The Cost of Stress

Plus

The Paperless Office
Top Tips to Save the Planet
How to Create a Perfect Wardrobe
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Welcome to this August issue of PA Enterprise. Each month we try to bring you the very best articles to help you excel as an administrative professional. In this rapidly changing world, we hope to keep you up to speed.

This month is no different. After our hugely successful networking event at the Royal Garden Hotel in July, where environmental consultants Envirowise shared practical tips on going green in the office, we bring you The Myth of the Paperless Office and Other Stories. This article blasts the myth of the paperless office and outlines ways in which to attack waste: firstly, and most importantly, by using fewer resources. Though we all hear about the importance of recycling, it must go hand in hand with a commitment to minimising waste. The article provides an overview of the first steps to take in this direction, and it’s something we can all do.

We then bring you The Cost of Stress: Monitoring and Managing the Risks, highlighting the dangers and risks involved with stress – both personally and professionally – and how to minimise these risks through stress reduction. After that, to continue our environmental theme, we introduce Top Tips to Save the Planet. And because we do know that it’s important to relax and take life easy as well as worry about the big issues, we offer up Go Thai – three fabulous recipes for top Thai dishes – plus the articles Over Fifty and Having the Time of Your Life and How to Create a Perfect Wardrobe and finally our Mind Reading Puzzle.

We are still accepting submissions for our Management Support Fellowship Award, so if you know of someone who deserves this top accolade then please check out our homepage and take it from there. To give them that added advantage, take a look at our Ten Top Tips for Writing a Winning Nomination before entering them. That’s it for this month. Please get in touch if there’s anything you’d like to see in future issues of PA Enterprise.

Basma Hadid
Publisher
5   The Myth of the Paperless Office and Other Stories
   With a little resolve office waste can be fought successfully.

7   The Cost of Stress: Monitoring and Managing the Risks
   Learn how to take control and say “No” when you want or need to.

12  Top Tips to Save the Planet
   The teachings of Emile Coué, the brilliant “father of applied conditioning”, are still relevant today.

14  Go Thai
   We promise these three mouth-watering recipes promise will not let you down.

17  Over Fifty and Having the Time of Your Life
   Grasping life by the scruff of the neck.

20  How to Create a Perfect Wardrobe
   Take the trauma out of choosing clothes.

22  Mind Reading Puzzle
   Reading your boss’s mind may be impossible, but at least this puzzle can be completed.

23  Past Articles on DeskDemon?
   Think you might have missed something? Find out what articles we’ve had recently at DeskDemon.
For the last thirty years the rise of the paperless office has been regularly predicted with various levels of gusto. Unfortunately this brave new world has yet to arrive with us. The reality is a long distance from the myth. In fact, despite increasing digitisation over the last thirty years, paper use in the office has increased. Whilst offices are populated by as many PCs as there are people, technology to create and print documents has too become accessible to all.

We can all word process and print or photocopy in bulk. Our love affair with paper is far from over. Though you might think that the growth of e-mail would lead to a decrease in paper use, the opposite has been true. In a recent book, The Myth of the Paperless Office, Richard Harper and Abigail Sellen present findings that show paper consumption increased up to forty percent after the introduction of e-mail, and that is without including paper used to print pages from the internet. At some stage many work-related e-mail communications are printed out.

Going short of again predicting a paperless office, there will undoubtedly be new innovations, including screens that successfully mimic the visual “feel” of a printed piece of paper – that do not emit light at the reader.

One other way in which we use paper is in filing and archiving. This is an area that digital technology can already excel if the correct filing and backup procedures are followed. A cultural shift is perhaps needed to more effectively use current digital technology in this area.

It’s not just paper waste that has increased over the last thirty years. In pretty much all areas we have increased the amount of waste we produce. Annually, offices produce tens of millions of tonnes of paper, packaging, hardware and food waste.

Like the well-known axiom that prevention is better than the cure, minimisation is the first thing to think about when attempting to create a sustainable impact on the environment. In so many areas, our way of life is simply not sustainable. Recycling is of course vital, but minimisation of waste is even more fundamental. But whereas recycling can have a minimal impact on lifestyle, minimisation of waste is much harder, requiring a change in processes, work culture and life style. However, it doesn’t just make
sense environmentally, it does financially as well. It has been estimated by Envirowise that waste costs companies on average 4.5% of their turnover.

How should you go about attempting minimisation of waste in your organisation? The first step is to have your processes and the waste you produce audited, either internally or by an environmental consultancy. How effectively are products, materials and consumables being used? What waste is produced and why?

