

# Faculty Development

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## Getting Organized

An e-newsletter of organizing tips for faculty members. February 2007.

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*"Clearing the inbox imbues you with a sense of control and the feeling that you have no unfulfilled email obligations that you haven't put into motion using a trusted filing system."*

-- Gina Trapani, author of *Lifehacker: 88 Tech Tricks to Turbocharge Your Day*

→ Some pages will open in a new browser window. M. D. Anderson does not endorse external sites.

Gina Trapani, author of *Lifehacker: 88 Tech Tricks to Turbocharge Your Day*, has written what she proclaims as a "self-help guide for the over-wired and the overwhelmed." A devotee of David Allen's *Getting Things Done*, Trapani provides tips, tricks and references to improve productivity, just like the website. For those of us with Lotus Notes (like us M.D. Anderson types), the book focuses on Microsoft Outlook, but there are many tips in her book that are universal. Her book was featured in a recent [Newsweek issue](#).

The term "life hack" was created by tech journalist Danny O'Brien, who interviewed many techie types who seemed to successfully cope with the interruptions of modern life. O'Brien discovered their creative secrets, and the term "life hack" to describe those creative techies and a website were born. Trapani began the [Lifehacker website](#) in 2005. Take a look at a condensed version of her book [online](#).

### Hack 1: Email Your Future Self

Using a system like Yahoo calendar, Google calendar, or something else similar, you can email or text message yourself about upcoming events. So if you always miss a birthday or anniversary, send yourself a message a few days ahead as a reminder. In Yahoo, log in and click on Calendar. Then click on "Add Events." You fill in the information, such as event type, date, time, and whether it's a repeating event. On the reminder section, you can choose to send a reminder to Yahoo Messenger, your email or phone. There's even space to include an address and phone number so you can order those flowers for Mom's birthday.

Trapani also uses this system to set up quarterly, monthly, bi-weekly or weekly reminders for tasks. Some of her tasks include: water plants, schedule a haircut, mail out taxes, and even save money for an upcoming vacation.

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### Hack 9: Reduce Email Interruptions

Like *Crazybusy* author Dr. Edward Hallowell, Trapani also suggests checking email two or three times a day and turning it off when not looking at it. Change the email setting for the system to check for unread email once an hour instead of every five minutes.

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### **Hack 11: Build a No-Fly Zone**

Modern office space -- filled with cubicles, the partial wall, and side-by-side desks -- creates interruptions. To protect yourself from interruptions, she suggests:

- Forward your phone to voicemail and silence your cell phone.
- Turn off Instant Messenger or set it to "busy."
- Turn off email or turn off the sound on your computer.
- Schedule an appointment with yourself on your calendar to show that you're busy for those who look at your calendar.
- Use noise-cancelling headphones.
- Have a pre-determined signal, such as a sign posted for when you're working on a big project.
- Come earlier or stay later to make it easier to get work done.
- Use a change of venue. To really focus, take everything into a small conference room where you can close the door and spread everything out.

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### **Hack 43: Craft Effective Messages**

Create a better subject line to guide your readers. Just glance at these subject line examples and see which emails are more urgent and need your attention.

- QUESTION: Take Monday off?
- IMPORTANT: Proj. deadline is 2 p.m.
- FYI: President's Day Holiday
- REQUEST: Pls send me budget figures

Some conversation threads in email go on to become completely different subjects, but the subject line may not change. If you are sent an email with a misleading or poor subject line, change the subject line when you reply.

Keep your email missives short and sweet to increase the likelihood someone will read it. Use bullets or line breaks to write multiple questions and points. This makes it easier to read than long paragraphs.

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### **Hack 46: Decrease Your Email Response Time**

When checking email, respond in batches by keeping email hours. This cuts down on constant inbox monitoring. Start with the oldest email first. Using The One-Minute Rule, respond to any messages that will take a minute or less to respond to.

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### **Hack 47: Empty Your Inbox (and Keep It Empty)**

Trapani and David Allen use similar methods in processing email. Both advocate using the inbox for only new emails and processing the rest. Trapani created her "trio" method: three folders named Action, Archive and Hold.

- **Action** -- Stash emails here if there is a task you need to complete, a reply that will take longer than a minute to write, and any type of action you need to complete.
- **Archive** -- Any email you want to keep as part of your "reference library" goes here. Trapani prefers this over creating several different folders since she opts to do a search for the email

she needs. If you already have a good filing system in place on your email, keep it.

- **Hold** -- This is similar to Allen's "waiting for" folder. Park anything here that you're waiting to hear back on or that you will need immediate access to for a few days, such as a big project nearing deadline.

The Trio method requires you actually open the Action and Hold files. Otherwise, you're stashing emails away, and it becomes a case of out of sight, out of mind. "Commit to making a decision about the fate of every message you read in the inbox on the spot," Trapani writes. "Whether you respond immediately or file it in Action, Archive, or Hold, never leave a message in your inbox; you want that space for future incoming mail -- because there will always be more." And that's one piece of truth we can always count on.

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### **Hack 34: Carry Your Life on a Flash Drive**

As a backup, use your flash drive to store data, such as your to-do list, address book, passwords, any multimedia, office documents, website bookmarks, web browser configurations, etc. Encrypt anything sensitive with a password. Create a simple (and unencrypted) text file called ReturnIfLost.txt with your contact information in case you lose it.

The book recommends encrypting software, such as [TrueCrypt](#) or [Steganos Locknote](#). For complete instructions, please check out the book or follow the directions on the website. If you're not good at technical details, talk to your resident computer expert.

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### **Assorted Hacks)**

Other tips include:

- Clean your desktop and delete those shortcuts of programs you never use. This does not delete the main program, which has to be deleted through the Control Panel.
- If you only listen to MP3 players, box up your CDs and get them out of your way.
- Unsubscribe to blogs, list serves, e-newsletters, and anything else that you no longer want to receive.
- Regularly back-up your files and defrag your hard drive to clean it up. At the work place, please contact your computer technicians for more information. At home, follow the instructions in your computer manual. Defragging is time consuming so you may want to schedule it for a time when you're not using your computer.

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### **Got Clutter?**

I have developed 15-minute, 30-minute and 45-minute presentations on organizing and time management. Moving to a new building? I also have a 15-minute presentation on preparing for a move for your department.

I also do one-on-one sessions in your office and help you come up with a solution. To schedule a presentation or a one-on-one appointment, call (713) 792-8061 or e-mail [Janice Simon](#) (jsimon@mdanderson.org).

To subscribe to this newsletter, e-mail [Janice Simon](#) (jsimon@mdanderson.org).

*Happy Organizing!*

-- Janice

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