



Out of Sight? Out of

ADHD-Friendly Ways to Organize Electronic Files



THINKSTOCK

Mind? Out of Control!

by Stephanie Wright and Cris Sgrott-Wheedleton

BY THE TIME YOU'VE READ THIS INTRODUCTION, it's likely that at least one email will find its way into your inbox. Maybe it's the latest sale offer from a company you love, a reminder that your cable bill is due soon, a Facebook update, or a nice note from an out-of-town friend who was thinking of you and wanted to say hello.

Whatever the content, there they are, filling up your inbox and pulling your attention away from the task at hand. And it's not just emails, either. The popularity of paperless options and greener living haven't alleviated the piles of paperwork cluttering our desktops, they've just relocated themselves to our electronic desktop. But what can be done about it? Electronic bills and healthcare documents can't be shoved into a drawer for a quick fix, but neither can they be neatly categorized into your paper-based filing system.

As modes of communication evolve and take on different forms, so must we adapt our strategies for managing them. People with ADHD may find themselves at a greater disadvantage in the digital age, as documents are stored "out of sight" and can easily end up "out of mind" and out of control. Add to that the multitude of blogs, news articles, and social media updates begging for attention and it becomes clear that managing digital files is no easy task.

Three general categories of electronic files require maintenance: emails, documents, and photographs. These strategies are designed to help you do just that.

Overall e-organizing tips

Searchability is the new filing system.

Filing systems are wonderful, but they are based on a world of paper. It is not necessary to replicate the extensive system of folders and subfolders to categorize and file away electronic documents.

Limit online files to broad categories such as "Family," "Home," and "Cars" to eliminate confusion as to which specific folder a file might have ended up in. For those struggling with executive function limitations, it is likely that car insurance documents, for example, may end up in "Cars" one day, but be placed in "Insurance" the next. This inconsistency in systems creates a tangled web of files that is both frustrating and time-consuming to navigate.

The most important step you can take to maximize the probability

of finding the file you need is to name it purposefully, using keywords. File names are no longer limited to a certain number of characters, nor do they need to be fancy. For example, if you can never remember if you've saved your child's camp information in the "Activities" folder, the "Johnny," or the "Summer" folder, consider doing away with a few of those folders and renaming the file along the lines of "Camp Horseshoe Johnny Summer Registration Form." The same idea works for emails as well. When sending emails, be sure the subject line makes it clear what information is being sent in the body of the message. Don't be afraid to ask friends and family to do the same when sending you information.

Get comfortable with the technology.

Emails, e-readers, e-bills...enough already! For those that didn't grow up Google-ing, texting, or chatting with friends on Facebook, the structure of the digital world is not always intuitive, and is often overwhelming. Understanding how technology works is the first step towards making it work for you.

Most computers, software, and browsers have built-in shortcuts or features that can streamline almost any process. However, if you're not quite sure what the terms file extension, control panel, or operating system mean, it's likely that you're missing out on the benefits of these features. Some computers, for example, can search for pictures not only by file names, but by using facial recognition software already included in your desktop. Simply show the program who you want a picture of, and it will bring up any photos of that person. The more you can make technology work for you, the less daunting a task will appear, and the less likely you are to put off tackling it for another day. Take a class, ask questions, and don't be afraid to explore the e-universe.

Embrace the process.

Nothing in life is perfect, and electronic files aren't going to be the exception. The goal of organizing online files should always be to alleviate stress and increase productivity. As with any process, the hardest part is generally getting started. Procrastination is common for people with ADHD, and there is nothing easier to leave until later than old files or emails—or the gigabyte of photos scattered across your hard drive.

Break the process down into more manageable pieces to get things rolling. Not having the time or inclination to name each individual photo with the names of who is in it, where it was taken, and what the date was, is perfectly acceptable. Instead, make it a goal to create one main photo folder per event and then leave individual files unnamed.

Every time a mini-goal is reached, follow it up with a reward. Being more organized is certainly a reward in itself, but a new book or trip to a favorite



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restaurant can be great incentives for pushing through a difficult task. Also, once a new system is implemented, be sure to stick with it long enough to really test it out. Starting new systems and changing routines too frequently will not only leave your files in a mess, but will likely lead to further frustration. Try your new system for at least three weeks before reevaluating and changing what did not work.



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Start today.

Having years' worth of pictures, documents, and emails to sift through and organize can be overwhelming, to put it mildly. But that does not mean it can't be done. Rather than taking on your entire hard drive as a project, consider starting fresh with today's files.

Each time a new file is saved, do so according to the new system. The next time a batch of photos is uploaded, create a folder for it using keywords about the event being documented. Overhauling everything shouldn't be the goal, but starting the process should. This will keep the electronic pile from growing and is also a great way to try out the new techniques before revamping everything. Then, to tackle the backlog, set aside smaller windows of time to reorganize those pesky old files.

For people with ADHD, regulating attention is a key component to getting things accomplished, and there is no greater playground of information and stimuli than the Internet. Get the most out of organizing sessions by closing any programs or windows that will lead to distractions (yes you, Facebook). Set a timer for fifteen to twenty minutes and work until it goes off.

If it is still too difficult to face the task, try making it more fun. Create an organizing playlist or CD full of songs that inspire you to get moving. It works for the gym, it can work to get you pumped up

and inspired or organize as well. If you still can't convince yourself, ask a friend or family member to bring over their laptop and be your organizing buddy.

What to do about...

Each time I order a product online or get information from a website, it collects my email address and then sends me spam emails every day.

- **Digital Novices:** Consider getting two separate email addresses; one that you use for truly important emails (family, friends, etc.) and one that you use as a login for online sites or frequent buyer accounts. Don't bother checking the junk email address unless you are looking for a specific coupon or have time to read a newsletter.
- **Digital Pros:** Create filters in your email account that automatically identify and file emails based on sender address or content. Most email servers allow for both general and more specific rules for filtering. Some, such as Google's Gmail, will also allow you to customize the look of your inbox and can automatically place unread or priority messages at the top for easy viewing.

I don't always use the same computer, but I need consistent access to my files. Emailing them to myself after every change is time-consuming and difficult to track.

- **Digital Novices:** Start saving your files online through services such as Dropbox. These accounts will allow you to access your files from anywhere with an Internet connection. There are many free and low-cost options for storing files online, and they come with the added benefit of being safe should anything happen to your personal computer.
- **Digital Pros:** Saving files to the cloud is still the way to go. If you have multiple personal devices, consider networking them together so that you can see your files regardless of which one you are using.

I'm always uploading photos from my camera right before heading out to use it. I don't have time to organize my files.

- Instead of spending time on individual files, simply create general folders for photos based on events. Include the name and perhaps date of the event and dump all the photos in there. Even if you have two or three events on your memory card, creating two files won't add a significant amount of time to the process and will be worth it in the end.

I can never remember where a file is saved.

- **Digital Novices:** Focus on searchable file names rather than multiple folders. Instead of spending time clicking through document, use your computer's search function to track files.
- **Digital Pros:** Many word processing programs will allow you to add a footer to documents that will automatically stamp them with the file's location on your computer. Adding this feature to your documents will allow you to trace where they are, even if you only have a hard copy.

I leave emails in my inbox because I have to do something about them.

- Making a decision or taking action is not always easy and there's no shortcut to avoid them. If you find yourself having trouble completing a task, schedule a specific time to work on it, use a timer to get started, or invite a friend or family member to help. ●