You should then ask yourself what should the benchmarks be? How do you measure them? How can you minimise waste and how can you recycle, reuse and dispose of waste? What innovations and teamwork can you employ? Can you cut use of disposables like plastic cups and ballpoint pens? Can you buy products in bulk for a number of departments to reduce packaging? This commitment involves communication and cooperation to create a joined up organisation where people in all positions are working together.

Optimisation of Product Lifespan

The lifespan of office equipment such as computers is often too short or too long. Too short and waste is increased dramatically. This isn’t just through discarding the manufactured article itself. Five times as much waste is produced during the manufacturing stage and twenty times as much at the site of original resource extraction. Too long and you are missing out on the increased energy efficiency offered by the latest technology. Also, some office equipment that is designed to have an increased longevity may use materials that are harder to recycle.

Discover what the optimum lifespan environmentally is for your office equipment and ensure you maintain and repair your equipment to stay functional for this period but are ready to recycle it way the time comes.

Recycling

Recycling is often seen as the most important process to undertake for the environment. Whilst we’ve seen that this isn’t the case, it is still, nonetheless, vital. If you want to initialise or improve the recycling at your organisation, first set up a pilot scheme to develop the whole process into an as effective one as possible. Find out how it works at all stages of the process – again, discussion and coordination is key here. Once you have achieved a successful process you can begin to roll it out to other parts of the company.

And remember, recycling isn’t just about sending your waste along to recycling plants; it’s about using recycled products and materials too. Wherever possible, source products using recycled materials.

This is only a brief introduction to the potentials and problems of waste management at an organisational level, but it just takes the drive and determination to make that difference. And, as they say, if we all do it there’s no end to what we can achieve.
The effects of stress are huge. Not only are there a great number of potential risks arising from the spread of stress within an organisation, it costs a great deal of money!

Let us start with looking at some hard-nosed UK figures.

- The CBI estimates that there is a cost of £4bn per annum to industry as a direct result of stress related absence.
- This figure rises to over £7bn when you consider the loss of productivity!
- A recent survey by the HSE indicated over 550,000 cases of absence as a result of stress, depression and anxiety.
- A further 66,000 were absent with heart problems as a result of stress.
- There was a loss of nearly 13 million working days in total.
- The average absence for stress-related issues was 28.5 days.
- 1 in 5 believe that their job is extremely or very stressful – that’s 5 million people!
- Up to 40% of absence is related to stress.
- When stressed, performance can be reduced by up to 70%.
- The CIPD estimate that stress costs industry £522 per employee.

Had enough of this? Let’s move on and think about the effects of unmanaged stress on organisations.

The Organisational Consequences of Stress

Where an organisation is suffering from stress problems there will be a number of probable consequences, all with ensuing costs to the business.

If the atmosphere is getting worse there will be an increase in staff turnover. The costs of this are often overlooked or hidden behind some spurious justification. What is the direct cost of recruiting replacements? Oh, and the indirect costs? What is the cost of the loss of the experience and expertise? Staff turnover disrupts business in many ways and reduces profitability. Simultaneously, costs will increase too!

When individuals are suffering from stress their work performance is likely to deteriorate. The quality of decision-making will go down, possibly with faulty judgements being made. What is the risk to the organisation of this? It is probable that the rate of casual errors will increase too – with what consequences?

The relations between people will be affected for the worse. As communication, support and teamworking deteriorate people will not enjoy coming to work and levels of commitment are likely to reduce. This will probably mean that customer service (both internal and external) gets worse too – again, with what consequences?
As people become less motivated, and even demotivated, their productivity goes down and the impact of that is…?

When we take into account the figures plus these probable knock-on effects, it makes sense to think about managing the organisation in a way that will reduce the potential possibility and impact of stress. Indeed, that is a key part of one of the HSE initiatives and the introduction of their “Management Standards for Stress”. Although these are not compulsory in themselves, there is legislation around it, a duty of care and responsibility attached to managers as part of the Health and Safety legislation. This means undertaking risk assessments, creating a positive environment and managing work activity to reduce stress and pressure at work.

What is Stress?

Before going further into these, let us consider what is meant by this word “stress”. The HSE define it as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them.” A simpler option is to think of it as “the internalisation of pressure, where it exceeds your ability to cope.” When we hear people say things such as “We all need some degree of stress”, what is really being said is that we need some level of pressure to galvanise us into action. These pressures can come from all sorts of sources in our lives and from within ourselves too.

