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Summer Cleaning: (Digital) Organizing Basics for Mathematicians

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Summer Cleaning: (Digital) Organization Basics for Mathematicians

Posted on 05/21/2015 by gkaraali

At the beginning of last summer I wrote about <u>a neat trick to make your summer a productive one</u>. And I heard from some of you who took me up on this suggestion; it seems that this actually works for many people! So, this year, for those who are willing to experiment with new ideas, I have another summer recommendation: Let us clean!

[A small warning: many time management and organization sites offer various products at a range of prices. However occasionally they will also provide free and yet still valuable content; the links in this post are only to such content.]

Spring cleaning is a must for <u>homemakers</u> and <u>fashionistas</u> alike; if you are obsessing over your pantry or your wardrobe, spring is a perfect time to take a good look at what you have hiding in there and clear the deck, in preparation for the coming months of summer. For the academic, too, this idea holds much promise. And I propose, May is often the ideal time to do this kind of thing. If your academic year ends in June, that is fine, too. Just hold on to this post till you are done, until all the exams are taken, all the grades are in, and all the undergraduates have left for home. Take a couple days off then, no less than two and no more than five, and then jump right into summer cleaning.

Let me be clear; I know that if you have traveling plans or if you are teaching or taking a course over the summer, you will have a limited time to dedicate to summer cleaning. That is actually a good thing. Indeed I'd suggest you build in some time constraints even if you do not have them to start with. For instance you may choose to dedicate forty-five minutes daily for five days a week over the course of four weeks to this task; alternatively, you might decide that you will dedicate five full days to summer cleaning and then that is it for this summer. No matter what you decide, do not allow this to take over the whole summer. Perhaps it is best to set a concrete deadline where you commit to stopping and make sure you stick with it.

Ok, so you will stop when your time is up, and so your deadline is set. Now what should you do? Here are the three key domains that you need to focus on:

- *Your workspace*: This is the first obvious step. If you are anything like me, by the end of the semester, you have piles of paper and stacks of books all around your desk. Ok, let me be honest, the stacks and piles may appear on any flat surface they can find, including shelves, old storage boxes, and even the floor. So start the summer with taming these first. First put the books to their proper place in your bookshelves. (If you do not have a shelving scheme for your books, that is fine, for now. We can think about that later. For now, we are just clearing the flat surfaces.) Next move on to the papers. Be brutally honest with yourself. Will you really need that menu from that Thai restaurant? Will you really reread that paper you skimmed through when prepping for your final lecture? Get rid of everything that you already have an electronic copy of somewhere. And if you do not, maybe you should use a scanner and make sure you have electronic versions. You might also need to obtain some new storage boxes if you need to save student exams or other such documents for the foreseeable future. However when in doubt, recycle.

Image source: WikiCommons. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recycling_symbol.

It is good for the bottle and it is good for the can. And it is definitely good for the paper. I have seen some quote the Pareto Principle to infer that you can get rid of at least 80% of the paper on your desk without any worries. Try to one-up Pareto and get to 99%!

- *Your email inbox*: You might have noticed that this post is subtitled *(Digital) Organization*. Here is where this digital component comes in. Some of you may have heard of Inbox Zero. Here is where to go for the original idea. And yes, this is what I will suggest you do for your summer cleaning. I know. It sounds crazy. You NEED all those eight thousand five hundred and forty seven emails in your inbox! And how could you possibly get it down to ZERO? But yes, zero is your hero and it is quite reachable! If you want a quick hack, you can simply create an ARCHIVE folder and move everything in your inbox to that folder. Yes, everything. And then your inbox is empty. Soon you will notice that you did not really need all those emails after all. And when you do need something, you will find that the search function on most mail programs is actually quite sophisticated.
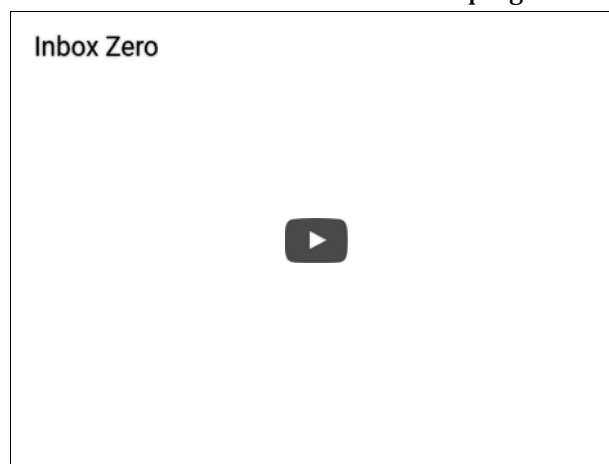
Merlin Mann's Original Inbox Zero video

Now if you do reach Inbox Zero, then I bet you will agree that yes, this is indeed the digital equivalent of Nirvana. But even in Nirvana, you are not done. You need to learn to maintain the new pristine inbox you have. To do this, you have to commit to moving everything in it to the ARCHIVE folder every month. Some could even figure out how to automate this. Other smart people have already done so, see for instance here and here. Of course you also need to get your email habits into some sort of shape as well. Or come next summer, you will be looking at another bloated inbox and decide that oh well, this did not work for you after all... I could attempt an email management post too, but the web is rich with many of these. Mathematician or not, the key features are the same: Routine review and quick processing. Here is a neat summary.

