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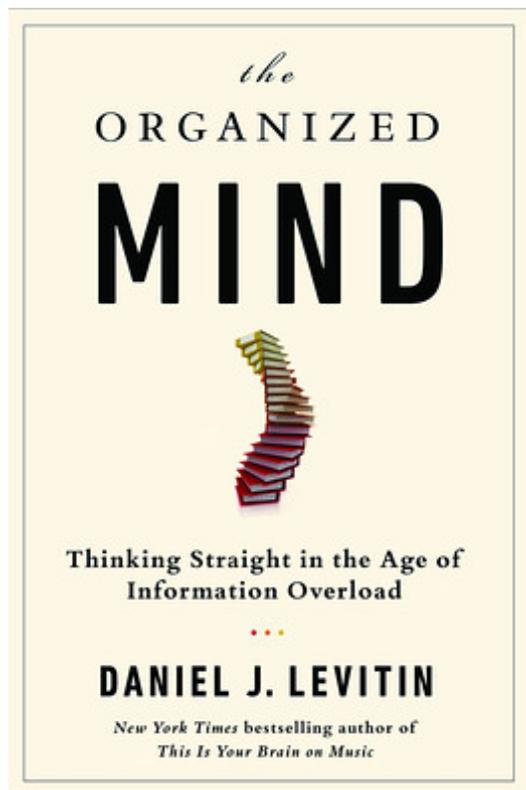
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Ten Tips on Organizing Your Mind, from Dr. Daniel Levitin

By Lucy Feldman



— Dutton

The neuroscientist that brought us bestsellers “This is Your Brain on Music” and “The World in Six Songs” has turned his attention to the problem of organization. **Dr. Daniel Levitin’s** new nonfiction book, “**The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload,**” combines scholarly research and interviews with people like **Michael Bloomberg, George Shultz** and **Sting** with practical tips on how to organize our homes, social lives, time and more. “Neuroscientists have learned a lot about the brain and organization and productivity, but it hasn’t trickled down to the average reader,” he says. “My aim was to bring the science to the average person.”

Here are ten tips on organization from Dr. Levitin based on his book, which will be released by Dutton tomorrow.

1. Take breaks. What do air traffic controllers and simultaneous translators for the United Nations have in common? Their jobs are so stressful, they're mandated to operate on "duty cycles" of time on and time off. Increasingly, we all feel bombarded at work. Try a 15-minute break every hour or two. "That walk around the block, that fresh air, is going to help you work more quickly and effectively when you get back," he says. One study showed overtime workers suffer from profound diminishing returns—for every extra hour, they achieved only 20 minutes' worth of work.

2. Set up different computer monitors for different activities. "[There's a] biological mechanism in the hippocampus for remembering where important things are," Dr. Levitin says. Studying for an exam in the testing room helps a student perform better, and visiting the crime scene will help a witness remember more. For office workers juggling multiple activities at a time, physical separation can help mental organization. "You're using your spatial memory now to tell you where to look," he says.

3. Embrace a (modified) paper to-do list. "Computer scientists talk about serial access versus random access, and this is an important concept for finding things," Dr. Levitin says. If a VHS tape represents serial access—you have to fast-forward through everything to get to the scene you want—a DVD represents random access—you can skip right to the part you need. A to-do list typed into a computer or phone usually forces you to go through the less efficient process of serial access. "Your eyes have to pass ones in the beginning to get to the ones in the middle," he says. Dr. Levitin recommends writing to-dos on small pieces of paper like index cards, then making piles based on priority—a technique used by Sheryl Sandberg. You can "rejigger" the cards with ease, he says, and making physical piles frees up your attention for the task at hand.

4. File correspondence in multiple ways. If your inbox sometimes feels like the Times Square of the Internet, it can help to file each thread of correspondence in more than one category—a technique shared by executive assistants and the White House, Dr. Levitin says. Keep track of President Obama's emails in a designated Obama file, as well as the files dedicated to the specific committees, meetings and projects he's writing about. When using an email program that allows tags, mark each message as it comes in with all possible relevant tags. And if you have a phone call with Mr. Obama that you'll need to remember later, send yourself a quick email about it, then file and tag it as if it's a message directly from him.

5. Purge, when needed. When inboxes, "review later" files and stacks of papers on our desks pile up past the point of return, sometimes it's okay to simply "hit throw it all away." Some people declare "email bankruptcy," delete everything and write to all their contacts asking to please try again if whatever they sent is still important. Dr. Levitin himself doesn't purge in the same way, but he does box up old, related items in his office once a year or so and simply file them away.

6. Designate time for short tasks and longer projects. Some tasks take weeks, and some only a few minutes, and you shouldn't switch back and forth between them all day long. "The research says you shouldn't intersperse these little things," Dr. Levitin says. Instead of reviewing your inbox every time you get a new message alert, allocate only a couple blocks of time each day to respond to all your messages.

7. Don't spend more time on a decision than it's worth. A CEO won't take an hour to decide whether to switch office supply companies in order to save a couple dollars. "Figure out what your time is worth or what you and your company stand to gain or lose, and figure out how much time it's worth investing in the decision," Dr. Levitin says.

8. Sleep, and nap on the job. "The fundamental finding about sleep from neuroscience in the last 10 years is that it's necessary to form memories," he says, and memory is essential to our work and social lives. "If you don't get a good night's sleep, the events of the day are not properly encoded in memory." Companies like Google and Safeway have even set up nap rooms: You gain in efficiency and problem-solving ability more than what you lose in time spent on a 10-20 minute nap, he says.

9. Don't over-organize. "The obvious rule of efficiency is you don't want to spend more time organizing than it's worth," Dr. Levitin says. "If you're finding things quickly enough as it is, then don't go to all the trouble."

10. Leave work at work. "I don't want it to sound like I'm proposing we all become androids," he says. "I'm talking about being able to do what you want to do in your work time so you have more time for spontaneity, leisure and social and artistic pursuits." People who spend time at home thinking about work and vice versa can feel disconnected and experience less enjoyment. "When you're at work, be fully at work," Mr. Levitin says. "And let your leisure time be what it's meant to be—restorative and fun."

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