

Tips to help with digital de-clutter

JENNIFER FORKER - Associated Press - Associated Press

Ask friends how many emails they have sitting in their inbox or how many photos are saved to their laptop, and don't be surprised if the numbers tally in the thousands.

Some of us have a difficult time knowing how to organize all of this digital information, from emails and documents to uploaded photos and downloaded songs. We hoard because we can: Today's computer memory can handle it, and our email providers offer seemingly infinite storage space.

Take Peggy Stempson, associate pastor at Pierre First United Methodist Church in Pierre, S.D., who hangs onto at least 4,000 emails, many of them part of long conversations with friends going back five years or more.

"They spark memories, and connect me with people and help me contact them," says Stempson, 30. "It's kind of like a diary."

All of this digital detritus is not a problem unless it interferes with your life, work or happiness, according to Tim Kasser, a psychology professor at Knox College, in Galesburg, Ill.

"If this acquisition of 'e' stuff ends up leading to a lifestyle that forces you to have less time for your family, or less time to draw or play music or run around in a park, or less time to be involved in your community, then I would say that to me is a problem," says Kasser. "I can see how that happens with electronic stuff."

Thank goodness there are experts to help extend spring cleaning to the digital realm.

Start the de-cluttering process slowly, advises Danielle Claro, editor-at-large at "Real Simple" magazine.

"If you're intimidated by it, you need someone to hold your hand — either a friend or a teenager," she says, noting that she'd probably enlist her own teen.

Allison Carter of Atlanta gets paid to help people find their way through the digital morass. She helps clients streamline emails, organize finances, manage documents and photos, and back it all up.

"The digital world, it's about finding things, making your life more efficient, enjoying things, rather than having them only live in the darkness of your hard drive," says Carter, whose business is called Digital Life Organizing.

Controlling the email torrent is often the most daunting challenge, she says.

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"I like my active to-do's and ongoing projects to be in my inbox until I've tackled them," says Carter, but that's all that should be there.

For important emails, she recommends setting up action reminders, and recommends Google's free online calendar. Others include Zoho Calendar and the Cozi Family Organizer, which also are free.

Gmail users can retrieve unread emails by typing "is:unread" into the search field, then delete ignored emails in large chunks. That's a favorite Claro tip.

"It was a great, great feeling. It was like doing a juice fast or something," she says.

Carter likes the app Remember the Milk for managing tasks online. Manage your family's activities via Cozi. Or link everything — email, calendars, reminders and more — with a system that pulls all of your work and home life activities into one online site, such as at IQTELL.

"That's the wave that's coming next," says Carter. "You're going to have a place to have it all in one spot."

And that one spot? Well, it's not on your computer. Rather, it's on a remote public server — what's referred to as "the cloud."

Two free, cloud-based sites that may help unclog your inbox and desktop are Springpad and Evernote, says Carter. Users can store notes, recipes, photos, newspaper articles — even snapshots of web pages.

"Bookmarks are outdated," says Carter.

Keep track of important documents at File This, and receive notifications of bills and automatically pay them — reducing emails, she says.

Shawn Whyte, an information technology consultant in Helena, Mont., recently moved thousands of documents, songs, books and photos from six old computers and personal laptops to a newer one with monster memory (2 TB, or terabytes).

Her favorite tip? If you're a Google gmail user, view and manage your emails through Microsoft Outlook. If you have other email accounts, they all can be viewed via Outlook. It's a time-saver, says Whyte.

"You can sort and move 200 emails at once," she says. "I sorted and deleted 5,000 emails in 3 hours."

Google it, says Whyte, to find out how to configure an Outlook gmail account. An alternative is Mozilla's Thunderbird.

Some photo-saving tips: Get a program, such as Snapfish, Shutterfly, Google's Picasa or others, to edit, store and share your photos, says Carter. Use Linea to

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organize your images fast. Use the app Lost Photos to dig up images forgotten in long-ago emails.

"Don't get hung up on being perfect or being orderly," says Carter. "They don't even have to be in time order to enjoy them. It's fun to have them mixed up: You can see how people change."

Finally, says Carter, you have to back up your computer to protect all those emails, photos and documents from suddenly disappearing. She likes CrashPlan, Carbonite and Mozy, which are online, cloud-storing, backup services.

"Having things in the cloud is really going to change things in the next generation," says Carter. "Older folks, we're not used to it. We're leery of it."

Your information in the cloud can be encrypted, says Whyte, and only you can see it.

"It's good to be concerned about privacy, but not so much that it hinders you," she says. "There are reputable companies out there that are good at this."

If your busy life has room for only one digital change, let it be protecting your data.

"Keep your data safe and back it up," says Whyte.

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