact that access to some sorts of items (emails anywhere and most items you work with on a mobile device, for instance) is only possible through the app that handles that type of item will also play into how you organize those items.

By project

For projects that have starting and ending points, having a folder that holds all the material relevant to the project can be a natural way of organizing things.

3 See the "Resources" section at the end of this document. Other mentions of names with recommendations will also refer to articles in the resources section.

4 Or links to them. From here on out, if I say *items*, read it as *items or their links*.

5 If you file things immediately and use links, you only need to delete the link.

By date

This scheme works for organizing levels towards the bottom of a system that overall uses some other scheme. So for instance in a Finances folder that is divided into Banking, Credit Cards, Investment, and Utilities subfolders, each of those subfolders could could contain separate folders for each year.[6]

By type of item

This can be useful within limits. For instance, it often makes sense to keep your personal photos together in your Pictures folder or your downloaded music in a Music folder. Indeed, if you use an app to manage any of your media, it piles all these files into a folder or folders that suit the app's way of working while presenting you with a human-usable way of organizing how you access them. In this way these apps are similar to email applications (which have always worked this way).

The limitations of this method show up when you want to work with several different types of item within the same project. If images are all in your Pictures folder, songs are all in your Music folder, and text documents are all in your Documents folder, then

Active vs. inactive

Projects that you're working on should be easy to get to while completed (or otherwise inactive) projects can get filed away.

By person or organization

Personal emails, like personal letters, seem to go most naturally into a group with other messages to and from that person.

In a business context, think back to the "Patel account" I used in a previous example. The folder[7] for such an account might have all sorts of items in it—text documents, spreadsheets, billing statements, photos, videos, audio files, and so on—but they would all relate to the services you provide the client with.

By topic

You might have articles you've saved on a variety of topics that could be "shelved" in separate folders.

6. Resources

These are some articles with schemes and ideas for keeping your computer organized. Some of them come across as kind of opinionated, so take them with a few grains of salt and just take the ideas you think will fit your own style.

Guinness, Harry. "How to Best Organize Your Computer Files, Folders & Documents." Business Envato Tuts+, November 30, 2018. https://business.tutsplus.com/tutorials/how-to-organize-computer-files--cms-32191.

Harry Guinness discusses a few approaches to the question of how to organize items and then lists some procedures you might want as part of your ongoing task of keeping organized.

6 Except in simple cases, you'd probably want an intermediate level that splits each category up further, for instance a folder for each bank, utility company, and so on.

7 Or folders. The top-level folder named Patel probably has several folders inside it that are organized by 1 or more of the other schemes in this section. Just like its paper version would have.

Steber, Carolyn. “13 Tips for Finally Organizing Your Laptop.” Bustle, July 8, 2016. https://www.bustle.com/articles/171398-13-tips-for-cleaning-organizing-your-laptop-once-for-all.

Carolyn Steber offers a mix of ideas on clearing out clutter, organizing what remains and making your on-screen environment pleasant and visually appealing.

Stokes, Natasha. “How to Clean out & Organize Your Computer.” Techlicious, February 6, 2019. https://www.techlicious.com/tip/get-organized-and-clean-out-your-computer/.

Natasha Stokes presents some software recommendations for cleaning cruft out of your computer files and for identifying and getting rid of duplicate items. She then talks about a way to organize items that can be used with any operating system.

Virtue, Mark. “Zen and the Art of File and Folder Organization.” How-to geek, July 5, 2017. https://www.howtogeek.com/howto/15677/zen-and-the-art-of-file-and-folder-organization/.

Mark Virtue gives a very detailed organization scheme, but you can use some of his ideas without having to adopt the entire scheme.

Note that though his general provisions can be easily adapted to any operating system, the article’s lowest level details are completely Windows-centric.