

Sometimes even the professional organizer needs organizing.



Anne Marie Williams, owner of Atmosphere Consulting, was stressed from working so hard just to keep up with her calendar. She felt like there just weren't enough hours in the day. That's because there weren't.

She followed the advice she gives to clients and wrote out all the things she was trying to get done. As she added up the hours it would take to accomplish those tasks, she discovered that it was physically impossible to do what she was trying to do. That happens to a lot of small business owners.

"People beat themselves up because they're not doing enough," said Williams, who coaches many entrepreneurs on time management from her Braintree office. "But when you lay it out, you realize you can't get it done."

There will always be more to do than can be done in a single day, but it's not hopeless. There are several things entrepreneurs can do to grab hold of their time, regain control of their calendar and reduce stress.

The trick is to approach a busy schedule as you would a messy office. You need to sort through what you're trying to do and get rid of what you don't need so you can fit it all neatly into your schedule. "This is your container, there is only so much room," Williams said.

Start by defining your goal as a small business owner. Do you want more family time? Are you trying to rapidly build the business to sell it? This helps you determine which activities are most important.

Next, list everything you are trying to do, all the meetings, all the calls, all the tasks needed to keep your business in business. You may also want to include your personal obligations.

"Get it all out of your head," said Standolyn Roberts, founder of Things in Place, based in Waltham and president of the National Association of Professional Organizers. Then you can start to prioritize and purge.

Look at each activity as you would an object in your office. Does it help your business? Does it make you happy? Can you outsource it or delegate?

After reviewing her to-do list, Williams hired a virtual assistant to handle calls and schedule appointments when she is busy with clients.

"I didn't have time to do it properly and it made me feel bad," she said.

Once you decide what you are going to keep on the list, figure out when it should happen. Make sure you leave room for planning and travel. Designate time for weekly tasks such as bookkeeping.

Roberts does her office work on Tuesday afternoons. She is very strict about not setting up appointments with clients during her office time so that she can preserve her routine. She also takes off Friday afternoons, which fits her work/life balance priority.

Roberts also recommends putting to-dos on your calendar rather than leaving them on a long list.

"The biggest mistake I see people making with their time is making these giant to-do lists and then getting two things done and then beating themselves up because they can't get it all done," she said.

Credit: By JENNIFER HELDT POWELL

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