

Free Clutter VS. Clutter Free

By Vicki Voisin, ACP

Is your office ruled by clutter? Is your desk so covered with papers and files that you have no room to work? Is too much “stuff” affecting your productivity? Do you long to simplify and pare down?

You probably answered “Yes” to at least one of those questions, so you must hear the tale of my friend, whom I will call “Gloria,” who finally learned the important lesson that even though something may be “free,” it may still be very expensive.

Here is the story:

The conference was excellent and exhibitors were abundant. Gloria was there, business cards in hand.

She was moving from booth to booth, chatting with the exhibitors, letting them know she appreciated their support of her career field, and learning about their products and services.

And, yes, she was picking up every sample, product or gift in sight. If she could manage, she picked up two or three of everything. Some exhibitors had candy. Others had brochures and magazines. She helped herself to those, too. It was all free, so why not?

When the conference was over, Gloria returned to her room to pack for the trip home. She swept the so-cute, itty-bitty

bars of soap and bottles of shampoo, conditioner, lotion and mouthwash into her luggage, along with the shower cap, shoeshine cloth, and sewing kit. Then she tossed in the unused packages of coffee, several pens and the pads of paper that were by the telephone. It, too, was all free, so why not?

Gloria crammed all the freebies into her luggage, remembering that it had been too heavy when she left home and was even heavier now. While struggling with the zipper, she said a brief prayer that it would hold when the not-always-gentle baggage handlers hefted the luggage onto the airplane.

When Gloria unpacked at home, she put all the hotel goodies in the bathroom closet with her mounting collection from previous trips. She realized they were not being used, but it was all free, and that pleased her.

She took everything else to her office and dumped it on her already overflowing desk. There was a virtual sea of freebies, including mugs, mouse pads, a yoyo, a Frisbee, letter openers, staple removers, calendars, pads of paper, cubes of sticky notes, squishy stress relief balls, highlighters, pens, luggage handle wraps, software samples, bags...and more bags. She had even picked up things she could not identify.

Then Gloria surveyed her desk. Her pen collection documented trips to New Orleans, Jacksonville, Tulsa, Phoenix, Dallas and Minneapolis. She spied a clock from a well-known employment agency, a calculator courtesy of a title company, and a tape dispenser from a prominent office supplier. Gloria literally could not see the top of her desk. There was “free” stuff everywhere.

Knowing of my interest in the virtues of good organization, time management, and efficient work habits, Gloria called me.

“Vicki,” she pleaded, “You have to help me! My desk is covered with so many free things that I cannot work!”

“Gloria,” I replied sympathetically, “you have picked up some nice things that you only thought were ‘free.’ They are taking up valuable space in your office and keeping you from being productive. This makes them ‘Expensive’ with a capital ‘E.’”

“But I can’t just throw everything away!” she whimpered, “They are all useful things that I might need some day...”

When I later visited Gloria’s office and saw all her freebies, my first thought was, “Wow! Is this the office of a successful and productive paralegal, or is it a commercial for office suppliers and legal vendors?”

I explained to Gloria that she is not alone, despite the fact there is no “Freebies Anonymous.” Many people have issues

dealing with clutter, particularly when the clutter is free to begin with.

Excessive clutter is a significant problem. It distracts you from focusing on goals and projects and may lead to a number of other problems such as procrastination, resentment, stress and even depression. It may contribute to low self-esteem if you feel as though you are not capable or are missing a basic organizing skill that others seem to have.

"It is a common misconception," I told Gloria, "that letting go of things means having less. In reality, letting go actually gives you more freedom and peace of mind. You will be able to easily access the things you use most often, which is important to a stress free work environment."

I also helped her understand that clutter is both time consuming and costly because things inevitably get lost. Searching for misplaced documents and client files is not just a waste of time and energy; it is also a waste of money. For instance, assuming Gloria works 48 weeks in a year and spends just five minutes of each hour of an eight-hour workday looking for things, she will waste 160 hours per year. Multiplied by her billing rate of \$95 per hour, the annual loss totals \$15,200!

Gloria was tired of the clutter-induced stress in her life so we got busy. I assured her that she did not have to get rid of all of her treasures. Instead, we found three copy paper boxes (easy, because Gloria saved those, too) and marked them: "Throw Away," "Give Away," and "Keep."

One by one, we sorted through all of Gloria's freebies. If there was something she could and would use, it went into the "Keep" box. The things that she thought someone else could use went into the "Give Away" box. The items that did not work or were absolutely no use to anyone went into the "Throw Away" box.

As it turned out, most of the pens Gloria had picked up in her travels either did not work or she did not like to write with them. Besides, how many pens can

one person use? If they did not work, they were tossed. If she did not like them but they were still good, they went to the firm's equipment room where pens must be the larval stage of wire coat hangers—the pens are never there when you need them, but more coat hangers seem to show up in the closets.

Some of the items Gloria kept could be re-purposed. For instance, coffee mugs became holders for her pens, markers, and highlighters.

After an hour or so, Gloria could see the top of her desk and she once again had an organized, uncluttered space where she could work and be productive. Gloria was amazed at how much weight and stress lifted from her shoulders when the clutter was cleared away. She could breathe! She could work! She felt peace.

We talked about maintaining this peace in her life by keeping her office neat. Because her desk is prime real estate, only the things she uses on a daily basis, such as the stapler, hole punch and pens, should be on top and within reach. The things she uses weekly should be kept nearby in easily accessible file cabinets, bins and boxes. If she is using something only once a month, it should be stored elsewhere.

Instead of stacking files on top of her desk, she should place them in an inclined desktop sorter so they stand upright and are easy to see. She should deal with mail the minute it arrives, and junk should be discarded (possibly shredded) immediately. Then, once a month, she should sort through her papers and magazines and discard anything she does not need.

At the end of the day, Gloria should clear her desk and empty her voice mail and e-mail boxes so that when she arrives in the morning she is greeted by a serene space. She will feel much less overwhelmed when she sits down to a clear desk. This will save valuable time and energy and will help her prioritize her work.

Gloria's office looked wonderful, so I gave her some homework—to deal with the freebies at home. That evening, Gloria sorted the sample shampoos, lotions, etc.

Some went into a basket in her guest room so that houseguests could use them. The rest were donated to a homeless shelter.

Now Gloria realizes that with anything free, there is usually a catch. In her case, if the stuff she picks up during her travels takes up valuable space, makes her unproductive, and interferes with her life and her work, then it comes with a very steep price tag.

Now, when Gloria attends a conference her goal is to take home information, not stuff. She still visits all the exhibitors to learn about their products and thank them for supporting her profession, but when she is tempted by their "free" merchandise, she asks herself, "Is it useful?" And, more importantly, "Will I use it?" If she cannot honestly answer "yes," then she does not take it.

This happy ending should be instructive for every paralegal who wants to keep his or her workspace clutter free so he or she can excel in a profession that has little patience for wasted time and motion. Besides, a clutter free space is usually a happy place.

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