Starting from Scratch: Declutter one (electronic) space at a time

Written by Julie Desmond
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Disorganization happens. Sometimes in just one area; sometimes on a much larger scale. Lately, shows like Hoarders have really taken off. Earlier generations remember Sanford & Sons. There certainly are people in the world who live surrounded by stuff. Likewise, there are other people who watch those shows and pat each other on the back, saying, "Glad that's not us!"

Then those glad people flip open a laptop or snap on a computer and... can you hear the stuff crashing out of its virtual closets? They look at the computer and realize it's a mess! But instead of dealing with the problem, these virtual hoarders do what all hoarders do: they buy more storage and ignore or deny the real problem. Until the computer crashes and they get evicted from life as they know it and have to start over, having lost everything they ever regarded as valuable.

Clouds help; lost data can be recovered and restored. Search engines help; it is certainly easier to find something in a list of 3000 emails than in a pile of 3000 letters. But getting organized before the crash is key to a really satisfying, productive electronic life.

So, where do I start, you ask? Start from scratch. The way a person builds a house or bakes an apple pie: step by step, from the beginning. Fortunately, like a builder or baker, you can start from scratch without having to invent bricks or plant apple seeds. Bricks and apples are tools. Computer cleanup has tools, too. Many are already built into your computer programs; you just need to use them.

Start where you spend your time. If it's email, find out about folders... and delete buttons. Your delete button is your friend. If you save all your sent messages, and delete everything else after you've handled it, then you probably still have a record of each conversation, but it doesn't clog your inbox.

My friend takes pictures constantly. I asked her what she does with her photos, imagining all the creative and sentimental possibilities when one snaps a photo every 28 seconds. "Nothing," she said, adding, "I save them on the cloud." Tags? Labels? Folders? "Nope." Facial recognition software would help this photographer. Spending a rainy weekend adding tags to every photo is another option. Considering why one needs to document every living moment is a question in itself.

 Ask it.

Music enthusiasts are hoarders after my own heart. A music library is a thing I understand and appreciate. However, do you need to have every song you have ever owned available at your fingertips? There is fabulous software out there to organize your music. Use it. Every time you add something to your library, think about how you'll retrieve that song a year from now. Focus on keeping one or two categories up to date in your library, and finding things later will be simple and fast.

Start slow and stay committed. After thirty days of doing anything, it becomes a habit. Thirty days? You can handle that.

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