[Personally I do not do the mega-ARCHIVE thing that most productivity people recommend. I have my folders, and many many of them. I like to assign things to their appropriate bins and keep them there. For some reason, my brain gets immense satisfaction from knowing that at least some part of my life is well organized (even if the experts claim this is not optimal). Well, it works for me. And only you can decide what will work for you. You can live with one INBOX and one mega-ARCHIVE folder all your life, or like me, create a nested hierarchy of folders which is quite dynamic and fluid. Some ACADEMIC ACQUAINTANCES may move to FRIENDS, and occasionally I realize that a thread of emails with a specific person turns into a project which can sit in its own folder until the project is complete. You can probably see how this could easily get complicated or time consuming in its own right, but it works for me, so I will leave it as an option for those who find the mega-ARCHIVE idea totally abhorrent. The others should probably go with the experts.]

Now the trick about Inbox Zero is that it is addictive. Once you reach there, the feeling of relief and weightlessness is amazing. And then you want to do it again. And again. And again.

I have reached Inbox Zero for the first time in November 2012; I remember. And yes, I have fallen off the wagon many times. In fact today I have nine emails in my inbox and this moment it is bugging me a bit. But tonight, I know, I will get back down to Inbox Zero and I know it will be amazing. Again. You see, some addictions are healthier than others.

- *Your computer*:
  Ok, you have reached the Nirvana of Inbox Zero and you want more? I will next suggest you move on to your computer. It does not matter if you have a desktop or a laptop; if you have a computer that you call your own, or there is a computer account assigned to you that you use on a regular basis and you save your stuff in there in folders and such, then this applies to you. I am nothing close to organized, but I know my way around my computer, after much reorganizing, and so I will try and share with you some of the ideas that worked for me. So this summer, you can get started on a system that will work for you for many years to come.

  First off do you teach or take classes? You should definitely have a folder for all that stuff; mine is called TEACHING. You need another folder for Research (call it *Scholarship* if you like). You also need a folder for Lists, Notes, and References. If you sit down to think about this a bit, you will definitely come up with a good skeleton. Once you get started with your computer organization, things will shift around a bit, but eventually you will settle into a workable system.

  In case you are curious, in my desktop most of my stuff sits inside my DROPBOX folder, because I like a neat (read = empty) desktop. And here is a list of all my main folders:

- **Advising**: contains all student advising stuff, including a folder for mentoring resources.
- **Archival**: this isa temporary folder for me. It contains some leftover stuff from some of my old computers and is slowly being processed away.
- **Books**: This is where I put all electronic books I have. There are MATH BOOKS, TECH BOOKS, BOOKS ABOUT ACADEME, and OTHER BOOKS in there. This could easily go into the REFERENCES folder but I do look at the folder rather frequently so keep it out.
- **Completed Projects**: This is where all stuff I completed goes. It contains TALKS, WRITING PROJECTS, REVIEWS AND REFEREE REPORTS, COMMITTEE AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICE, among many others.
- **Departmental**: contains all documents relevant to conversations we had as a department. I also have another folder for college-wide documents.
- **Latent (possible future) Projects**: This is a life saver! I am one of those people who love starting new projects; new ideas appeal to me immensely. So in order to allow myself the room to dream and plan ahead, while also ensuring that I can focus on what is currently on my plate without stretching myself too thin, I start a new subfolder in this folder for each new interesting idea. They sit there until some room in my schedule is open and I then can move some of these selectively to the ONGOING PROJECTS folder.
- **Lists, Notes and References**: This folder contains three subfolders, expectedly titled LISTS, NOTES and REFERENCES. This is where I have the list containing addresses of people I need to send New Year Cards to, my family's packing checklist, other checklists (for travel and weekly shopping an so on), notes for my classes (these are simple text files where I just write down teaching ideas, what went right in class one day, what did not work that one time I tried it, and anything that I think could help me teach the class better next time), notes from conferences I went to, and reference folders containing videos I could use in class, math funnies, outreach ideas, health & fitness, tech resources and do on.
- **Ongoing Projects**: This is the folder I do most of my work in. It has subfolders for TALKS, MATH RESEARCH, OTHER WRITING, REVIEWS AND REFEREE REPORTS, COMMITTEE AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICE, and EDITING.
- **Research Planning**: Hopefully self-explanatory. This folder also contains my CV, GRANTS, and TENURE AND PROMOTION folders.
- **Teaching**: contains all teaching related stuff in my computer, with subfolders for each semester.
- **Web page**: contains a copy of my webpage files.

So clearly this will not be ideal for everyone but again, it works well for me. If you put your mind to it, surely you will eventually converge to a workable system. Why not let this summer be the time you get started on that?

Now if you find that you are done with all this and you want more (digital) organization suggestions, first I will ask that you check with yourself if this is an attempt at productive procrastination (which I have nothing against, in fact I do it all the time! But I just think you should be aware if that is what you are doing!) Then if you still want more, organizing and polishing your online presence may be a good next step. Organizing all the math stuff sitting in random places in your computer could be another. I will write about these individually. in the meantime, you can check out Organizing Your Digital Self for ideas.

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