

Boost your efficiency with Crabby's suggestions



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Crabby Office Lady

"Efficiency" is a big buzzword around my office, and I imagine it's being bandied about in your world, too. But what does it mean to be efficient? Is it about speed or is it about competence? Perhaps it's a little of both.

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The word "efficient" has many meanings, all of them subtly connected. It can indicate effectiveness, power, proficiency, and even shrewdness — as in being calculating. To me, the meaning of the word "efficient" is like music or art — it has many connotations, and it can be somewhat hard to pin down or even talk about. Maybe I should just let it flow through me, and let the gods and goddesses of economy and performance guide the way.

(Or, better yet, perhaps we need some tools to help us achieve that perfect sense of efficient-osity....)

Office can help

You have two hands, two eyes, two ears, one brain ... and 17 things that must get done before the end of the day. If you're like me, you try to tackle nine of them all at once, eventually losing track of what got done — and what didn't. I've figured out a few ways to manage all my tasks by making the most of my time and using the tools that I have access to. I have yet to achieve perfection through efficiency, but I'm darned close.

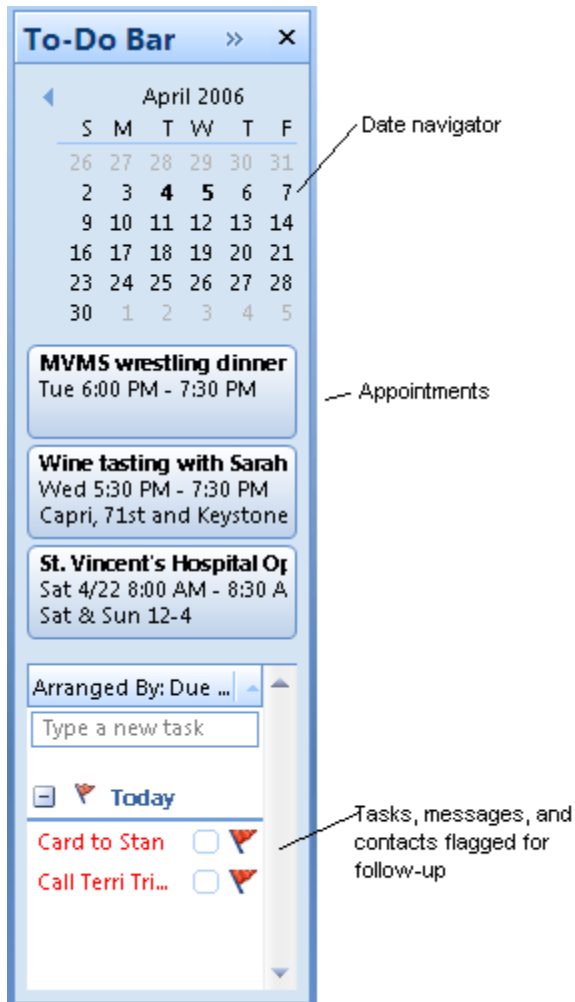
Make a list

Some of the things you set out to do for yourself today can maybe wait until tomorrow ... or the next day. No, I'm not saying put off today what you can do tomorrow. What I AM saying is that you are not a machine. Hey, we're all very busy and we all have a lot to do. Meetings, tasks, messages to follow up on — it's enough to make a person freeze from indecision about what to tackle first. But if you don't take the time to negotiate your chores (and BREATHE), you may find that you get none of it done in the time you'd like.

Office can help by ...

Outlook 2007 implemented a new feature called the To-Do Bar. And surprisingly enough, it does just what it implies: It keeps all of your to-do items in one spot. Prior to Outlook 2007, you may have had tasks, appointments, and flagged messages, but you had to go from view to view to keep track of all of them. Well, no more. The To-Do Bar in Outlook 2007 integrates everything right there. And, as a bonus (if you act today ... or really, any other day), it also integrates all of your OneNote, Project, and SharePoint Services workspaces.

I'm guessing you can see how the To-Do Bar can make you more efficient. I mean, no more hopping around from window to window to try to find what needs to get done today or even this week.



Take the easy way

Now, I'm sure your parents, bosses, teachers, and coaches wouldn't be too thrilled with me if they knew I was telling you to take the easy way. However, the easy way doesn't mean the road more traveled; it can also mean the road less traveled, and thereby the one that makes all the difference. In other words, why spend all that time reinventing the wheel like your cohorts do every time you need to create a presentation, a document, or a brochure?

Office can help by ...

Here at Office Online, we have little template elves whose main job is to crank out helpful, inventive, and useful templates that you can use as a starting point for all your Office needs. These helpful creatures take care of the formatting, measuring, element combining, and so on. All you need to do is pick the template that best suits your specific project, download it, and away you go. You say you don't like some of the templates our elves have created for you? Then change what you don't like and create your own template. Contrary to popular belief, we don't keep track of who downloads what, and we are not going to be tsk-asking over your shoulder if you decide that you don't like the fonts or the too colorful ... colors. A template is merely a starting point; it will save you time — and make you look good.

