

Organizing space and time

DOI: 10.1070/PU2004v047n06ABEH001869

Morgenstern J *Organizing from the Inside Out. The Foolproof System for Organizing Your Home, Your Office and Your Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998) [Translated into Russian (Moscow: Dobraya Kniga, 2003) 352 pp. ISBN 5-98124-005-9]; **Morgenstern J** *Time Management from the Inside Out. The Foolproof System for Taking Control of Your Schedule — and Your Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000) [Translated into Russian (Moscow: Dobraya Kniga, 2003) 256 pp. ISBN 5-94015-005-5]

Who of us avoids constantly moaning about the difficulties of resisting the chaos that reigns supreme on your desk and around it? Who is not complaining about a permanent shortage of time? Even if such happy individuals exist, they are too rare a species to be taken into account. They are the exception that proves the rule: chaos is unconquerable and it is a miracle if one manages to complete in time even those jobs that are absolutely necessary.

How often have we tried to restore order? The result invariably has been either defeat after a few hours of waging the war against chaos, or a relatively ordered state that was later completely destroyed by the victorious advancing chaos. Even the most ingenious measures fail miserably and titanic efforts produce nothing useful. The situation with time management is just as pitiful. Like the space around us, time insists on living its independent life and refuses to bend to our will.

Are the elements invincible then? No, we find that it isn't, that they can be overpowered. The key is the right approach. What approach? Ask the professional. Namely, ask Julie Morgenstern, head of the Task Masters Co., which provides services in the professional organization of the working environment. We are lucky that she has shared her knowledge with us in two books that were recently translated into Russian. Julie's secret (this is how Julie Morgenstern refers to herself, by her first name, when giving numerous practical examples) lies in what she calls the principle of organizing 'from the inside out'. She is unique in that she seems to be able to formulate this principle explicitly and to boil down the technique based on it to a clear-cut algorithm.

The principle itself is extremely simple: start with the specific goals and the individual psychological needs of the person. Don't try to mold the human being to fit the working environment but rather modify and tune the environment to agree with the individual character of this person. Alas, the principle looks simple only as long as we stay within this general and abstract formulation. The difficulties arise when we try to implement the principle in real life. And in this, Julie's books prove to be a brilliant guide. They make the process of self-organizing not only possible but easy and even rewarding.

Julie is convinced that the emotional side of things is extremely important. The problem of organizing your life can be solved only if you feel that your efforts bring (and have already brought) tangible results at each step of working out a solution. This 'positive feedback' builds satisfaction and turns the work of self-organizing into a pleasure. But how do we achieve this positive feedback? Read Julie's books, they will provide you with very clear instructions.

Once your workspace is organized, start organizing your time. The principles are the same and the algorithms of problem solving are almost identical. Furthermore, the pleasure you get from at last becoming the master of your time is at least as great as that of seeing chaos retreat.

I regard myself a fairly well-organized person. However, when reading Julie's books (especially the first volume, the most important) I found clearly formulated 'typical errors' that were also my errors. It became obvious that, owing to some of these errors, my system of self-organization was too complicated and 'unfriendly' and that some other errors made my repeated attempts of creating order difficult and ineffective.

It couldn't be otherwise. What the reader learns from Julie is precisely how to self-organize, not how to 'put things in order'. Remember your attempts of battling the advancing chaos and now ask yourself: why was this so difficult? Why were the results of your work erased so fast by the onslaught of chaos? The answer is very simple: the system that you revived again and again was no good for You! When you 'put things in order', with agonizing difficulty, you are squeezing yourself into the Procrustean bed of a useless system. In most cases, the system is of your own making, and for a while it serves its purpose. But that was a long time ago; the type of your work, its goals and scale were different then. The old system is not convenient for you any more but you may not even be aware of it. Julie will show you how to analyze your current tasks and current preferences and how to redesign the working environment to best fit your precious self. The 'new order' worked out in this way is not only easy to install but is also quite stable: chaos fails to scupper it and thus nullify all your efforts.

I have already learned much from Julie and have changed a lot following her method; I received, and continue to receive, real pleasure in the process. I believe that this pleasure is of the same origin as the joy of discovery: you feel it when that which seemed unattainable has been realized.

Now I will outline the main points of the method for the more impatient or skeptical. The entire effort of self-organization breaks down into three stages, each one being essential and not to be confused with the others. Julie calls them: Analyze, Strategize, Attack. I will only describe the analysis stage.