This mechanism is known as “the pressure curve”. If the amount of pressure is not high enough, we do not feel the need to respond and so performance is likely to be down (wonderfully called “rust out” in certain circles). Have you ever gone into a shop, restaurant or somewhere on a very quiet day? What was the response and service like? This end of the scale can lead to problems from the boredom level!

Get the pressure “right” and we are triggered to respond in the most effective way – and will operate at our “optimal performance” level. Moving along towards the end, the pressure levels increase and when this is too much the response is what most people think of as the classic stress problem, “burn out”.

Pressure Rising

This rarely just “happens” suddenly. The pressures build up and the symptoms will become more and more obvious – the physiological and behavioural clues will be more noticeable. If the situation does not change and the pressure become more manageable, the person who is at this end will probably start to become ill as the body sends out signals to say it needs to protect...
itself against this burnout.

The challenge facing managers is to identify what is the “optimal” amount of pressure for each person in their team. We each interpret pressures in different ways. What one of us may shrug off, another will think of as a crisis, and vice versa. Add to this, we all have various pressures influencing us, external to our work. These can range from personal relationships to financial and environmental ones. Then there is the human capacity to create pressure on ourselves through having unreasonable expectations or by finding things to worry about over which we have no control! How well do managers know their team members to assess their personal “negative” and “positive” pressures?

**A Modern Phenomenon**

Why do the figures show such an increase in stress related problems in recent years? Has that much changed? In short, yes! There are a number of factors, including increasing workloads, a faster pace of life, a lack of control over aspects of our lives and materialism.

What can organisations do to monitor and manage the stress risk?

One of the first things to acknowledge that there is a risk. Too many managers, especially senior executives, want to hide their heads in the sand and deny that there is a problem or potential problem. They certainly do not want to suggest that they may be a significant contributor to the problem. Stress is not a problem confined to the executive suite. In fact, a higher percentage of the workforce down the line will suffer stress-related problems than senior management. Having said that, the consequences to the organisation and the people of an over-stressed senior manager can be horrendous!

The organisation can use a number of factors to assess whether there is a problem. As in most forms of good management, gathering data is key. Work from facts and not conjecture, though do not ignore it.

**Absenteeism**

One of the “standards” is to look at absenteeism, both in terms of its levels and its patterns. Is the level...
static or increasing? Is any area of the organisation suffering more than the others? What happens when employees return to work; do you have a meeting with them to find out the real reasons for the absence, and what you can do to prevent them recurring? Also, will the organisation offer support to help the employee?

If there is a pattern in one area, what is being done to address the cause? Is it the nature of the work, or the manager or the environment?

Look at the quality of information. Is there an increase in errors, customer complaints or are other standards not being achieved? Before chasing the teams or individuals and demanding improvements, explore why things have begun to slip. Talk to people about what is going on and how they feel.

What is happening to the staff turnover figures, are there any trends apparent? Is the organisation using exit interviews to find the real reasons behind the departure?

**Some Questions to Ask**

To get a proper overview as an organisation, a good starting point is to carry out a simple audit. Questions in these areas will help to get an immediate sense of where the organisation is in terms of meeting the HSE criteria. It will also highlight where issues may occur.

- The culture of your organisation:
  - How does it approach work-related stress?
    - Demands on people: Is work sensibly scheduled so that the workload levels are right?
    - Organisational change: How is it managed and communicated?
    - Understanding of roles: Do individuals understand their role in the organisation? Does the organisation ensure that individuals do not have conflicting roles or challenges? (Is there a clear definition of roles?)
    - Support and training: From both peers and line managers – for the person to be able to do the core functions of the job – do you cater for individual needs and differences?

How well would your workplace score? Which areas could do with some attention? Remember, prevention is preferable to cure in most things. In this case, it is almost certainly a less expensive option! Pay attention to these factors and the organisation can start to address stress early on, preventing it becoming a problem.

Another thing for the management team to do is to develop an understanding of stress, its causes, symptoms and consequences. They can then begin to operate in a way that will create a healthier organisation. They can monitor the “health” using the approach above – and then set about managing to maintain a healthy environment.

The secret to stress management is not about learning relaxation, exercise or other coping strategies, although these do help. It is about getting to the cause of the problem and dealing with it from there. Good management practices, communication, and supporting and caring for people will all help to reduce the risk of stress. Reduce stress and you reduce risks in many other areas of the business.

