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TECH FIX

How to Declutter and Organize Your Personal Tech in a Few Simple Steps

Accessories and data may not take up much physical space, but they contribute to frustration and anxiety. Here are ways to keep e-junk at bay, Marie Kondo-style.



By **Brian X. Chen**

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With a new year and a new Netflix show that features the Japanese organizing guru Marie Kondo on the art of “Tidying Up,” many of us are experimenting with how to simplify our lives by purging our homes of unwanted possessions.

But what about the stuff we don’t see?

Think about the digital junk we hoard, like the tens of thousands of photos bloating our smartphones or the backlog of files cluttering our computer drives, such as old work presentations, expense receipts and screenshots we have not opened in years.

In addition to the digital mess, tech hardware adds to the pile of junk that sparks no joy in our lives. Everyone has a drawer full of ancient cellphones, tangled-up wires and earphones that are never touched. And the things we do use every day, like charging cables strewn around the house, are an eyesore.

Why are people so terrible about tech hoarding? Cary Fortin, a professional organizer for the company New Minimalism, summed it up: “We don’t really think about the cost of holding on to things, but we think about the cost of needing it one day and not having it.”

Don’t fret, dear reader. As a technology critic who tests dozens of gadgets a year, I’m in a unique position of having to wrestle with extraordinary amounts of tech products and accessories every day. (Last year, I brought nine new smartphones, two tablets, four smart speakers and 14 power accessories into my home.) So here’s a guide to tidying up your technology physically and digitally, including tips from professional organizers.

How to declutter your power cables

The No. 1 culprit of tech clutter in every household, professional organizers say, is the power cable. Part of the problem is that we typically need different wires for products like smartphones, battery packs, cameras and laptops. These then accumulate into one tangled mess.

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Here's how to solve power cable overpopulation in a few simple steps:

Gather them all together and purge the ones you don't need.

This sounds easier said than done, but here's a good rule of thumb: "If you don't know what it goes to, get rid of it," said Marissa Hagemeyer, an organization consultant and co-owner of Neat Method. Among the wires you keep, if there are extras, cap them at two, such as two Micro USB cables, she said.

In the process, you may end up discarding a wire that you later need. But don't beat yourself up. "You can buy a new one if it turns out you needed it," Ms. Fortin said. That's better than wasting space on something you might hypothetically need.

The same approach can be applied to other tech gadgets, like the obsolete smartphone that is living in your sock drawer. If you haven't used it for six months, get rid of it. Unwanted tech accessories and gadgets can be discarded responsibly through donation centers or e-recycling programs like Best Buy's.

Have a designated place for all your tech accessories.

Pick somewhere in your home where your various wires will live, like a closet, cabinet or drawer. From there, categorize the wires and give them compartments. I separate my different types of wires — earbuds, phone chargers, miscellaneous USB cables and computer chargers — into Ziploc bags and label them with a label maker. All the bags live in a drawer in my TV stand.

There are different approaches to organizing your power cables. Families with children could give each member a compartment. For example, put your son Joe's iPhone charger, laptop charger and earbuds into one Ziploc bag and label it "Joe's tech."

This step is a must. "If you don't have a dedicated place for your items, then you're wasting your time finding them," said Keith Bartolomei, a professional organizer for Zen Habitat.

Hide wires that live out in the open.

Even if you find a place to stash your spare cables, you probably have a few left plugged in all day. To tidy them up, there are methods to hide the wires or, at the very least, keep them off the floor.

Mr. Bartolomei recommends using twisty wires and rubber bands to keep wires wrapped around furniture, like desk legs. There are also products for bundling up and concealing wires, like fabric sleeves or boxes that cover your surge protector. My approach to keeping wires off the ground is to run them through magnetic buckles that clip onto a metal side table.

How to resist digital hoarding

Do an annual clearance of the files you no longer need.

To streamline this process on a computer, open a folder and sort the files by when they were last opened. From there, you can immediately eliminate the files you have not opened in years.

On your smartphone, prune unnecessary apps that are taking up space. On iPhones, Apple offers the tool iPhone Storage, which shows a list of apps that take up the most data and when they were last used; on Android devices, Google offers a similar tool called Files. From here, you can home in on the data hogs and delete the apps you have not touched in months.

Manage your enormous photo library.

Eradicating photos is the most challenging process, the professional organizers agreed, because the thought of deleting your memories may be painful. But photos are some of the biggest data hogs of all, so some periodic maintenance is crucial.

Start by trimming out the easy ones: duplicate photos, blurry shots and old screenshots.

Then move on to the harder part: deleting the photos that were decent but not your favorites. Mr. Bartolomei said people could look at each photo and ask themselves a few questions: “Is this something you want to see again? Does it make you happy? Do you want to spend more time with this photo in the future?” If you answer no to any of those questions, the photo can probably go in the trash bin.

My approach to managing digital photos is to purge everything without doing any organization at all. I use Google Photos, which automatically backs each shot to the cloud, compiles photos into albums and includes a tool for removing images from the device. (I also back up all my photos to an external drive in case I ever become unhappy with Google Photos.) Then I erase all the photos from my iPhone every six months and pay Google \$2 a month to manage thousands of my photos at full resolution.

Whatever approach you take, don't skimp on tidying up your data. Even if it doesn't use up physical room, it can still cause you harm.

“It takes up so much psychic space and brings up the same negative effect: anxiety,” Ms. Fortin said. “Since we all have our phones in our pockets, we're toting our clutter around with us.”

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