The **analysis** identifies the specifics of your work and particular traits of your personality that are relevant to self-organizing. You begin the analysis by scrutinizing the system you already have. You find out which elements of this system work well and which of them malfunction and why. The

former elements will be retained as much as possible. Those refusing to cooperate can sometimes easily be improved by introducing small modifications. In other cases, the analysis suggests adding new elements to the system and significantly changing some others.

Here is a simple but instructive example of getting something useful in an effortless way. Let us assume that a huge stack of books and magazines keeps growing near your sofa or the dining-room table; it irritates you as a constant reminder of your miserable organizing skills. Whatever you do, the stack refuses to go away, driving you to despair. However, it is precisely this factor that lets in a very unexpected solution. Analysis makes it possible to subjugate the pile without forcing yourself with an iron hand to read exclusively at the desk. It is simpler and more useful for the cause to accept that you prefer to do certain jobs while sitting on the sofa. Do not fight this habit, use it. Hang a bookshelf by the sofa and put those books that you prefer to read while sitting there onto it. Some will stay for a considerable time, other will return to their permanent place after a phase of active use. The pile that kept irritating you will disappear together with the feeling of guilt caused by your lack of self-organization.

The algorithm of the analysis is of course more important than mere examples. In order to find out what hampers you from becoming organized, you conduct **diagnostics** which detect causes at three levels: technical errors, external realities, and psychological obstacles. Technical errors can usually be removed without much difficulty; the important point is to identify them. External realities and constraints are beyond your power, and you need to accommodate them. It is, however, important to clearly formulate them, which is done at the analysis stage. You will have discovered to your great surprise that you did not quite realize the role these constraints play. An interesting part is the set of psychological obstacles which may virtually force a person into being disorganized even though he may seemingly yearn for the opposite.

For each of these levels Julie gives a list of typical causes of disorganization and then demonstrates (mostly with specific examples) how to remove them, once they are identified in your particular situation. Here are the lists.

Technical errors: (1) things have no places assigned to them; (2) things are kept in inconvenient places; (3) there are more things than storage space can possibly fit; (4) the system is too complicated and intricate; (5) too many things were left ‘in prominent places’ as reminders, and (6) organizing space is a boring task.

External realities: (1) nonrealistic workload; (2) intense lifestyle and new technologies; (3) transient period; (4) a partner who refuses to cooperate, and (5) confined space.

Psychological obstacles: (1) the urge to have too much of everything; (2) subconscious wish to face the challenge of chaos and heroically defeat the enemy; (3) fuzziness of goals; (4) subconscious fear of success or failure; (5) need of a hideout (chaos as a barrier shutting off the outside world); (6) conviction that organized life is incompatible with creativity; (7) lack of organization as an excuse from tackling tasks you hate to do; (8) personal dislike of the premises; (9) sentimental attachments, and (10) striving for perfection and immaculacy.

Once the analysis is completed, the self-organizing algorithm dictates that you compose the strategy and plan the attack; then comes the attack itself — that is, building the

organizing system customized to your personality. Julie instructs you on what is to be done at each of these steps and illustrates the recipe with numerous examples. Of course, it is impossible to explain the whole process here in one short bibliographic note. What I meant to achieve was to arouse readers’ curiosity and to prompt them to read Julie Morgenstern’s books.

The method presented in these two volumes is quite universal. It works for people of all walks of life (including housewives) and for all working spaces, including offices, studies in private houses, kitchens, and nurseries. Incidentally, Julie uses an example that gives a very visual demonstration of the general principles of organizing: the way in which space is arranged in a nursery school. You will see that this illustration is indeed very persuasive.

To conclude, I repeat once again that managing time — which inevitably differs from managing space in a number of particular features — nevertheless follows very similar rules. Time also has to be distributed among pre-prepared easy-to-use ‘cubbyholes’ or ‘boxes’. Then each task you plan to do will fit into one of the prepared boxes that contains enough time for just that task. It sounds like a miracle but this miracle you can create. The secret of the miracle is of course very simple: your plan ignores tasks for which you did not allot time. The benefit is that it was you yourself (not some accidental circumstances, not the elements raging around you) who selected the tasks that are left undone over the time budget you had at your disposal. On the other hand, all the preplanned tasks will have been completed. How many of us can boast of this achievement?

M B Menskii