**Creating a Healthier Organisation**

Graham Yemm is a partner of Solutions 4 Training Ltd and Managing Pressure. A Master Practitioner of NLP Graham is also involved in running “The Business Group”, which promotes uses of NLP in organisations and is an accredited trainer for the LAB profile programme, “Words that Change Minds”. More information about Graham can be found at www.managingpressure.com.
The Management Support Fellowship Award brings together outstanding administrative professionals throughout the UK, giving recognition to the hard work and dedication of PAs and secretaries everywhere. The Award rewards the achievements and accomplishments of exceptional individuals whilst promoting the work of the administrative profession as a whole. Every administrative professional has their golden nuggets of expertise and accomplishments. Each Management Support Fellowship Award nomination will mean that a unique success story is shared with peers, thereby disseminating proven best practices. Achievements, both big and small, are an inspiration to others.

Criteria - An outstanding achievement providing inspiration to others in:
- Communication
- Meeting and Events
- Mentoring
- Office management
- Organisation
- Problem solving
- Project management
- Technology
- Training

Self Nominations
Your success, whether it is a small personal achievement or a corporate wide achievement, has the potential to be an inspiration to others. The Management Support Fellowship Award is based on fellowship, and the sharing of success with your peers. If you have any outstanding achievement in organisation, project management, training and mentoring, office management, communication, meeting planning, technology and software, or problem solving and believe others could benefit from your success, take the time to enter. By sharing your experience, you could win the monthly prize or fabulous Grand Prize of £10,000.

Nominators
If you know an administrative professional who has an outstanding achievement in the areas of organisation, project management, training and mentoring, office management, communication, meeting planning, technology and software, or problem solving you can present the success from a different point of view – whether as someone who has benefited from or seen the benefits of the skills of the administrative professional in question. This is a unique way to say thank you for all that your colleague has done. Your nomination could win you the monthly prize or the Nominator’s Grand Prize of £2,500.

http://www.deskdemon.com/pages/uk/awards2007/index
Some small steps to make a difference

Top Tips to Save the Planet

By Christine Farrell

From the chocolate we eat to the products we use...

Now we have turned down our thermostats and have begun to say no to standby, we can begin to look at other ways we can improve our lives and help safeguard our planet.

No sandals required, just a new and more positive approach to many of the things we take for granted, like our shopping, cleaning and eating habits. Time to think about the global picture.

Top Tips to Live a Better Life

• Forget the plastic: Plastic bags are bad – so take your own!
• Tell your friends: If you have saved money by implementing some easy energy saving tips you should tell at least one friend.
• Share: Yes, share – from your many power tools that lie under a pile of dust to the toys that your children have long outgrown. It’s not only better for the planet; sharing makes you feel good.

• If you don’t need it…don’t buy it!
• Make a difference: Opt for buying presents that make the world of difference to others. For some really great gift aid ideas try logging onto www.worldvision.org.
• Don’t buy new – invest in antique: Antique furniture is often cheaper than you think, makes a tremendous statement and lasts a lot longer too.
• Don’t just bin it: Reuse, recycle or donate it.
• Buy local: Across the world more and more people are opting to shop locally.
• Organise a clothes swap: Update your wardrobe by sharing – it makes perfect sense.
• Tell your boss: If by turning off your lights you saved X amount just imagine what we could save if offices across the globe adopted and implemented these simple energy saving measures into their daily routine.
• Switch to green energy: A great way to help reduce our global emissions is to make a stand and switch to buying energy from a green energy supplier.
• Walk: Yes, walk. Walking is not only good for the environment; it can dramatically improve your health! So hang up your keys and walk whenever you can.
• Friendly to fish: Make sure that your fish has come from a certifiable source.
Shrimp matters: Look to buy ecologically sound prawn and shrimp. We may all have come to love the sweet taste of it, but intensive shrimp fishing not only destroys many other marine species, shrimp farms have been directly responsible for the destruction of valuable mangroves!

Fairtrade: Add a little or a lot of fair trade into your weekly shop. Fairtrade is good for the planet and helps to secure the lives and the livelihoods of some of the world’s poorest communities. So lend your support and help encourage more to do the same.

Sweet success: Buying chocolate with a high cocoa content is better for you and far better for both the cocoa farmer and the environment.

Responsible companies: Switch to buying from companies who are socially responsible and who place value on the planet’s natural resources.

Recycled paper: Make sure that the paper you buy is either recycled or from a non-wood source.

Ditch the packaging: Buy whenever and wherever possible loose fruit and vegetables.

