

Conquering Clutter

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZERS HELP CREATE ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

By Tim Westby

Admit it. That stack of papers you haven't gotten around to filing bugs you. Or is it the growing pile of unopened mail that makes you cringe? Or that muddle on your desk? Sure, it's organized. Sort of. You can find what it is you're looking for — eventually. But deep down, all the clutter around you is a source of stress. You keep telling yourself that one of these days you will take the time to simplify and create order out of chaos, but haven't you said that for months — if not years? And really, do you even know where to begin?

We're a nation of stuff. And we bring more of it into our lives on a daily basis, often without knowing where to put it. So we pile it into corners, boxes and closets. Our two-car garages are so filled with stuff we leave our cars exposed to the elements. For those things we really don't know what to do with, but can't bring ourselves to toss, there is the attic or basement or, for the truly beset, the rented storage locker.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed by it all. But don't worry. Help is here. In fact, it's everywhere. Countless books and magazine articles (and even whole magazines), videos and classes have spawned a kind of anti-clutter movement.

If the books are not helping you cut through the clutter, consider forking out the bucks to bring in a pro. The web site for the 2,000-member strong National Association of Professional Organizers lists 13 members in Utah alone. A professional organizer will come into your home or office and work with you to clear out the clutter and show you a plethora of ways to keep organized.

Do not hire a professional organizer expecting to get a premium maid service. Instead, be prepared to do much of the work yourself. A professional organizer will help you get things in order, but you'll need to be fully involved in the process in order for it to work.

"Organizing is mostly a skill, so teaching is a big part of the process," says Marla Dee, owner of Clear & Simple in Salt Lake City. "Eighty percent of people I work with, once they have a system in place, they're fine."

Most professional organizers will start with a one to two-hour consultation in your home or office. "I sit down with my clients and find out what is working and what is not," says Vickie Hansen, owner of My Organized Life in Ogden. "I need to understand the flow of what my clients are trying to achieve."

Then they will map out a detailed plan. This is also where the acronyms and mantras come in. One favorite: STACKS: Sort it. Toss it. Assign it a home. Find containers. Keep it up. Simplify. Another is: See it. Map it. Do it.

Once a professional organizer maps out a plan, it's up to you to decide whether to handle the "do it" part on your own or ask for more help. Not surprisingly, most people want more help. "The number one reason why I would hire a professional organizer is because they can get it done," says Jamie Tabish, owner of Organized by Design in Salt Lake City. "There isn't time built into our lives for organizing and creating structure."



Marla Dee, owner of Clear & Simple, helps master the messy office.

Clutter's most fertile area, the one on which professional organizers say they spend by far the most time, is paper. "Ten years ago we were told we would have a paperless society because of computers, but the opposite is true. We have more of it than ever, and we don't know what to do with it," says Gloria Perry, owner of Harmonious Connection in Springville.

Specializing in filing — including computer files — and at least a bit of Feng Shui seems the bare minimum requirement for

any good professional organizer. But many organizers also specialize in a variety of other areas that might seem surprising, such as time management, estate sales, finances, goal setting and even working with people who have "special needs," such as children with Attention Deficit Disorder or the disabled.

Of course, a big part of creating order and structure means letting go. "We live in a world of abundance. I teach emotional detachment. We collect things that we don't need," says Hansen.

"In that sense, professional organizing is a lot like therapy," says Dee, who adds that while most of her calls come from women, men are better at the letting go part. "Men typically don't have a hard time tossing," she says, laughing. "I love working with men."

The amount of time it can take to clear out the clutter can vary widely, but Tabish estimates that most of her jobs range from six to 16 hours. "I've had clients who haven't opened their mail for two years. And I've had clients

who have never even organized an office or have moved into someone else's space, so it just depends on the amount of clutter that we're talking about," she says.

With most professional organizers in Utah charging \$45 to \$50 an hour, the final bill can quickly hit several hundred dollars. "It costs from \$400 to \$750 to really thoroughly do a room," notes Dee. "Plus the cost of containers."

For that reason and the amount of time required, Dee says she often works with clients off and on for up to a year. "We'll do one room and then take a break. And then we'll do another room."

Despite the cost, there is not a lack of work. And in the case of Dee and Perry, they have spent much of their time teaching others to be professional organizers.

"This industry is absolutely going nuts," says Dee. "The demand is huge out there. I'm very busy."

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