

# Taming the mess on your desk

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In every office in America, there are two kinds of desks. One looks heavily influenced by Jackson Pollock, the other by Norman Rockwell. And while in the art world certain eccentricities are tolerated, for professionals disorder can be a serious disadvantage.

Modern society seems to frown on messy people. To help them, the rapidly growing field of professional organizers is dedicated to teaching what mom and dad tried to when they said "make your bed" or "clean your room."

However, according to some, being messy is not the end of the world, and figuring out what to do about it isn't always as simple as calling an organizer.

When Walter Robinson moved into a new apartment in Cambridge, Mass., he found himself bringing boxes he hadn't unpacked from his previous move.

The boxes had labels on them marked important, but he hadn't opened them for over a year. He didn't really know what was in them, and he didn't really know why he had packed them up. At the same time, Robinson, a doctor at Children's Hospital Boston, knew he couldn't just throw out the boxes. They might contain records of his former patients or other documents relating to his practice.

The boxes, Robinson explained, made him realize he had a problem. His professional life spread out across multiple offices, and, constantly finding himself with too much to do and not enough time, he decided he needed to get organized.

"I was pretty good electronically, but I had stacks of papers everywhere," Robinson said. "I had multiple filing systems that I hadn't really thought out completely, and it wasn't working."

After reading an article about a professional organizer, Robinson decided to try the service. He called Michele Matties, founder of No Worries Professional Organizers of Framingham, Mass. That was more than six years ago, and the doctor and his professional organizer still work together, on occasion, though Robinson is now practicing medicine in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The order Matties brought to his professional life, the doctor said, has made an incredible difference.

"Michele cut my to-do list by a third," Robinson said. "Michele has this great gift in that she can take the number of things you are carrying around with you in your head and helped me put them down on paper in a way that I could do something about.... People who are creative walk around with a lot of projects in their heads, and she helped put it into a system so I didn't have to remember everything."

The last decade has seen a rapid expansion of professional organization services. The industry has national sales of over \$1 billion per year, if home and professional organization services are both included. Since 2000, membership in the National Association of Professional Organizers has more than doubled, rising to 4,000 members. This growth, according to the association's president, Barry Izsak, is no accident.

"Industries are born out of need," Izsak said. "As people find themselves having to deal with an ever-growing flow of information they are turning to us for help.... With life now more complex than ever, everyone is searching for a solution. People realize that the best chance of meeting this challenge is to get organized."

The statistics NAPO keeps on its Web site support Izsak's argument. Nearly a quarter of adults in the United States report that they incur late fees on bills because they lose them, according to a Harris Interactive poll. Ninety percent of Americans report an overwhelming sense of "time-poverty," according to a study published in *Psychology Today*. But those numbers don't answer the question: does organization really make us more productive?

This is the question Columbia Business School Prof. Eric Abrahamson explores in his new book *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder*, How cluttered closets, jumbled offices, and on-the-fly planning make the world a better place. Co-written with journalist David Freedman, the book draws a conclusion far different from that of NAPO.

Mess and order can be combined at different levels for different people, Abrahamson said in an interview. Dedication to organization, he argued, can actually be inefficient. As a self-described messy person, Abrahamson said that he has found his untidiness to be an advantage. Though he said he wouldn't want to be any less organized, he maintained that if he spent any more time organizing it would mean losing valuable time that could be put to better use.

"People who spend all their time organizing won't get anything done," he explained. "People who spend all their time being messy will find themselves unable to get anything done. The trick is to find the optimal level."

Among Abrahamson's findings, most people are often ashamed of being messy without having a good reason. Much of this tendency, he said, is a holdover from the industrial revolution, in which specific standards and orderliness allowed society to create great efficiencies. But as society moves into a knowledge- and information-based economy, the value of being organized compared with being creative or original has decreased.

"The industrial revolution was the advent of the machine and the engineer," Abrahamson said. "The idea of turning social systems into machines did not just remain in the realm of business organizations, but was applied to families, courts, churches.... This can be beneficial if you are focusing on mass production, but there are costs."

TIME SPENT organizing is time not spent thinking about a problem. In addition, spending too much time organizing at the company level can lead to compartmentalization of knowledge and can bottle up the spontaneity that breeds creativity, Abrahamson said.

For an individual there are economies of scale in tolerating mess to a certain point, such as waiting until you have accumulated a pile of documents to file, instead of filing each one at a separate time. Messiness also can give individuals and organizations alike a monopoly on information, since they are the only ones who know the location of anything. Abrahamson said part of the reason federal bureaucracies such as the FBI have such trouble tracking down terrorist cells is that those cells are disorganized and dispersed, making them difficult to track.

"We're not saying you should be a complete slob, but we're also not saying you should be obsessively compulsive," Abrahamson said. "If you are running a machine you should organize like a machine, but you can't run your life that way. Our environment changes very rapidly, and by not thinking and not adapting you are tremendously limiting yourself."

Abrahamson said he is skeptical of the real value professional organizers provide, given their fees and the costs in time and energy that being too organized brings about. In terms of society's view of the disorganized life, Abrahamson said, he thinks that if more people become aware of the costs of organization and the benefits of mess, the stigma will begin to fade.

"It's true that an extremely messy desk raises suspicion, but so should an extremely organized desk," he said. "Someone with a super clean desk is invariably spending a lot of time organizing, and I would ask: are they getting any work done at all?"

Perhaps organization is not an end in itself. But that doesn't mean professional organizers are never a help.

Robinson is one of hundreds of clients that Matties said she has helped since she started her business over 12 years ago. In that time she has helped small business owners and professionals develop systems of organization to help them meet their everyday demands.

Robinson said that Matties' value was that she showed him how to give everything in his home and office a place that made sense. By creating a "self-sustaining" system, he said, she helped him manage the huge inflow of information that is part of his practice.

In some special cases, Matties said, she has helped small business owners dramatically increase their cash flow by helping them organize the mailing of bills to clients. She has helped other clients who had trouble paying bills on time get their own books in order and slowly rebuild their credit rating.

"It's about giving support where they need it," Matties said. "We work together as a team. In some ways my appointments with people are the most important part of their day because that is when they know they will accomplish something."

Bringing her into their homes, she said, forces clients to open the drawers they are too afraid to look into or to throw away or file information they had forgotten.

"For some people it's attention issues, and for others they are just so geared to a fast-paced lifestyle, fast-paced jobs, that when it comes to filing the paperwork, that's what falls by the by."

BEFORE SHE began her career as a professional organizer, Matties worked in retail. But the traits that make her a strong organizer were always present. As a child, she said, she was the person who was always organizing her room, trying to minimize clutter and get rid of what she didn't need. As a management trainee at Filene's, she said, she distinguished herself by organizing the high-volume and highly messy men's stockroom at the store in which she worked.

As Izsak explains, those personality traits are hardly universal. "We get calls all the time from people who are in danger of losing their jobs because they are so disorganized," he said. "We were all taught grooming habits or study habits. Some people mastered it better than others. Organizing is the same kind of thing."

Matties charges between \$50 and \$250 per hour depending on what kind of help a client needs. The more physical work Matties is required to do, such as doing the sorting herself, the more expensive the service. Assessing the amount of help needed, she said, is part of her job.

"When people realize they need help, it's usually because they realize that what they're doing isn't working for them," Matties said. "What I do is help people use time in the best way for them by helping them get done what they need to get done more efficiently."

