

7 Ways to Control Chaos in Your Small Business

Clear the Confusion with Good Office Management

by Susan Ward, About.com

"I know it's here somewhere." "I'll have to get back to you about that." "Where's that _____?"

Sound familiar? If so, chaos has crept into your small business - and is probably busy spreading throughout your organization like a virus. Disorganization and confusion are irritating, but they're also just plain bad for business. Think of it as a formula, if you like: chaos increasing equals profits decreasing. What to do? Control chaos by applying these basic office management principles:

1. Establish office management routines and stick to them.

Routine tasks need routine procedures if you want to stay organized and keep things running smoothly. Set up routines for handling paperwork and office systems. For instance, every piece of paper that comes into your office should be handled once, acted upon, and filed - not haphazardly piled on a desk. Office systems, such as computers, will need both administration and what I call panic mode procedures. When the system crashes or a computer-related piece of equipment fails, everyone in your office needs to know who to call and what not to do (such as try to fix the problem themselves). These data management articles provide helpful tips for everything from office filing systems through computer backup procedures.

2. Set up clearly delineated responsibilities.

Good office management depends on people knowing who is responsible for what - it's people who are accountable who get things done. What would happen, for example, if the purchasing for your small business was done by whoever whenever? Would you be able to find a paper clip when you wanted one? Or print off a report when you needed to? Putting one person in charge of ordering all equipment and supplies solves the problem and keeps things running smoothly. It's the same with (computer) systems administration. You need to have one person responsible for the security of your computer system and keeping track of things such as accounts, passwords and software. Otherwise, chaos will proliferate.

3. Keep records - and keep your business records updated.

Keeping records sounds like the easiest part of good office management - until you consider the need to keep those records both accessible and updated. But my first rule for controlling chaos will help you get a grip on this; make updating records an office routine. When you get a new customer or client, for instance, it only takes a moment to enter him into your contacts database. Then it will only take another moment or two to update the record after you've spoken to him on the phone.

4. Take a walk through your office and have a sit.

Is your office an example of space management or space mis-management? When you walk through the office, do you have to detour around obstacles or run the risk of tripping over something? When you sit down at a desk, could you actually work comfortably there? Are things logically arranged so that the things that you would use most at the desk are closest to hand? There are a lot of things crammed into offices nowadays, from printer stands through filing cabinets. For good office management, you need to be sure that all the things in the office are arranged for maximum efficiency - and maximum safety. The Basics of Small or Home Office Design provides tips for safely meeting the power, lighting and ventilation needs of your office space.

5. Schedule the scut work.

It's too easy to put off things that you don't like doing, and I don't know very many people that enjoy scut work. Unfortunately, an office, like a kitchen, won't function well without a certain amount of scut work being done. If you are a small business owner who's in the position of not being able to assign whatever you view as scut work to someone else, force yourself to get to it regularly by scheduling time each week for it. Take a morning or afternoon, for instance, and spend it making the cold calls or catching up on the accounting (or updating the records).

6. Delegate and outsource.

In a perfect world, everyone would only be doing what he or she had time to do and did well. As the world is not perfect, instead a lot of people are doing things that they don't have the time or talent to do well. Delegating and outsourcing can not only improve your small business's office management, but free you to focus on your talents as well, thereby improving your bottom line. Virtual assistants can handle many of your office or administrative tasks.

7. Make business planning a priority.

Many small business owners spend their days acting and reacting - and then wonder why they seem to be spinning their wheels. Business planning is an important component of good office management and needs to be part of your regular office management routine. Successful small business owners spend time every week on business planning, and many use daily business planning sessions as a tool for goal setting and growth. If you have staff, involve them in business planning, either formally or informally.

Don't let chaos interfere with doing business. Once you start applying these seven principles of good office management, you'll be amazed at the difference good office management makes - and how much more business you do.

If you would like FREE business counseling, please contact the Lynn Area Chamber of Commerce at 781-592-2900 or info@LynnAreaChamber.com