THE AMBIGUITY OF CLUTTER

- [ ] Welcome to Organize and Organizability
- [ ] The Ambiguity of Clutter
- [ ] The Organization and its Internal Information System
- [ ] Business Function
- [ ] Design Flaw
- [ ] The Filing System
- [ ] Ongoing Maintenance

Welcome to the second module of Organize and Organizability. In this section we're going to understand why organization matters and what it has to offer. To do this, let's get a clear understanding of what we don't want. What we don't want is ambiguity.

The heaviness of clutter

Clutter is heavy, it is daunting. Here we are specifically referring to digital clutter. That is files, folders, documents, photos, messages -anything in our digital space that there are many of, that we spend time searching through.

Clutter directly affects our thinking, our motivation, and our productivity. Productivity and motivation come directly from clarity. Clutter on the outside causes clutter on the inside, and visa versa, clutter on the inside causes clutter on the outside.

I had a teacher once who said people with messy writing tend to have messy surroundings. I have taken that seriously; my printing is a litmus test for how I'm doing. When I feel on track, motivated, and clear in my thinking, my writing is neat and tidy. I know not everyone is wired for organization. It doesn't motivate us all in the same way, we don't all need to start with a tidy work environment. However, when it comes to the actual act of information management, organization does, in fact, matter.

Litmus test

noun

: a test in which a single factor (such as an attitude, event, or fact) is decisive

Clutter on a desk, on a desktop, on a website is hard to think through. A great way to receive information is from a display with blank background. It is here that the bombardment of distraction from excessive stimuli occurs.

Where do you feel the most weight from clutter?

Chart junk refers to elements on a chart or graph that does not add any additional information. In fact, it can take away from the information by being a distraction. Although this term specifically refers to charts, the concept may also be applied in other areas, like our work space, desk top, and information system.

Chart Junk

noun

: anything on a chart or graph that does not contribute to the data has no purpose and causes distraction.

AMBIGUITY EFFECT

Things that are ambiguous are hard for us to understand.

A cognitive burden is a obstacle or heaviness added to the process of understanding. We struggle to understand things that are not clear. Cognitive burdens can occur in the simplest of ways -in font that is too small or unusual font, unclear instructions, noise, or other such distractions. Cognitive burdens can also occur with challenging projects like learning a new skills or managing competing priorities.

When there is a burden to understanding something, we avoid it. Let's say we're given a document to read and the font is a fancy script, or we have to fix something but aren't sure how to go about it. These things we tend to avoid or put off because doing the task seems daunting.

The ambiguity effect in this case is avoiding information, be it files, records, a desktop, et cetera, because there is a cognitive burden in dealing with it.

Ambiguity

noun

: Uncertainty

Burden

noun

: Load

"Think about clutter in your living space. For me, the ambiguity effect creeps in around items that sparked joy, yet no longer served a purpose. I'm thinking of t-shirts that I don't wear anymore but has significance, books that I read to my children that they've outgrown. I no longer want these items in play, on the shelf or taking up precious closet real estate, but I don't want to throw them out, either. They would end up staying in the t-shirt pile or on the bookshelf, but that's not where they belonged. It was no longer an article of clothing I wear, or a book I read. The item's category changed -it is no longer a shirt or book, now, the items have become a keepsake. The shirt was recategorized, which meant the shirt pile was the wrong spot.

I got a storage bin, labelled it "keepsakes" and now the old shirt belongs there. Emptying out closets, shelves, and drawers now is easier because of this fourth category -keep, garbage, donate, keepsake."

The same goes for the organization of your company. If the internal information system, or mental model, of the system is complicated or messy, we avoid it. No one approaches it.

> *"Clutter is nothing more than postponed decisions."*
>
> *— Barbara Hemphill*

Things that are complicated, have a cognitive burden –that is the sum total of all the mental effort required to accomplish a task. If the task is simple and does not require much thought, or cognition, the task will have much less likelihood of being avoided. If there is a process in place, the task is much more likely to get done.

Question:

What in your section of work causes the most cognitive burden. What task do you avoid most? Why?

Cognitive Burden

–that is the sum total of all the mental effort required to accomplish a task.

Remember clutter on the inside reflects clutter from the outside.

Perhaps you're wondering if your information system is all that bad. If you are able to find documents, does that mean the process works? Ask yourself if your information system exhibits these six symptoms of a poorly organized information system:

- Can't find stuff
- Can't understand it even when you do find it
- Stuff is stored in scattered locations
- There is no process
- Low level of compliance with policies or laws
- Can't bring together the complete story of an issues, project, or event.

You may work just fine in the already existing system. But if you are constantly searching for documents, scanning them to ensure they are the version you're looking for, wondering if they are up to date, perhaps your system isn't working as well as you thought.

Activity:

Think through the process of that task. What point of the task is unclear?

What can be added or taken away to become more clear?

Clutter in our information prevents us and other users from being able to use the information that's there. The information system becomes information storage -a place we put information, rarely to be accesses again.

Sign up for a conversation to ask questions or work through challenges.

Continue on the the next section:

The Organization

