

Putting Paperwork In Its Place



by
Iain Smith

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The Proliferation Of Paperwork.

The abundance of paperwork, in all its shapes and forms, writhing across workspaces in schools up and down the country, is a terrible, enthralling sight. You may well recognise only too well:

- The involuntary shudder as you glance at your in-tray.
- The internal shriek as another pile of marking thuds onto your desk.
- The resigned shake of the head as you awkwardly slide pastel coloured sheets out of your pigeon hole.

A Paper Free World?

Just a few short years ago futurologists, predicted the downfall and eventual extinction of paperwork. They were wrong.

A brief glance at any desk in any primary, secondary or FE college, provides clear evidence that paperwork is thriving. There is no danger of paperwork joining the Sumatran Rhino on the WWF critically endangered species list any time soon.

If anything it is quite the reverse.

In October 1859 Thomas Austin introduced 24 rabbits for hunting purposes to an unsuspecting and rabbit free Australia. There are now 200 million rabbits in Australia, responsible for untold ecological damage as well as millions of dollars of crop damage.

Paperwork is a modern day pest on a par with Australia's rabbits. Left unchecked, your documentation threatens to repopulate even more quickly than those initial 24 rabbits. And given chance that perilous paperwork will run amok, causing devastation and misery to all people and things that lie in its wake.

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Is It Really That Bad?

Okay, maybe the rabbit analogy is pushing it. But you already know that having less paperwork cluttering your desk is going to be helpful to you. It is instinctively clear, but let's be explicit about why getting rid of paperwork is a good thing.

It will help you:

Focus on each piece of work at a time. Many people think that multi-tasking is a sign of efficiency and being on top of their game. It's not. Multi-tasking is a myth anyway. The reality is that you're only ever properly focusing on one thing at a time, and while this is happening anything else that is in your workplace is just physical, visual and mental clutter.

Complete each piece of work before moving on to the next one. You are much more likely to achieve this while there is only the relevant piece of work out on your desk at the appropriate time. Even if you don't have the full amount of time to complete a larger task, putting it away while you are not working on it and then pulling it out again when it is time to revisit the job is still a much better way of working. You'll become more productive.

Feel like you are on top. Working on one job at a time sometimes feels like you are working more slowly, but very quickly you'll relish it because you'll actually end up on top of your work. Not necessarily completely on top (you're working in a school after all!), but much nearer the top than now. When you have fewer items out on your desk or in your in-tray, you are able to work more effectively and efficiently, and that feels great.

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Let go of your addiction to urgency. Having one job on the go at a time might take a while to get used to. You might even feel as though you aren't working hard enough or effectively, but this is a false feeling created by an addiction to urgency. That false feeling comes from being 'busy', not necessarily working effectively to completion. Check in with yourself to see if this applies to you.

Appear to others to be more in control. How you present yourself to others is very important for a number of reasons. Your sense of self esteem might be related to this. Your reputation amongst colleagues and other agencies may well depend on how you present yourself to them. Appearing organised, effective, efficient and productive will have a positive benefit for you, and perhaps rub off on others too, helping your whole organisation.

Incoming!

Paperwork arrives from many different sources and, although there are a number of ways to cut it down, you often have little control over which, and how much, paperwork comes your way.

If there is only a limited amount of control we have over how much documentation comes in, it makes sense to focus on how to deal with it most effectively when it is in our domain. Let's look at how to get through those piles of paper cluttering your desk.

A Light Touch Approach

The underlying idea is to focus on each document at one time, and to touch each document just once.

That sounds like a tall order. It is. But it can be done and done repeatedly. The best way of achieving this is by using a simple four step process called the **Four Ds**.

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The 4 Ds are:

D = Do It

D = Dump It

D = Delegate It

D = Defer It

Next time you get twenty, ten or maybe just five minutes to attend to that mountain of papers, this method will help you to effectively process the pile.

Let's look at each of the four Ds in turn.

The 1st D

D = Do It

This is very straightforward. Pick up the first piece of paper and ask yourself a question.

"Can I deal with this in less than two minutes?"

If the answer is yes, then do it straight away. No pauses, no distractions, no umming or ahing. Don't put it off because it is such a small job that can be done easily another time. Just do it now.

It might just be your signature required, a paragraph to read, a comment to make – any small task that can be completed in two minutes or less. If you can get it done in that amount of time, then do it.

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And then put the piece of paper where it needs to go. In the relevant file, in the out tray, in someone's pigeonhole. Wherever it needs to go, as long as it is no longer in your pile.

One deputy head I coached called Mike, employs a handy little mnemonic from the world of marketing to help him tackle the first D tasks.

"Mike. Just Do It."

Silly. Simple. Childlike. Oh, and incredibly effective for Mike at being a straightforward reminder to focus on the basic less than 2 minute task at hand and get it done. Mike then gives himself a mental tick / Nike swoosh.

You don't need to be called Mike to adopt this – just do it anyway. Or you might well not need a mnemonic to help you get on with the first D. In that case, just do it.

