

# Creating Order Out of Chaos

*Strategies for organizing your work*



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**“The mere existence of knowledge  
somewhere in the organization  
is of little benefit;  
it becomes a valuable corporate asset  
only if it is accessible,  
and its value increases  
with the level of accessibility.”**

*Working Knowledge*  
Thomas Davenport and Laurence Prusak



# Knowledge Management: A Competitive Advantage

*Organizations are striving to leverage their knowledge resources to spur innovation and success in the new economy. To individual workers, this means that being able to manage their information resources is vital to success.*

## **Chaos...**

In his best-selling management handbook, *Thriving on Chaos*, Tom Peters portrays many of the challenges facing organizations at the close of the 20th century. Rapid and continuous change. Unpredictability everywhere and always. Unprecedented competitive pressure. The race to innovate. The need to go beyond *managing* change to *thriving* on it — thriving on a seemingly chaotic economic environment. And all this was before the Internet exploded onto the scene, accelerating the rate of change and turbulence in the marketplace.

To thrive on this chaos, organizations are increasingly looking to leverage the power of ideas as the engine of innovation. Only by managing all the knowledge resources in the organization — the ability to “know what it knows,” in the words of former Hewlett-Packard CEO Lew Platt — can a company keep up with competitive pressures, the unpredictability, and the speed of change. Knowledge management is now recognized as key to organizational success.

Knowledge management involves virtually every aspect of an organization, from systems and processes to culture and people. It has to do with generating new ideas and fostering learning, as well as making knowledge and information accessible to individuals throughout the organization. For, as Davenport and Prusak point out, knowledge gains value as a corporate asset only to the extent it is accessible.

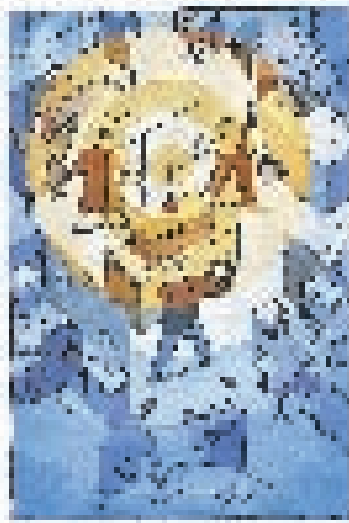
In many ways, making information and knowledge accessible begins and ends with the individual. To fully contribute to their company’s drive to innovate and compete, everyone in the organization has to “know what they know” — take in enormous amounts of information and keep track of it so they can access what they need and share it with others. This calls for bringing a level of order to a chaotic, information-flooded environment.

# Knowledge Management: A Competitive Advantage

*(continued)*

## **...and order**

“Getting organized” has traditionally been associated with finding “a place for everything and everything in its place.” We talk about storage — putting things away in containers, drawers and cabinets, out of sight, out of the way. Emphasis is often on aesthetics rather than function — a “clean desk” represents a disciplined person. Messy desks reflect, well, messy minds. It’s no wonder many people begin to feel anxious when the subject of “organizing” comes up.



What happens if we consider organizing the work environment as a strategy for thriving on chaos? If we shift emphasis from *storing* information to a focus on *managing* our knowledge resources effectively? What if we say that how your office appears to others — tidy or messy — isn’t necessarily a reflection of your effectiveness? In fact, what’s important is one thing: can you access what you need when you need it — and keep the explosion of information coming your way from overwhelming your ability to work effectively?

Recent research on how people manage information in the workplace has helped to identify common strategies. It also validates ways individuals tailor these strategies to accommodate their styles of working. A clear understanding of successful organizing strategies — and how to apply them in individual and group work environments — is key to helping individuals and organizations fully leverage what they know. It turns out that thriving on chaos has a lot to do with knowing how to thrive on order.

# The Organizing Challenge

*Today's workers have more to manage in less time — and often less space. Few are adequately prepared to take full advantage of the explosion of knowledge and information that is so vital to their organization's success.*

## More stuff

Workers today are inundated with information, more than we can readily absorb and manage. Because we have more “in-coming” we need to spend more time organizing — finding a place to put things and being able to locate them when they're needed.

