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Biz Savvy

Get organized to create more time in your day

More small firms are selling overseas in an effort to stem losses from slow sales in the states

Premium content from Sacramento Business Journal - by Larry Mandelberg, Contributing writer

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You know what it's like when the smooth, steady pace of daily routine is interrupted by crisis. In a flash, a productive day implodes into a bottomless pit of lost time while you dig in to solve the critical crisis du jour.

When something bad happens, making time to deal with it is never a problem. Regardless of the cause, the crisis swallows all your time and attention while every other deadline and urgent task waits.

This is where the saying "if you want to get something done, give it to a busy person" comes from. And in it we find both truth and paradox.

Truth comes from a sense of obligation to others to perform when we have been asked and accepted a task. Paradox comes from the lack of obligation we feel to do the same for those commitments we make to ourselves.

It feels as if I never have time for the things I want to do and the things I should do, and I always have time to deal with a crisis. In my three-plus decades of running businesses, I've never known a businessperson to delay resolution of a crisis.

We are all very different people. There are differences in the way we learn, communicate, deal with stress and tragedy, success and failure, and the way we interact with others. There are no magic bullets just as there is no quick fix.

Here are my top three strategies for resolving this time paradox.

Get Organized — Whatever It Takes

During a period when I was working from a home office, entering my office was an exercise in obstacle avoidance — papers and piles everywhere, boxes, computer equipment and rolled up flip chart notes.

While I knew where everything was, the time and mental focus it required for me to find anything was a massive drain and unwittingly undermined my efforts to be efficient.

Luck favors the well-prepared. Don't fool yourself into believing you can't work in a neat, organized area. Don't settle for a cluttered desk and don't let your direct reports do it either.

Create places for things to live and put them there. Hire a professional organizer if you have to. The pain it will create will be quickly washed away by the feeling of calm and control you'll have once everything is in its place.

Don't play solitaire

After a crisis has been put to rest or while waiting for someone else to finish a task before you can go forward, avoid the quick game of solitaire.

Plan your tomorrow everyday, with an eye for fill-in tasks — “working on the business” tasks that make big differences. Create some space where you can track those tasks. Record when they go on the list and commit to completing them within two weeks. If they're not important enough to do by then, they're not important enough to do at all.

I need to see my to-do's

If you're like me and need to see everything, an inexpensive solution is to mount a piece of light, smooth cloth the size of a clear wall space in your office. Spray it with adhesive and you have a sticky wall. Buy a ream of paper and ask your office supply store to cut it in half.

Every time you think of something important you need to do, write it down on one of those half sheets and put it on your wall. The adhesive allows you to easily move the sheets around as priorities change.

This gives you a good visual of what you need to be doing and automates planning for

tomorrow. Before you quit for the night, glance at your tasks and put them into order for the next day. This will help reduce stress while keeping your mind focused on what's important.

Information overload is real, and time is too valuable a commodity to waste. You can survive in chaos; many people are even energized by confusion and stress. But over the long haul, you won't be able to use your limited time wisely if you work in a cluttered environment.

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