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Creating order out of chaos can require a professional organizer

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As home offices go, Dianna Lovelace's work space wasn't the messiest. But every time the Rancho Cordova mother and pastor's wife wanted to pay a bill, do some writing or work on a project, the clutter crowded out her ability to concentrate.

Like many of us, the energetic mom, who also runs a women's ministry and teaches motivational workshops, could never find the time to get on top of her home office clutter.

And in her otherwise spotless home, it showed. The desktop was covered with family photos, piles of paper, bills, school notices. The wall-to-wall shelves were crammed with books, binders, old phone books, family mementoes, magazines, even a wedding bouquet. And the floor? It was a holding station for accumulated household stuff: last year's Christmas wreath, a bedroom comforter, the vacuum cleaner, Goodwill donations, a bag of to-be-shredded papers and 15 years' worth of women's conference materials.

"All I want is peace ... and to be able to multitask a little easier," exclaimed Lovelace, who said she procrastinated several years before hiring Tonya Piper, a professional organizer.

That's a typical response. "It's overwhelming for many people. Sometimes they just need permission to get rid of their 'stuff,'" said Piper, owner of **Control C.H.A.O.S.**, a former engineer who's been a professional organizer for churches, homes and offices the last five years.

A home office, whether it's a corner table or an entire room, is the place where every document of your life, from bills to health care to school, needs a place to roost.



BEFORE

Jose Luis Villegas / jvillegas@sacbee.com
Tonya Piper, right, a professional organizer, knows she'll be tested in removing the clutter from the home office of Dianna Lovelace, left. Among the benefits of the cleanup, Lovelace found \$100 in cash that had been forgotten in prior remodeling.



AFTER

Bryan Patrick / bpatrick@sacbee.com
Tonya Piper's de-cluttering of Dianna Lovelace's home office left an entire bookcase empty.

Getting it organized can free up usable space, and result in less time and money spent looking for lost items or buying replacements.

The mantra of every personal organizer: Everything in your house needs its own home, including every piece of paper you keep. And even then, we keep too much.

"People like to pile, instead of file," said Ann Nagel, the Elk Grove owner of Organize With Ann, who has seen clients' homes with paper piled on window sills, dining room tables, bathroom floors and just about any flat surface. The most typical -- but worst -- place, she says, is the kitchen counter, where papers easily get wet or spilled on.

"About 95 percent of what we file we never look at again but it's taking up valuable real estate in our home office," says Nagel, who turned to professional organizing after 30 years as a legal and corporate secretary.

When tackling a home office organization, there are two necessities: a good filing cabinet and a commitment to purge paper. And an understanding that it's often ugliest at the start.

To begin, spread your piles on the bed or floor and sort by category: taxes, insurance, bills, owners' manuals, etc. Put a sticky note on each pile as you go. Once they're sorted, create sub-categories. For instance, under "Insurance", you might have separate files: "Insurance-Health", "Insurance-Life," "Insurance-Home." Ultimately, those piles should go into a permanent home inside labeled folders in a filing cabinet. "It's not rocket science. Everyone has the same stuff, but with their own special needs," said Nagel. Create a filing system that works for you. Some need a file for resumes, airline rewards, gym memberships, Social Security. Some like organizing files alphabetically, by color (green for finances, blue for medical, etc.) or category.

Lovelace had already color-coded many of her women's workshop files, but they occupied valuable space inside a desk drawer. Because they aren't used daily or even monthly, Piper moved them to a nearby bookshelf. She turned brown accordion file folders on their sides, facing out, so Lovelace's rainbow-hued files are easily accessible.

Another home organizing tip: Have a single place to store incoming papers. It can be a letter tray, a file folder, a basket or even a box. "If it's all in one spot, you stand a much better chance of dealing with it when you're ready to take action," says Nagel. She always gives clients two brightly colored file folders: a red "Take Action" (phone calls to make, letters to write, insurance companies to contact) and a money-green "Bills to Pay" folder. They're intended to sit prominently on a desktop as visual reminders. "So many people don't pay bills on time and get late fees," said Nagel, "because they lose their bills or they're hidden in a pile somewhere."

Another common clutter contributor is sticky notes that often proliferate on desktops or computer monitors. Instead, keep a small binder or spiral notebook on your desk to consolidate all your to-do lists, phone calls, follow-up reminders and sticky notes, says Holly Graff, owner of Clutter Control Angels in Sacramento.

Sometimes, there are unexpected rewards to home organizing. Lovelace, for instance, was about to toss a tattered Home Depot bag filled with old light switch covers but decided to sort through the contents. At the bottom was a plain white envelope. Inside: \$100 cash, left over from a home remodeling project. Piper says other clients have found forgotten gift cards or checks.