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*Average number of messages received in a day by the typical U.S. office worker*

1997	1999	
32	52	phone calls
14	36	e-mails
11	23	voice mails
N/A	18	postal mail packages
N/A	18	interoffice mail packages
9	14	faxes
6	13	Post-it® notes
4	8	pager messages
2	4	cell phone calls
N/A	3	Express Mail™ packages

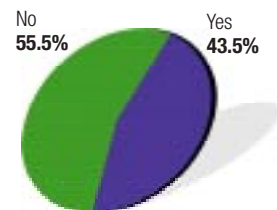
Pitney Bowes, 1997, 1999

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Despite the enormous capabilities of electronic media, paper abounds. We print multiple hard copies of e-mail notes, attachments, and Internet articles: one for the project binder, one for the road. In fact, according to a recent Xerox study, “Ninety percent of all documents, no matter how they are created, today are eventually printed out... that represents a fourfold growth in paper page volume.”

The 1998 Steelcase Workplace Index Survey confirms this paper explosion. On average, today's workers say they store more than a third of all information on paper only, with an additional 20 percent stored on paper as well as electronically.

*Where do we put all this paper? How do we find it when we need it?*



Is e-mail reducing the volume of paper in your central filing system?

www.fmmlink.com,  
February 2000

# The Organizing Challenge

*(continued)*

There's not just more paper and more information, but the size and shape it takes varies widely. Increasingly, the resources we depend on include DVDs and CDs, floppy disks and videotapes. We need to manage oversized items such as budget sheets, binders, floor plans, drawings and a host of other items.

*How do we manage all of the bits and pieces?*

## **Changing work**

Workers in virtually any occupation have more responsibility, more tasks to juggle in less time. We open files, write "to do" lists, update calendars and pile up papers from previous meetings — all while talking on the phone or checking e-mail. This multi-tasking may be efficient, but it inevitably creates a mess.

Other changes in how we work affect our ability to manage the information that we need. We work on multiple projects, playing a variety of roles while working solo or in teams and groups. We work here, there and everywhere. Some of us change workspaces so often we don't even bother to unpack; we live out of "move" boxes. We need to be able to access resources and share information with co-workers as we move from task to task, from project to project and from place to place.

*How do we keep on top of the variety of resources we need for the variety of work we do?*

## **New demands on workplaces**

Competitive pressures and the changing nature of work have led organizations to take a closer look at their workplace investment. Many are reducing the size of individual workspaces — in some cases, as a simple cost-cutting measure. Others are reallocating space to better support evolving ways of working. For example, as space for group work has increased, individual workspace size tends to decrease. This means that office workers must use their workspaces, including storage, more efficiently than ever before.

*How can we organize more in less space?*

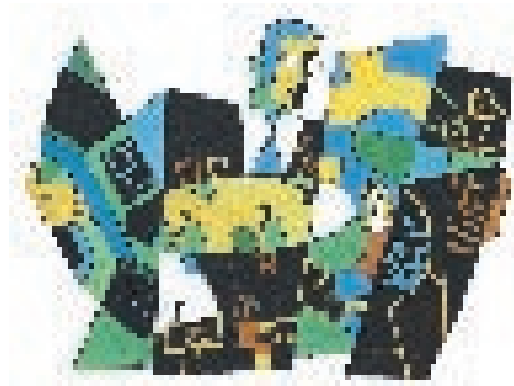
### **A human-centered approach**

Clearly, staying organized today is a greater challenge than in the past. Each day, American office workers spend an average of 20.1 minutes just organizing their work areas, according to the 1998 Steelcase Workplace Index Survey.

What can be done to help individual workers manage the wealth of knowledge resources available to them... so they can perform more effectively and support the work of others in their organization?

Any approach to addressing these issues needs to start with individual people. Today's workers need opportunities to learn organizing skills and how to develop their own best practices for managing their resources. High-performance workspaces then can be designed to support these practices.

Let's review some key approaches for organizing in today's workplace.



# Organizing is Strategic — and Personal

*People use the same basic patterns for organizing, whether it's at home or at work. But how they apply them and what their organizational systems look like is a matter of personal style.*

## Pilers and filers

Organizing your work environment isn't really as daunting as it may seem. In some ways, it's a matter of applying basic organizing approaches we use every day.