Love your meat: Whenever you can buy meat from sustainable or organic farms.

Bin the plastic cup: Get everyone to bring in a proper mug.

Buy organic cotton: Not only is organic a far nicer product, it is far better for the environment.

Make patio heaters a blast from the past: Invest in some brightly coloured blankets - snuggle up and get personal.

Worried about waste? Buy a wormery – a great way to get rid of your waste and fantastic for the kids!

Car share: As ominous as it sounds car sharing can work, provided of course the people you share with start and or end their journey where you do. Car sharing is also a great way of reducing the volume of school traffic.

In season: Switch to buying food that is in season and grown (whenever possible) locally – say no to excess food miles!

_Some Facts to Think About_

Fact: The Co-op supermarket in the UK was the first retailer to actively support Fairtrade and now stock over 110 Fairtrade products.

Did you know? One in ten products that line the shelves of our supermarkets contains vegetable oils, including palm oil. The spread of palm oil plantations has had a devastating effect on the lives and habitat of the orangutan. Almost ninety percent of the forests that are home to the orangutan have been destroyed.

Did you know? To produce just one tonne of paper requires two to three times its weight in timber.

Fact: Half of the paper in use today is for packaging! Ditch the packaging and join the growing number of consumers across the globe who say no to excess packaging.

Fact: In the UK alone we bin over three billion plastic cups a year!

Christine Farrell is the founder of www.climate-information.com, the first website to put the subject of climate change into a global context. Developed to help people understand the role we play in the bigger picture, Climate-information.com delivers timely, global information on climate change, deforestation, diet, water and saving energy.
Thai Prawn Salad

Ingredients:
- 500g/4½ cups peeled, cooked tiger prawns
- 1 spring onion
- 1 small garlic clove, crushed
- 12 Little Gem lettuce leaves
- 2 small fresh red chillies
- 2.5cm piece fresh lemon grass
- 2 tbsp fresh coriander
- 2 tbsp fresh parsley
- 1 tbsp soft light brown sugar
- 30ml/2 tbsp oriental fish sauce
- 60ml/4 tbsp lime juice
- 30ml/2 tbsp olive oil
- 90ml/6 tbsp dry white wine
- Salt and ground black pepper
- Fresh coriander sprigs, to garnish

1. Chop up the lettuce, spring onion, coriander, parsley and lemon grass. Deseed and thinly slice the chillies. Place chopped items in a large bowl.

2. Add in the prawns along with the remaining ingredients. Stir well, cover with cling film (cellophane) and leave to marinate in the fridge for approximately 3 hours, mixing and turning the prawns from time to time.

3. Garnish with fresh coriander and serve.

Baked Fish with Garlic & Thai Fragrant Rice

Ingredients:
For the fish
- 1kg monkfish tail in one piece, skin and membrane removed
- 45ml/3 tbsp vegetable stock
- 50-45ml/2-3 tbsp white wine
- 2 garlic cloves
- 25g butter
- 50g/1 cup fresh white breadcrumbs
- 15g fresh parsley, chopped
- Salt and ground black pepper
- 15ml/1 tbsp olive oil

For the rice
- 225g/1 cup brown basmati rice
- 2 limes
- 15ml/1 tbsp sunflower oil
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 stalk of lemon grass, finely chopped
- 2.5cm piece of fresh root ginger, peeled and finely chopped
- 1 ½ tsp coriander seeds
- 1 ½ tsp cumin seeds
- 750ml/3 cups vegetable stock
- 4 tbsp chopped fresh coriander

A FOOD TO DIE FOR
Thai food is some of the most delicious in the entire world. When cooked well the tastes are barely believable they’re so good. Having mixed eastern and western influences for centuries to create a cuisine that has internationally regarded, Thai food is also renowned for its health benefits. We promise these three mouth-watering recipes promise will not let you down.
For the fish
1. Preheat the oven to 190°C/Gas 5. Place the monkfish in an ovenproof dish and season with salt and pepper. Bake for 15-20 minutes. Mix the stock with the wine and use to baste the monkfish 2-3 times during cooking.
2. Finely chop the garlic. Melt the butter and toss it with the breadcrumbs, garlic, parsley and seasoning until the crumbs are evenly moistened. Spoon the breadcrumb mixture over the monkfish, pressing it down with the back of a spoon.
3. Drizzle the olive oil over the crumb-covered fish, return the dish to the oven and bake for a final 15 minutes, until the breadcrumbs are crisp and golden and all the liquid has been absorbed.