Lovelace's office transformation took about 12 hours, not counting "homework" assignments to weed out unneeded papers sitting in binders, boxes and piles. She enlisted her son's help to shred pounds of unwanted paper. Her printer and scanner, once across the room, are now within reach. The files she uses most often are fingertips away. A wire basket for bills sits on her desktop, along with a few favorite family photos. Everything came off the floor and went into designated areas. The result: a place for every object, including the wedding bouquet.

And because so much was discarded, donated or relocated, Lovelace now has six empty bookshelves and space for her sewing and scrapbooking projects -- as well as freedom to write the motivational women's book she's been planning. "With all this clutter, I couldn't ever focus on it. Doing this project has shot up my self-esteem," says the exuberant Lovelace, who calls the organizing experience energizing. "One of my slogans is 'Do it scared, but just do it.' That's just what I did here."

MORE DE-CLUTTERING TIPS

January is official Get Organized Month, says the National Association of Professional Organizers. From kitchen to garage, here are tips from local organizers:

Dawn Cannon

www.finelyorganized.net, Roseville

- * Gather up the holiday decor -- Easter, Christmas, Halloween -- you didn't use this year or no longer want. If you've stocked up on 75-percent-off holiday sales, get rid of two boxes for every new box you buy.
- * Try a 15-minute de-clutter exercise. Pick a room and walk through with a garbage bag, looking at what's visible, like the teacup collecting dust on your mantel for five years. Ask yourself: Do I love it, do I use it, does it bring me joy? If not, it goes into the donate bag. Involve your kids. They'll let go of stuff more easily if they help decide.
- * Raid the pantry. Get rid of expired food or items you'll never eat. Make it a kids' game and let them search for expiration dates.
- * Magazine pileups: While watching TV, flip through old magazines, tearing out articles you want to read. Date and put in a "To Read" file. If they're not read in 30 days, toss. Another option: Bookmark articles to read online. Donate clean magazines to libraries or used-book stores.
- * Kids' art: Gather crayons, markers, colored paper, craft supplies. Donate to classrooms, after-school programs or women's shelters.
- * Kitchen: Haven't used the bread machine in years? Donate it. If you can multitask with a single item, like a Cuisinart, give away the extras. Don't hang onto saucepans or skillets you never use, even if part of a set.

Holly Graff

www.cluttercontrolangels.com, Sacramento

- * Take 10-15 minutes daily to tackle one project: empty a junk drawer, file some papers, delete 10 e-mail messages.
- * Always open mail near the recycling bin or shredder. Dump all junk mail before it lands on countertop or table.
- * Schedule a Saturday family de-clutter date, even if only for 30 minutes. Start small: a closet, a drawer, a desktop. Pull everything out and sort into piles for tossing, recycling or donating.

Ann Nagel

www.organizewithann.com, Elk Grove

- * For the garage, take a day to pull everything onto the driveway and sort by categories: gardening, sports equipment, tools, etc. Decide whether to keep, donate, recycle, trash or garage sale.
- * For coupons, buy a small box with dividers labeled January through December. File by expiration month.
- * Use descriptive names on files. Never label a file "Miscellaneous." File new papers in front so oldest stay in back.
- * Keep a "To Be Filed" folder on your filing cabinet. At least weekly, file the accumulated paperwork.
- * Don't use paper clips. They fall off, catch on other papers and cause misfiling. Use a stapler or metal clips for thicker documents.
- * To reduce clutter, do a daily sweep of your house -- in morning or just before bed -- putting things away.

Tonya Piper

controlchaosorganizing.com, Rancho Cordova

- * Spend an hour at the computer going through folders: delete unneeded documents, apps, sound files, photos.

PRO ORGANIZERS

If you want outside help in organizing your home, office or garage, check the National Association of Professional Organizers' website: napo.net. It has tips and links to local organizers. Typically, Sacramento-area organizers charge \$50 to \$120 per hour, depending on the job's size and complexity. Some offer speciality services: home downsizing, kids' rooms or helping those with chronic disorders such as hoarding.



AFTER

Bryan Patrick / bpatrick@sacbee.com

Dianna Lovelace has a neat office and peace of mind after the systematic filing and cleanup by Tonya Piper, left, who has named her company Control C.H.A.O.S. Lovelace said she had let her stuff pile up for years before hiring the former engineer.

Have a personal finance question? Call The Bee's Claudia Buck at (916) 321-1968.

Memo:

PERSONAL FINANCE

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