For example, we use an array of *strategies* to organize our home lives. We place all the food-related items in the kitchen; we store tools and repair supplies in the utility closet, basement or garage. Within these domains, we tend to sort things according to how we use them: in the kitchen, we place breakfast food on one shelf, snacks on another, pots and pans below. We place items we use all the time either out on the counter or in an easy-to-reach spot on a shelf or in a cabinet.



To better understand how people organize, Steelcase commissioned primary research in numerous home, work, retail and industrial settings.

There are countless *tools* that help us organize our home environment — closet organizers, entertainment centers, CD racks and peg boards. These products are designed to help us locate things when we need them — and keep them out of our way when we don't.

Why not apply some of this organizing logic to the workplace?

In fact, when we study how people manage information in the workplace, we can identify some universal patterns — strategies everyone uses in one form or another. This paper describes several of these strategies. But it's important to keep in mind as we consider common patterns of organizing that individuals apply them in their own way, to accommodate their personal style of working.

People have varied ways of thinking, taking in information and working; not surprisingly, they tailor their organizing strategies and environment accordingly. For example, some people work best by keeping their work visible — arranging *piles* of work materials in plain view throughout their workspace. Where they locate a pile helps them recall what's in it. Keeping the work visible also helps them keep track of what they have to do.

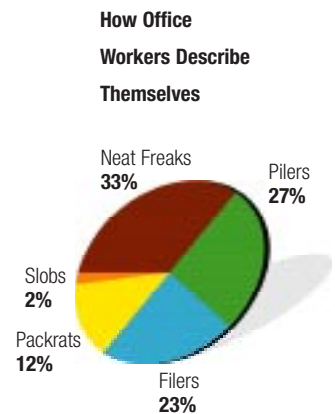


In contrast, *filers* work best when the desktop is clear of everything except what they're currently working on. What's on top of their desks provides focus for them; clutter distracts them. They keep things they're currently not working on out of sight, relying on alphabetical, numerical or other ordering systems to keep track of them.

Both styles — filing and piling — help people mentally organize their time, tasks and materials; each calls for a different type of workspace design.

The “best practice” for organizing is one that reflects your way of thinking and doing. Regardless of the approach, keep in mind that your personal method of organization should help you:

- *Separate useful, relevant information from “stuff.”* More is not better. Nor is less. Relevant and useful is better.
- *Find what you need when you need it.* Conventional wisdom holds that orderly files are better than “messy” stacks. But the true measure isn't aesthetics — it's whether the approach helps you find things when you need them.
- *Share information.* It is becoming more and more important to share information — in your workspace, in team spaces and in group storage areas.



Organizing Your Workspace,  
Steelcase Workplace  
Index Survey, 1998

# Strategies for Organizing

*Organizing your workspace involves setting goals, forming collections, staging your work and materials, and “mapping” the territory.*

## **Assess your organizing goals**

How can you develop your best practice, your individual approach to organizing? Start “inside,” says Julie Morgenstern, a professional organizing consultant and author of the best-selling book, *Organizing from the Inside Out*:

Successful organizing forces you to look at the big picture, not one small section of the frame, so that the system you design will be complete. It is a nurturing process that helps you focus on discovering what is important to you and making it more accessible, rather than haranguing you to throw out as much as you can and organizing what’s left over.

Morgenstern suggests starting by completing the following statements:

I can never find \_\_\_\_\_.

I have no place to put \_\_\_\_\_.

There’s no room for \_\_\_\_\_.

I am tired of \_\_\_\_\_.

I can’t \_\_\_\_\_ because of the clutter.

I’m losing money on \_\_\_\_\_.

The disorganization makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_.

When people visit, I \_\_\_\_\_.

This self-assessment is a simple tool to get you thinking about what's important to you, what's driving the need to organize and what you want to get out of an organizing system. Setting goals is critical to tailoring the organizing system to the individual, according to Frank Doezema, Steelcase product manager, storage. "There's no 'one size fits all' for organizing. As long as you can work effectively and access your resources efficiently, that's organized enough."

As you consider some of the organizing strategies that follow, your responses to this self-assessment can help you develop a system that best meets your personality, needs and goals.

### **Assess the resources you need**

With your goals in mind, the next step is to do "spring cleaning" — take a broad look at all of your "stuff" and decide which resources you need to keep and which can be disposed of or "donated" to others. A few questions can guide your decision-making process:

- When was the last time I used this information?
- Is this material current?
- Will I be using it in the near future?
- Is this material relevant to my primary area of responsibility?
- Is someone else in the organization responsible for keeping this information?