For the rice
1. Rinse the rice in plenty of cold water until the water runs clear. Drain through a sieve.
2. Remove the zest from the limes using a zester or a fine grater. Avoid removing the pith with the zest.
3. Heat the oil in a large pan and add the onion, lemon grass, spices and lime zest and cook for 2-3 minutes.
4. Add the rice and cook for another 2-3 minutes, then add the stock and bring to the boil. Reduce the heat to very low and cover the pan. Cook gently for 30-35 minutes then check the rice. Once cooked, remove from the heat.
5. Stir in the fresh coriander, cover and leave for 15 minutes.

THAI-FRIED BANANAS

Ingredients:
- 1 tbsp desiccated coconut
- 40g/3 tbsp unsalted butter
- 4 large slightly under-ripe bananas
- 50g/4 tbsp soft light brown sugar
- 60ml/4 tbsp lime juice
- 2 lime slices, to decorate
- Vanilla ice cream, to serve

Instructions:
1. Dry fry the coconut in a small frying pan until lightly browned. Heat the butter in a wok and fry the bananas for about 2 minutes on each side, or until they are golden in colour.
2. Sprinkle the sugar into the wok with the bananas, add the lime juice and cook, stirring, until the sugar is dissolved. Sprinkle the browned coconut over the bananas, decorate with lime slices and serve with ice cream.
The Hub

Do you ever have a problem and need answers fast? Do you wish you could get objective advice from a peer? Ask on The Hub!

Join in the topics from your peers around the world. DeskDemon's 'The Hub' is a forum board that allows you to network with your peers. Share your thoughts, experiences and advice with your peers worldwide. Post a question or a thought or simply join in and comment to help others.

Take a minute to visit 'The Hub' at DeskDemon

Grasping life by the scruff of the neck


But if that’s how you feel, don’t you think it’s time you stopped concentrating on what’s wrong and made a promise to yourself to change? How about celebrating what’s right and deciding to have more of it? How about recognising that you do have the power to make choices? Why not acknowledge that it’s never too late to become the person you’ve always wanted to be and decide right now to create a whole new you?

Okay, I can feel your cynicism from here, but please stay with me. It is feasible; it can be done. Thousands of over fifties have made some great decisions that have led to them leading happier, more fulfilling, radically different lives. You could join them, but you have to start by realising that, you’re not alone, you haven’t got a moment to waste and the future you face really does depend on you.

The First Teenagers

When we’re young we tend to think that when we’re fifty we’ll know it all. We fully expect we’ll be successful, wise, confident, accomplished, likeable and fun loving people with everything going for us, most of our ambitions achieved and very little about our lives that’s wrong. But in 2007 many are finding it’s not like that. In fact, reflecting the angst of the first generation of “teenagers” that they started out as in the 1950s and 60s, many over 50s are stressed, striving, and still wondering when, if ever, they’re going to “get there”.

Today in the UK the thirteen million or so of us who are between fifty and seventy are told we’ve never had it so good. Sandwiched between middle and old age, we’re a rapidly growing, vibrant generation whose attitudes, aspirations and interests are a million miles away from those of the truly elderly. Ours is the generation with the greatest amount of disposable wealth (albeit unevenly distributed), a hugely extended life expectancy, and a massive amount of freedom. So, if the media and marketing messages are to be believed, all over 50s are pushing the boundaries, being adventurous and living life to the full.

A Hidden Reality

But things aren’t as straightforwardly rosy as they seem. A huge proportion of over 50s – particularly women – are rocketing into retirement with insufficient funds to sustain them. Even those with good pensions who seem to have “made it” can find that this is a time when things start to turn sour. Boredom with the status quo, including jobs and relationships, combines with uncertainty about what to do next. The future stretches ahead. Suddenly words like “set in your ways” and “past it” seem a bit too close to home. It all adds up to a state of restlessness and disquiet that we never expected to feel.
Knowing Where to Start

If you’re in your prime and you don’t feel as fantastic as you should – particularly when you look at all those other baby boomers who are “doing it for themselves”, trekking round the world or starting new relationships – it can be difficult to know what to do. It’s not always easy to create new goals. Even if we think we know what we want, how do we judge whether what we aspire to is truly admirable or, perish the thought, somewhat embarrassing? What if we end up feeling foolish rather than fantastic? How do we make wholesale changes without damaging or discarding others? Where do we draw the line when for years we’ve been used to doing the same things in the same ways with the same outcomes? Where do we start?

