

Quick Guide: Clear the paper clutter

If you don't hot-desk or have a clear desk policy that works, the chances are your desk can sometimes (or maybe frequently!) look like a bomb has hit it. So before you lose another piece of paper, or spend far too long looking for something that's probably not there, here are the **top ten tips** to help you clear the paper clutter:

1. **Sort your paper into four piles:** Action; Read/pass on; Filing; and Junk. The last one is easy to deal with: ask yourself why you're keeping it. If there isn't a very good business reason to do so, or if you can get another copy easily, then bin it.
2. **Action!** It's probably on your desk to remind you to do it. So diary the deadline and put away the piece of paper: file it, bin it, pass it on, or use a bring forward system (see 8 below) if you must keep it.
3. **Read it.** Are you ever really going to read it? If so, diary the date and put away the paper in a drawer or reading file until the time comes. Be realistic about it and wary of saying "I'll read it when I get a minute".
4. **Pass it on.** If you need to get replies to something write (or attach) a note on the paper, diary to chase it up, and pass it on. If you need to keep a copy, put the copy in your bring forward system.
5. **File it.** (There's that dreaded F word again.) Make sure you file routinely. Set a time and duration to do it and stick to it. People will soon accept your routine time away from your desk especially as it doesn't take long if you do it routinely.
6. **Get rid of your in tray and pending tray.** They are a breeding ground for crises, clutter and loss of time. They can also look untidy and add to the clutter.
7. **Handle each piece of paper only once.** Stop wasting time frequently picking up and looking at things you have to do. If it comes in today, deal with it today: put it into one of the four categories to be dealt with.
8. **Use a bring forward system** (concertina file, plastic wallets, tabbed book etc) to store papers for future action dates. Educate others to use it too, so you avoid paper "arriving" on your desk without being actioned.
9. **Alternatively, scan and attach** your paper to your electronic diary or reminder system. That way the paper's gone but you will not lose it or forget about it.
10. **If you really want to clear the clutter,** don't *try* to do any of this. Do it!

Compiled by Des Whitehorn