

LIFESTYLE



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Goodbye to clutter

Professional organizers straighten clients' messy lives

BY KAREN AYRES
Daily Record

If you sleep on the floor because your bed is filled with clutter, or if you haven't seen the top of your desk in months because it's covered with papers, you're not alone.

Busy executives and homeowners alike find it hard to get organized. But thousands of people are discovering the growing services of professional organizers, who will help you clear the old phone messages off your desk, the dishes out of your sink and the clothes out of your closet.

"It's like losing weight," said Terry Schuster of Clutter Free in Fair Lawn. "When you decided to become organized, people look at you differently."

Schuster is one of about 85 members of the Greater New York Area Chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers. She began working as a professional organizer three years ago and works primarily in people's homes, home offices and small businesses.

Schuster said her clients often misuse their space. She goes into their home or office, listens to their concerns and goals for organization, and works with them to develop new organizational programs, like a filing system for office papers and mail.

Basic paper plan

Schuster follows a basic paper plan: Trash it, pass it on, pay it, file it or act on it.

"It's all just delayed decision-making," Schuster said. "We go through and find a place for every piece of paper."

Schuster and other professional organizers also go through clients' kitchens and closets, cleaning and organizing what is often years worth of clutter.

"I make logical centers of operation, like putting all the kids' cups in the bottom cabinet," she said. "I help people help themselves."

Let's get organized in five quick steps

1. Keep a calendar to track your activities, as well as your family activities.
2. Open all of your mail every day and file or throw it away.
3. Set up a home office.
4. Make a list every day and prioritize the items on it.
5. Every day, throw something away.

— from "Organize Your Stuff the Lazy Way" by Toni Ahlgren

Schuster said she tries to help her clients organize their time and possessions on a permanent basis. Several clients call her every morning to tell her their goals for the day, which encourages clients to take responsibility for their actions and to improve their time-management skills.

Schuster said her clients are disorganized for a variety of reasons: Some have attention deficit disorder, others have obsessive compulsive disorder, and many are overly attached to their possessions.

Many more clients are simply very busy and don't take the time to sort papers when they check their mail each day. Some clients were organized before a crisis of some type like a divorce or even something positive like a wedding threw their organizational system for a loop.

No matter what the reason, Schuster urges her clients to remember one thing: "Your mess wasn't created overnight and we won't make sense of it in just a few days."

Both Schuster and fellow professional organizer Elaine Bloom encourage clients to remember the rule of 80/20, which basically means people use about 20 percent of their possessions 80 percent of the time. That rule encourages people to throw out

many possessions they would otherwise keep in their closets, cabinets and desks.

"That rule cuts across almost everything in people's lives," said Bloom of A Place for Everything in Maplewood. "I encourage people to set up a filing system that works for them and to go through it regularly and purge things."

Bloom became a professional organizer six years ago after reading a magazine article about the profession. She said she has found a difference over the years between clutterers and people with just a lot of paper.

"Clutterers are usually very complicated," she said. "Brain chemistry is a factor, as is how they were raised and the emotional deprivation in their lives. I ask them what they want to get out of their lives."

Labeling toy bins

Bloom also works directly with her clients to help them manage their papers and other items. She said children can add to the clutter, but can also learn at an early age to organize. Labeling toy bins with pictures can help the youngest child stay organized, just as color-coding files helps keep busy executives in order.

"Paper management and time management are very intertwined," she said. "You need to assign priorities."

Deborah Gussoff of In Order agreed and said there is no typical client.

"It all depends on why someone is saving things," said Gussoff, of Montclair. "Some people purchase things to fill a void in their lives, while others suffer from a lack of time."

Gussoff said clients often have so much clutter in their homes that they buy duplicates of things they already have because they can't find them. Other people spend hours every week looking for the same

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items.

"If you look more than once, you haven't established a place for it," she said. "By knowing what you have you can also save money."

Gussoff said she encourages her clients to throw things out by providing them with a list of organizations that accept donations. As for

clients' offices, she recommends liberally using recycle bins.

Do'reen Hein, another professional organizer based in New York City, works primarily with corporate clients who need to do more than throw papers away. Hein works on large projects like organizing computer systems for telecommunication companies.

"I listen to my clients and review their big picture," said Hein, of Artistic Designs. "I try to create a system around how they function.

It's not just telling someone how to file. It's a behavioral and way of life change."

Hein makes task lists for her clients and focuses on organizing her clients' computer tool boxes.

"Computers are where the technology is going," she said. "People are just now understanding their importance."

Hein was one of few professional organizers when she began her career in 1985. Now there are more than 1,200 professional organizers

across the country who work with corporations, small businesses and homeowners.

Organizers' fees range from about \$40 an hour to about \$200 an hour for corporate work. However, many organizers said they give their clients homework assignments and allow them to work on their own time.

Books with professional organizing techniques also are available at your local bookstore if you have budget concerns.

And if you need more incentive to get organized, listen to Schuster: "I've had clients find chairs they didn't even know they had. But it's mostly money, like checks for \$200. We always find money."

FOR MORE INFORMATION on personal organizers in your area, including the organizers mentioned above, call the National Association of Professional Organizers at (512) 206-0151, or visit the organization's Web site at www.napo.net.