These questions can help you hone down the materials you need to organize, and help you think about options. What do I need to keep in my own space? What could be kept in group space? What material should be passed on to others? What can I pitch?

# Strategies for Organizing

(continued)

## Consider how you sort your materials

Once you've purged the extraneous materials, think about how you sort everything you have and everything that you receive. Although the specific approach each person takes is individual, the basic process — organizing related materials into *collections* — is common to all. Paying attention to how you create collections and the kinds of collections you use can help you create a work environment that works for you.

As we take in increasing amounts of information daily, it's easy to become overwhelmed. In extensive interviews and observations of office workers, Thomas Malone of the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center found that a key reason for this difficulty is that workers just don't know what to do with everything that keeps flowing in. There's not always an obvious "home" in our workspaces for all the valuable and useful information that comes in.

In an effort to deal with the mass of materials, we tend to "chunk" them into very broad categories, placing each chunk in a pile: "interesting information on emerging issues," "do this now," "get to this by the end of the week," etc. A "chunk" might consist of all of the materials from a recent professional development conference. Often, these collections consist of materials of all shapes and sizes: project binders, videotapes, floor plans, survey results, a CD-ROM, books, etc.

"Chunking" doesn't stop with the first broad sort. Take, for example, the "interesting information on emerging issues" pile. As the pile grows and time passes, you may find various patterns of information forming — or new uses for it. Several of the pieces may concern an issue that connects directly to a new project you've begun, so you add them to the other materials you are gathering for that project. In other words, you create a new *collection* for that project.

Or, you may find you have a half-dozen pieces related to another issue and decide to start a reference file — a collection based on that topic. Over time, you may decide to pitch a few articles that no longer seem relevant to your work. Similarly, you might eventually sort different studies from the “recent conference” collection into existing project collections, pass along a document to a co-worker and post a helpful “tips” sheet next to the computer.

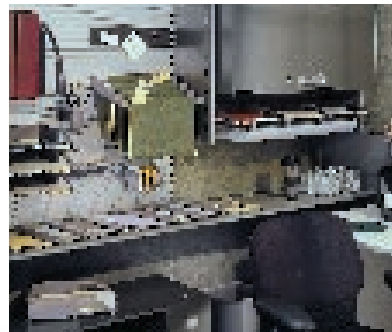
Organizing materials into collections is an effective way to handle new information, even before you know quite what to do with it. Those initial, very broad collections serve as a kind of filter, allowing you to distill the information you need from the rest.

Grouping things into meaningful categories or collections is not new; it’s one of the most basic forms of creating meaning out of chaos — of getting organized. Whether you’re a piler or a filer, your workspace can be designed to help you keep up.

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**Workspace Tip**

Think about using furniture and worktools to help you “de-layer” things on your desk. Sort stuff that’s piling up into shallow or more visual groupings above, below or next to your primary worksurface.



# Strategies for Organizing

*(continued)*

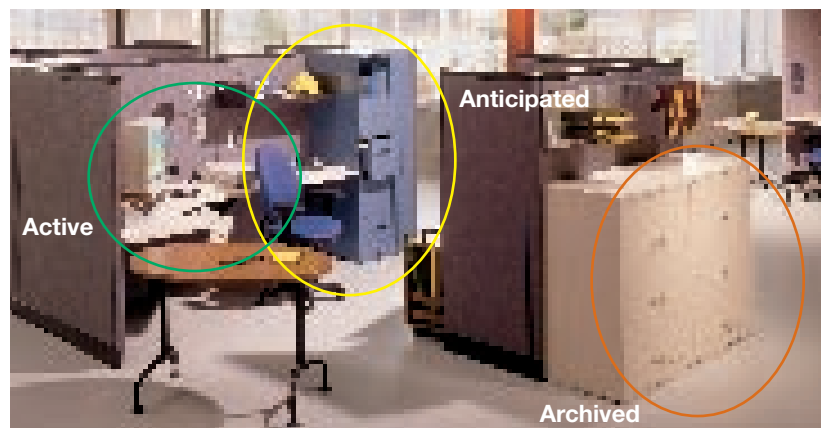
## **Stage your materials based on how you use them**

Once you've identified how you sort your materials to support your work, think about how you want to arrange them in your workspace — where you want to locate them. Extensive Steelcase research, in partnership with organizations ranging from product and architectural design firms to research institutes, shows that workers tend to “stage” materials in their workspace based on frequency of use and urgency.

