



Economic Toolbox

Organizing the Farm Office

An office is place where the affairs of a business are conducted. Under this definition, many farm offices are found in the milk house, at the kitchen table or in the cab of the pickup truck. A lot of farmers think they have a real office, but these rooms are really just a dry, out of the way place to accumulate paper. This type of farm office is usually large enough (no matter how small) to hold decades of paper before piles begin to topple. The filing system is chronologically-based (the deeper in the pile you go, the older the information).

Computers, printers and fax machines have really thrown a monkey wrench into the order of the traditional office. Suddenly, desks are too small, the work space is taken over by the computer, there are too few electrical outlets, and worst of all, the chronologically-based filing system (paper piles) have nowhere to go. A farm office that is cramped, cluttered and disorganized is not a place for managing the modern farm business. Marcia Ramsland, a professional office organizer from Pittsford, New York, lists reasons to organize your office and desktop. First, it has been shown that people can waste up to 20 minutes a day searching for things in an unorganized office. An organized office saves time, and reduces stress while looking for that #%!# piece of paper!! A structured office, desktop and paper flow improves productivity of the office worker, and gives him or her more self-respect and pride. An organized office also gives more credibility to you and your business. A business-like office has a positive affect on prospective employees, bankers and other business people you need to deal with and impress. The revolution in farm productivity and efficiency needs to extend into the farm's office. Here's how.

The "L" Design

If your office includes a computer and accessories, you should consider the "L" design

for your workspace. This configuration consists of two desks or work tables at right angles to each other (see figure). Tables should be large enough to hold your equipment and allow desktop space to spread out papers and books. Stay clear of inexpensive and small "computer" desks. They are just large enough to hold your computer, but do not provide an area for writing on, stuffing envelopes, taking notes on the telephone or holding worksheets.

The computer keyboard should be located on a moveable tray that can slide out of the way when not in use. These trays are also adjustable to allow for a comfortable typing position. Adequate lighting for your work area reduces eye strain and improves general atmosphere. The printer and fax machine should be within reach of your desk chair.

Paper Flow

It is important to recognize and establish a specific paper flow path in your office. A good paper flow will reduce the build-up of clutter and put an end to the "paper piles" problem. Generally, paper starts on one corner of the desk the "incoming corner", flows across the "clear work space" area and towards the "outgoing corner" of the opposite desk. The incoming corner is where mail and other papers begin their journey through your office. Concentrate on cleaning this area down to the desktop every day.

The clear work space area is the next stop in the paper flow. This is where mail is opened and read, notes taken, checks are signed, and the like. Once a piece of paper reaches the clear work space, some action must be taken. It may be thrown away, filed in the current activity file such as bills to be paid, filed in nearby reference files or put into the outgoing mail tray. Try to avoid the tendency to create a pile of paper to be filed at a later date. Creating another pile of papers to be files about doubles the number of times you have to handle each piece of paper flowing through your office. At the clear work space, decide on a destination and file it immediately. Empty your waste paper basket frequently, not just when it's full. An empty waste paper basket encourages its use. Concentrate on improving your paper flow and you will see a dramatic reduction in office clutter.

Filing

File cabinets and drawers can be separated into active files and reference files. Active files contain paper that is currently being used. This includes current bills, bank statements, reports, and correspondence. The active file drawer should be within reach of the clear work space without having to leave your desk chair. Reference files contain information that you may need at some later date such as magazine or newspaper clippings, legal documents, cancelled checks, income tax returns, and employee records. If it is possible to locate these files near your desk, you will be able to save time and energy in the filing and retrieval process. Newspapers and magazines go to a separate "to be read" pile. Articles of interest that you would like to save should be torn out and filed in your reference file cabinet. The rest of the magazine can be thrown away to reduce clutter.

Get Organized

Organizing your office does not need to be an expensive or time consuming process. Second hand desks, filing cabinets and tables correctly arranged can go a long way towards improving office efficiency on a shoe-string budget. Developing a paper flow and making a habit of following through the process with each piece of paper will stop new clutter from accumulating. To catch-up, start organizing the freshest piles of paper first. Take an extra 10 minutes per day and soon your office will be a place where you are proud to conduct business.