



HAVE AN OFFICE EXIT PLAN

Written by: Tammy Holoman

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For many parents who work full time, 40 hours a week on the job isn't the norm. When the final working hour rolls around, it should be time to head home and carry on with family life, but employees often work long past that point. There is hope, however. Time-management experts share their best strategies to help busy parents make it home at a reasonable hour.

1. Manage your inbox.

Using email effectively can make a big difference, says Gerialin Thomas, owner of Metropolitan Organizing in Cary.

"No one runs up and down their driveway 13 times a day to check their mailbox," she says. "When checking my email, I try to follow the 10 a.m., 2 p.m., 6 p.m., 10 p.m. schedule."

Thomas says many clients may not fill in subject lines, or they write emails that are too long or indirect, which wastes time.

"If the entire message is not visible in your windowpane, you need to condense it and say what you want in the very first line: 'I need a response by Friday.' Make it an action to be taken," she says. Thomas also recommends including a phone number in your email signature, in case a verbal conversation is easier.

Jeff Davidson, a work-life balance expert in Raleigh, creates email folders for specific projects, months and individuals, allowing him to prioritize tasks and stay organized. You have four options, he says: Delete it, file it for later, pass it on or act on it yourself.

"Email is usually not urgent, or the person would've called instead," he says.

2. Keep a calendar and a to-do list.

Whether you prefer an electronic or paper calendar, it's essential to record tasks and obligations for easy reference. "If an electronic calendar doesn't work as well for you, don't force it," Thomas says.

Davidson agrees that it boils down to what works best for you. "The moment you don't maintain a calendar, it will let you down," he says. "Decide what's a priority and protect your future calendar steadfastly. You can say 'no' to

things even if they're scheduled for six months out."

Although all professions don't allow this luxury, learning to decline appointment requests can prevent overextending yourself, Davidson says. The same applies to projects, committees and meetings, although you don't always have a choice. If you can predict your busiest times, avoid tackling jobs that aren't urgent during those periods. If your afternoons slip away, use your computer or phone alarm to notify you when the day is half over so you'll know when to wrap up.

Davidson also recommends having a daily to-do list. "It's OK if you cross some things off and then add five more, as long as frivolous items don't make your list," he says. "And don't juggle multiple lists. You're creating more work for yourself. Use one."

Multitasking is overrated, Davidson says. "Let go of that concept. You end up making more errors, and you'll do your best work if you focus on one thing."