At home, we tend to find a convenient spot for things that we use often or things we can't afford to forget. We might post the family schedule on the refrigerator. We put lighter jackets toward the front of the closet in summer, storing winter coats and hats out of the way. Things we rarely use usually end up in the basement.

People apply a similar organizing approach at work. We place urgent material and information we're currently working on in our main work area. We keep what we plan to use soon or materials we reference frequently nearby, usually where we can see it and reach it. And we store things we rarely need in places farther away.

In other words, we stage information into different areas or zones, based on how often we use it. Steelcase calls these zones Triple A — active, anticipated and archived.



Since work is a fluid process, information and materials move continuously from one zone to another. For example, a file may be currently in use (active), set aside for a meeting scheduled later in the week (anticipated) and then stored (archived) when the project is complete.

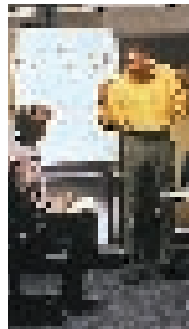
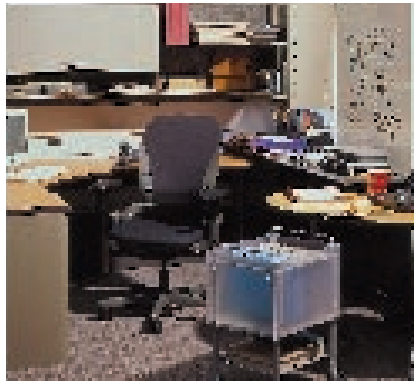
The same logic applies to group work. We need to be able to take active materials to the group space, to access shared reference materials while working together, as well as store background materials in a place accessible to all.

The work environment can be tailored to support these zones. The size and shape of each zone will vary with each person's or each team's organizing approach and the unique type of work they do. But most people find that when you have the right support for each zone — and for moving materials between zones — information becomes a whole lot easier to manage and thus more useful.

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### Workspace Tips

An *active zone* may center around your computer; another could be a mobile table where you review materials, read and make notes. Mobile carts and shelving provide easy access to *anticipated* materials — high-priority items that you use frequently.



Use mobile markerboards to allow information to exist — and persist — in more than one zone. So work in progress can be moved from zone to zone.



Store background materials and items for future reference in an *archived zone* — outside your personal workspace.

# Strategies for Organizing

*(continued)*

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## **Conceal or Reveal**

As you organize materials, it's helpful to think about what you want to keep visible and what can be put away, out of sight. The decision to conceal or reveal materials can reflect personal style, the nature of the material or organizational culture.

For example, organizing materials by piling them on top of worksurfaces often has to do with the individual's desire to use visual cues to stay organized. "‘Pilers’ tend to say they like stacks because they can see their work — what's active and what's coming up — and that reminds them of what they have to do," explains Anne Saliers, Steelcase product manager, storage. "They tend to live by the 'out of sight, out of mind' philosophy."

"Many filers, on the other hand, find piles and clutter distracting and are perfectly comfortable and competent relying on their individual system for organizing most anticipated and archived materials — out of sight, in drawers and cabinets."

In addition to individual style questions, other factors help determine whether materials should be visible or concealed:

- Valuable, sensitive or confidential materials may require secure storage.
- Information that needs to be shared may call for a more visible location — on top of a worksurface or shelf, or displayed on vertical surfaces.
- Organizational "clean desk" policies impact whether materials can be left out in the open after work hours.

Thinking about what information and materials you wish to keep visible and what you want kept behind closed doors helps you assess the kinds of display, worksurfaces, organizational work tools, shelves and cabinets you will need in each of your work zones.

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## **Consider ways of finding what you need**

Setting goals, purging and sorting information into collections, staging your work materials — and supporting these processes with a work environment tailored to your style of information management — can go a long way toward keeping you organized. Next, it's important to think about how you — and, if necessary, others — can navigate through your information system.