The first thing is to realise that being over fifty represents a broad spectrum of experience. At one end there are people who are satisfied and happy and are looking for little more. At the other, there are those who are economically underprivileged and whose main concerns are focused around their health, wealth and fundamental wellbeing. In the middle, there’s a big group who are comparatively successful but find themselves wondering, “Is that all there is?” There’s a realisation that if we just accept that the best is behind us, then the future really isn’t very bright.

Universal Issues: Insight and Understanding

Despite our individual differences, at this age there are some issues of universal importance in everyone’s lives: health, finance, relationships, learning and development, communication, a sense of self and having fun. And whatever the specific challenge you have about your life, any solutions tend to have consistent themes: actively manage the situation – don’t let things just drift – let go of the past and deal with the here and now, treat yourself and others kindly, maintain a balance between work, relationships and your own needs, plan and think things through, and focus on listening and good communication.

One of the key things at this age is to gain insight; we need first to understand what is really important to us and to others, and second, to see ourselves as others see us. The problem at this age is that a lot of what we do and much of who we are is heavily overlaid with habit and assumption. We assume that our relationships with people are still as strong as they once were, but perhaps other people have started to drift away and are leaving us behind. In our work we assume that we are still as efficient, organised and creative as we once were, but perhaps the goalposts have moved and we’re falling behind. In our dealings with others we think that we are kind, caring and concerned, but perhaps the way we say things and our tendency not to listen at times makes others feel diminished and hurt?

Leave the Status Quo Behind

Even more fundamentally, we need to realise and accept in a very positive way that the status quo won’t continue for ever now we’ve reached this age. Our health and strength will decline, but it’s not too late to start a new regime – right now! – of eating better, drinking less, exercising more and paying attention to any warning signs. We won’t always be top of the queue for promotion or even be assured of a job. But we do have the opportunity to keep developing our undoubted strengths, learn new skills and think of ways that we’d like to continue contributing in the workplace that has benefits for others and meaning for us, for example, through a mentoring role.
Our relationships won’t continue in the same way indefinitely. We must think of our family, friends and colleagues as garden plants – cultivate and feed them industriously, enjoy them while they last, but be prepared to have them fail or die. Our response must be to enjoy them during the here and now and be prepared to start again without regret, putting our energies into creating new relationships and enjoying them grow whilst still carefully tending those which remain.

What Do You Want for the Rest of Your Life?

The ways people choose to change their lives are totally unique to them. There are huge numbers of over fifties out there doing massively impressive things like starting businesses or charities, resuming their education, or moving abroad. But for some of us that isn’t appropriate – it doesn’t represent what we want or need. Perhaps we just want to find a way to feel a bit more positive about ourselves, more optimistic about the future, or to worry less and sleep better. These things are just as important, and the starting point is the same. It’s down to you to take some time to really think about what you want and determine to make some changes.

At this age, we’ve all been around long enough to know deep down what we need to do and be, but somehow, in some areas, we just get into bad habits. The answer is shockingly simple and highly memorable:

• Think
• Plan
• Believe in yourself
• Do

By reminding ourselves of those things we’ve always known but maybe have overlooked or forgotten, we can focus on seeing ourselves as others see us now – not as we were. We can determine to find the courage, confidence and self-belief to become the best we can be. And for all of us that means not settling for being “good for our age”, but aiming to be fantastic!

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Want to know the secret to creating a foolproof wardrobe? It’s all about “buying less and spending more”. The ultimate goal is to build a wardrobe of clothes that suit you perfectly and that will mix and match easily to create innumerable outfits. It may take you several years to get there, but the result is absolutely worth it.

A perfect wardrobe should be made up of 60% Classic pieces, 20% Basics and 20% Trend.

You probably already have a few classic pieces in your wardrobe. These are the items you paid more for but are made of high quality natural fibres and have lasted for years. By purchasing classic pieces over a longer period of time, pairing them with good quality basics and keeping current with a few trend items, you will always look elegant and put together.

Begin by separating your clothing into piles of classics, basics and trend. The classics are good quality pieces that fit you well, that look great and are still in great condition. Next create a pile of good quality basics like singlets, stockings, t-shirts and lingerie. These are items that should be replaced every season or so. Finally you should be left with a pile of trend items. While you may want to hang on to a few favourites, once the trend is over you need to throw them out or donate them. Anything you decide to keep should be stored separately from the rest of your wardrobe.