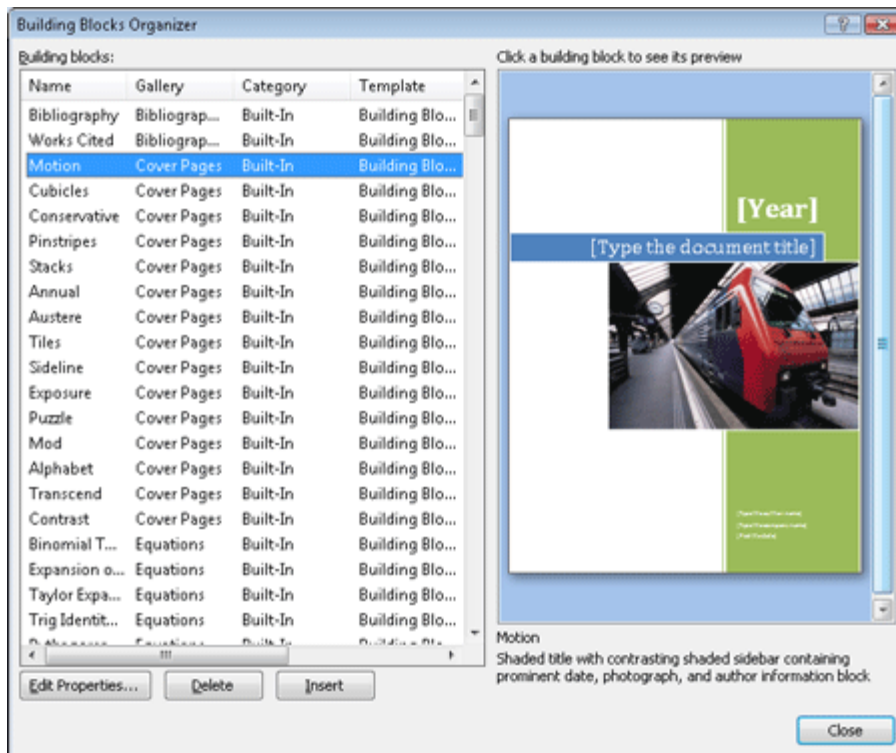
Recycle

I hope I'm correct in assuming that everyone reading this has hopped on the recycling bandwagon (a bandwagon made of recycled newspaper, wood, and bicycle tires). Expand your green-focused mind a bit to include recycled parts of documents. If you have items that you constantly reuse — logos, headers and footers, tables of contents, for example — it would get mighty tedious (and time consuming) to have to recreate them in every single document you create.

Office can help by ...

In a word (or two): building blocks. These handy little things are parts that you have predesigned and that can be popped into any document. It's like building a house: Every time you need a brick, you don't head out to the field to find your clay and mud, pop the stuff into a mold and then stick it into a kiln. No; you have premade bricks — building blocks — on hand. You just need to put them into place ... brick by brick.

Some building blocks come with Word 2007 — the ones we thought you might need the most. You can take these as they are, customize them, download more from Office Online, or create some of your own. It's very simple: You create, just one time, the item you need to reuse in other documents (such as your logo that contains an image, a hyperlink, formatting, and so on). You select that item and then use the Quick Parts tool to save it as part of a gallery. Next time you need to insert that item, you simply open up the Quick Parts galleries and pick the building block you need. Now *this* is efficiency at its most powerful. Think of how many keystrokes and how much brain power you'll save by automating with building blocks.



Put things in easy reach

If you're constantly trying to find commands and menus while you're working in an Office program, chances are you're spending too much time in the chase. It used to be that some of these things — margin settings, mail merge, even word count — were hidden deeply in the recesses of the various commands and menus. You (and I) were always having to reach way far out to accomplish even the simplest of tasks, and frankly, it was eating up our time. Hey, I have an idea: Why don't we make the commands that we need the most readily available?

Office can help by ...

The last lesson in how to be efficient comes to you by way of the Ribbon, which is part of the Microsoft Office Fluent user interface. I wrote about the Ribbon when the 2007 Office release first came out, and some of you already love it (while others, well, not so much). Hopefully, those of you who've been working in the 2007 release for a while now love the Ribbon and can't imagine ever going back to the old way.

The main purpose of the Ribbon is to make the commands you need the most, available at your fingertips. In earlier versions, you often had to use the **Tools | Options** menus to hunt for what you needed to do. And sometimes the command you needed wasn't even there, and so you had to continue your search. With the Ribbon, everything — or mostly everything — that you need to do is organized in logical groups. And if the Ribbon, as it is, doesn't provide enough options for you, you can create a Quick Access Toolbar, which contains any command available in Word. It's like your own personalized Ribbon.

Of course, as with anything else, you need to take a little time to familiarize yourself with how the Ribbon and the Quick Access Toolbar work. If you don't do that, you may find yourself cursing these handy helpers rather than praising them. An ounce of prevention (training yourself and customizing your workspace) is worth a pound of cure (the cure being your increased efficiency, of course).

Final words

And those are my four methods for making sure you're getting the most out of your time at work. And I didn't offer these so that you can work more hours in a day, strapped to your chair in an airless room for days on end. I want you to figure out ways you can work smarter so that you can finish your work, get up and out of that chair, and go on with your life. All work and no play make Jack and Jill very dull storybook characters (and you, one inefficient, ineffective, and inadequate part of the workforce). A little thought to how you can organize your time and your tasks will save you time and frustration later on. I suggest you give it a try.

"Do not be awestruck by other people and try to copy them. Nobody can be you as efficiently as you can." — Norman Vincent Peale

About the author

[Annik Stahl](#), the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Did this article help you?** feedback tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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