The 2nd D

D = Delegate It

If it is a document that is going to take longer than two minutes then you can't do the 1st D. You're onto the second question.

"Can I delegate it?"

Delegation is a complex and incredibly useful skill that, employed properly, allows for an abundance of team building properties; growth, empowerment, progress, trust and collaboration to name just a few.

Right now, however, we're purposefully being very basic. We're just asking:

"Should someone else be doing this thing?"

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If the answer is yes, then move it out of your possession as soon as you can. (Some of you will want to create a new pile of items that you intend to delegate. Be careful, that way danger lies!)

Decide who it is for and as quickly as possible go and give it to them.

That might mean walking out of your room and handing it to another person.

Or putting it in someone else's pigeonhole. You might even have to file it and then communicate to the other person what the task is and where it is.

The 3rd D

D = Defer It

Deferment is what the majority of your paperwork will require.

If the piece of paper is something that:

- will take more time than you have right now
- you have to do, but not now
- then there are two main ways of deferring it.

Defer to Tasks:

If the item is a task that you need to do later then get it out of your sight for now. While it is in view and you're not working on it, the document is just physical, visual and mental clutter.

What you can do is place it in a file. Most likely there is a file that is appropriate, and if so then that's where it goes. And you write the task down on your To Do list. (If you're not using a To Do list then please start using one now. No exceptions. And ensure that you prioritise it effectively.) That's it.

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I ensure that all my clients have the tasks on their To Do list prioritised and scheduled and so when it's time to do that task, then you go to the file and retrieve the relevant piece of paper.

Defer to a Diary/Calendar:

If the item is time sensitive then you might like to literally staple the paper into your diary on the page of the date when you'll need it. You'll always have it ready. I had a manager who did this for all of her paperwork. Her diary was wild and looked like a mess, but she was unbelievably organised and always on top of things.

Or you can again file the paper and make a note in your calendar. Once the date and time arrives, that's when you pull out the document.

The 4th D

D = Dump It

Or destroy it, delete it, defenestrate it, detonate it. Put it in the bin.*

If it is at all possible to get rid of the piece of paper, then this is the best option of all – because it's final. If it's gone, permanently gone, it's not likely to find a way back to you.

Did that last sentence fill you with a mild sense of panic? There's a worry most of us have about getting rid of stuff. We worry that if we get rid of it we'll cause chaos and disaster. Come on, how many times has that happened to you? Really?

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For 99% of the paper that comes your way someone else will have a copy of it. Either on email, on their hard drive or in their paper files. It's a make believe concern. In the name of effectiveness, efficiency and productivity I'd recommend erring on the side of recklessness. Take a walk on the wild side.

Think about how many tasks you've had on your to do list that you never actually got around to doing. Yes, it might have been frustrating but the earth carried on spinning didn't it?

So what would happen if you just dumped this one? Would anyone actually notice? Do they care? If they do aren't they likely to chase you up about it anyway?

If you drop ten 'iffy' paper tasks and only three people come back to you, what does that tell you about a) the person and b) the job they want you to be doing?

This is a perspective that may ruffle a few feathers. It is also an approach that can allow you to become ultra productive on the most important issues that come your way. Choose carefully which documents to be reckless with.

*(Of course there are exceptions – if you're a SENCO you probably won't get to use this D as much as other people can. But use your judgement.)

Prepare Yourself

Just a brief word before you set off with a renewed vigour to pacify your paperwork and discipline your documents. It's important to recognise that what you're doing is only processing them.

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For the most part, you're not actually going to be doing the thing that each piece of paper requires you to do. That distinction is an important mental shift that needs to be acknowledged. Without it you could actually work on processing your paperwork for twenty minutes, end up much more on top, but actually not *feel* as though you've made a dent in your documents.

A Final Word

I hope you find this booklet useful and that it makes a difference to your day to day working life. You can make more strides with paperwork and other areas about Time Management by attending my impactful Time Management INSET. I deliver Time Management courses for schools and colleges up and down the country, tailoring it for whole staff, teaching staff, SLT and solely Headteachers. There are more colouring in exercises for the HT only course.

"Following our really interesting training, I've changed my way of working - changing from having 42k emails in my inbox, to be being empty. Iain made the training really enjoyable and everyday I have to remind myself to, 'eat the frog' and get the job I least want to do, done first! Every job now fits into a different quadrant!"

- Andrew Wood, Assistant Head

Other popular INSETs I've written and deliver include *Stress & Resilience* and *Coaching Your Senior Leaders*. Call me now to enquire about INSET availability, or to find out how your Senior Leadership Team can benefit from working one to one with me throughout the academic year.

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"Iain has undoubtedly had an important role on my journey as a principal. Iain uses a variety of techniques to get underneath what makes you tick as a person. After digging deep he then, with precision, is able to facilitate the understanding, knowledge and skills needed to change in order to achieve and become the leader you wish to be. I would highly recommend Iain and can honestly say I would not be where I am today without his coaching."

- Andy Booth, Principal

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