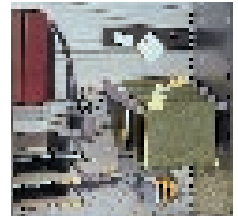


When you ask people where they keep things in their workspaces, they'll inevitably draw you a verbal "map": "I keep the to-do pile on the left of my telephone"; "I pile reading materials on the floor near the door"; "the over-sized drawings are rolled up in the corner"; etc. Mental maps are a very basic approach we all use to remember where things are.

In many cases, mapping works just fine. If you're the only one who needs to find the information, and your "map" gets you to the information you need, then the system works. But mapping has its limitations simply because the map is invisible, residing only in your head. The sheer quantity of information and materials challenges people's ability to remember where everything is — without cues. And if someone else needs to access information in your workspace when you're not there, how do they know where to look?

Visual coding and labeling can help. If you have sorted your materials into logical collections, you can easily use color, size, shape or texture to *code* them, to signal what goes together and to differentiate one collection from another. For example, your personnel files might be in red folders and binders while all of the materials you have gathered for the new business development project are contained in yellow folders. Coding makes it easier for you — and others — to see your organizational system.

When mapping and coding aren't enough — and especially when materials need to be shared — labeling is necessary. Place specific content cues on labels when you need to differentiate between several like objects — say, you have 20 yellow file folders containing background documents related to the new business development project. Developing an effective coding and labeling scheme not only helps you and others find things, it also can make it easier to return materials to the right place after they've been used.



#### **Workspace Tip**

Use color-coding and labeling to more easily find things and return them to the right place.

# Try These Tips

*Here are some things you can do to organize your work environment.*

1. **Purge** materials that you don't use or that others are responsible for keeping.
2. **Screen** incoming information by having your name taken off low-value mailing lists.
3. **Convert** electronic information to paper only when necessary.
4. **Handle** information right away and only once. At least keep it moving by "chunking" it into broad categories until you can determine how to further organize it.
5. **De-layer** the worksurface: take things that are piling up and move them to labeled trays mounted vertically or shallow open shelves; free up desk space by hanging your phone, pencil pots, clip holders, files, etc. on a nearby vertical surface.
6. **Think** in zones (active, anticipated, archived). Get anticipated materials out of your active zone and archived materials out of your anticipated zone.
7. **Use** color to code file folders, paper and labels to distinguish your collections and make it easy to return materials to the right place.
8. **Label** your file folders, binders and collections so you and others can tell what's in them.

# A Quick Summary

Managing the explosion of information in today's workplace starts with the individual. People need the opportunity to learn strategies for organizing their work, how to apply those strategies to suit their goals and individual work styles, and how to organize their work environments to support their organizing style.

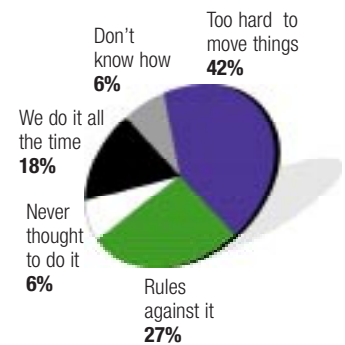
Companies can support this effort. They can provide learning opportunities, reinforce the importance of information management to effective job performance and enable their people to tailor the work environment to accommodate individual approaches to organizing.

Four key organizing concepts can help individuals and organizations take a human-centered approach to tailoring the work environment to help people manage their resources:

- **Personal style** — are they pilers or filers?
- **Collections** — how do they sort through incoming information and group their materials to support their work?
- **Staging** — how can they arrange their active, anticipated and archived information to support their work?
- **Information way-finding** — how do they find their way to specific information and materials in their individual or group workspace?

Organizing strategies — and the workspaces that support them — that fail to accommodate how people naturally manage information are doomed to become one-time “events.” People “get organized” — then lapse into their old ways of doing things while the new system falls apart around them. Taking a human-centered approach not only works better — because it supports how individuals and teams really work — but it's also the only way to truly *sustain* people's ability to manage all the information they need to do their jobs.

As the very nature of work evolves in response to the demands of the new economy — as the trends toward more information, more types of media — and expanded work responsibilities accelerate, people and organizations that develop sustainable strategies for keeping on top of it all will be well positioned to fully leverage the power of information.



859 participants in Steelcase HotHouse Environments seminars responded to the question, “What is preventing our workers from tailoring their environments to support the work they do?”

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