Once this is done you can create a list of which classic items you need to complete your perfect wardrobe. Here are the top ten staples of a classic wardrobe:

A good trench coat: This is a wardrobe essential. As with all your classic pieces, choose a neutral colour like black, chocolate, navy and beige.

Good quality knitwear: Go for natural fibre like 100% wool or cashmere. These are more expensive but much better quality and will last a lot longer. A classic V-neck style in a thin knit will get you through several seasons.

A cocktail dress: Look for a classic style that flatters your body shape. A wrap dress suits most figures. Remember, it doesn’t necessarily have to be a “little black dress”. If black isn’t your thing, pick a dress in one of your best non-neutral colours.

A white shirt: A well-cut white shirt with crisp collar and cuffs is always a great addition to any wardrobe. It is perfect to layer with this season’s trends or as timeless weekend and work wear.

A great pair of jeans: Look for either a bootcut or straight leg style in a dark, even denim – definitely no
fading, embroidery or hemline detail. Always fit your widest area first, and then it can just be a simple alteration to nip in the waist and so on if it is too large.

**An A-line skirt:** A simple A-line skirt is very easy to wear and great for covering problem areas like the stomach and hips.

**Man-style pants:** A great cut that skims over the hip area and creates a long leg line. Get a pair in black and beige.

**Knee high boots:** Perfect for autumn and winter weather. Look for a soft chocolate leather in whatever heel height you are comfortable with.

**A beige leather handbag:** Always gorgeous, this will go with practically everything.

Now that you have your wardrobe of classics, you can start to create “clothing clusters”. This is a clever and easy way to build a versatile wardrobe of clothes. Once you get the idea of how clusters work, you’ll be able to plan your wardrobe around them and give yourself lots of options.

**Clothing clusters**

A clothing cluster is a group of five to twelve pieces (jacket, skirt, pants and so on) that work in combination with each other. The basic guidelines are:

- Solids mix more easily than prints but prints can bridge the gap between two completely different solids
- Choose classic styles with clean, simple lines
- Choose colours from your most flattering colour palette
- Choose styles that suit your shape and your clothing personality

- Invest in quality pieces that will last for many years

Go through your wardrobe and note down all the possible combinations you own and then try them on to make sure they really work. Maybe you could have a friend or your partner take a photo of you in each outfit you create so you can remember all the combinations you came up with.

Teaming classic pieces with good quality basics in your best colours will ensure you always look elegant and put together. Best of all, taking the time to plan your wardrobe means you’ll no longer be tempted to waste money on impulse items that don’t go with anything you own.

**Susan Lockhart** is a leading image consultant in Brisbane, Australia and owner of Synergy Image Consulting. At Synergy Image Consulting you can learn how to make the most of your appearance and dress for success and get professional advice on colour, dressing for your body shape, bridal wear, grooming and more. More information can be found at http://www.synergyimage.com.au.
We would all like to be able to read other people’s minds – especially our boss’s quite often. Unfortunately it’s impossible – similar to staring at a huge field of letters and trying to decipher a code. In this field of letters, though, it’s possible to find the words from the sentences below. It may not be mind reading, but it’s pretty good mind work.

(Repeated words only appear once in puzzle)

| WE | WOULD | ALL | LIKE | TO | BE | ABLE | TO | READ | OUR | BOSS’S | MIND | BUT | REMEMBER | THAT | HE | OR | SHE | CAN’T | READ | YOURS | TOO. | IF | YOU | HAVE | ANY | QUESTIONS | ON | A | PROJECT | THEN | CLARIFY | THE | INSTRUCTIONS, | COMMUNICATIONS | IN | BOTH | DIRECTIONS | IS | ESSENTIAL | IN | A | PARTNERSHIP | RELATIONSHIP |
| OUR | WCN | MQ | ECTIONS | R | AD | F BOSS | SS | SPIN | LH | ISHEMYOU | BMX | NATHEN | NS | SMM | READ | RTH | AT | SZVSUACC | ALTTB | ORW | TTEEN | ISLMGMNP | WEP | ROANIABAGIEJT | OR | UOLTFCRF | SNSFRA | HE | COI | IAI | ND | HDSLBS | BP | J | TIN | ATURFE | BIH | LWM | E | IRNLIONYIEKIEJG | C | OWTFROY | USERP | DUB | T | NOHWNBUTWOULDYO | A | SWEZSMREM | EMBERTN | RELATIONSHIP | IPTO | HY | CD | IRECTIONSJ | CANT |
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