

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Business Section

Organizer is batting cleanup

When clutter is out of hand in the office, this professional helps get things in order.

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Professional organizer Barbara J. Bergeron (left) helps Loren Barsky, director of human resources at St. Joseph's University, organize her file drawers. Barsky said that two years later, her staff still uses Bergeron's system.

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Barbara J. Bergeron quit her job eight years ago. She'd just had a baby and wanted to be a better mom. So she started a business she could run from her Chester County home.

Her first business, a billing services enterprise, bored her silly. So she shifted gears and turned the fact that she is a "very organized person" into a new career.

Now she's a player in a growing national profession that is coming of age this year.

Its practitioners call themselves "professional organizers" - when its national association's own testing program is implemented in a few months, some of them, including Bergeron, will become "certified professional organizers."

In their consulting work, professional organizers rescue office workers drowning in waves of e-mails and paper at a time when the percentage of people with secretaries or administrative assistants is shrinking.

"The information overload is astounding," Bergeron said, "and keeping up is rapidly becoming a survival skill."

Some professional organizers specialize in helping students navigate through distractions to better grades. Others save marriages by making homes work better. A few help senior citizens downsize into smaller living quarters and organize their lives around limitations of advancing age.

Many new clients have papers piled so high in their offices and on their desks that they can barely reach the top. One had so many tall piles he had to snake his way down a narrow path to his desk chair - there was no open space in his office.

"I'm shockproof," she said. There are two things she doesn't do - she doesn't sit in judgment "and I don't clean offices."

What she tries to do, with careful observation and through classes and personal coaching, "is teach organizing skills that last a lifetime."

She says she improves productivity at work and also improves weekends and vacations. Once the clutter is gone, "you don't have to memorize where every piece of paper is, think about what you're supposed to do and who you're supposed to call when you get back - you can truly leave work at the office."

The goal of her company, SOS Organizational Services, is to "improve the quality of a client's life, to reduce stress and anxiety and increase productivity."

Stephanie Denton of Cincinnati, president of the 1,600-member National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO) describes Bergeron "as a consummate professional... who jumps in and does what she says she's going to do."

Bergeron has risen rapidly in the 17-year-old NAPO, Denton said, to become its national marketing chairwoman. She is playing a key role in putting the young profession on the radar screens of corporations and individuals.

Seeing a professional organizer - like seeing a shrink - is something many are reluctant to talk about. One of Bergeron's clients, Loren Barsky, human resource director at St. Joseph's University, is an exception.

"She's made a vast difference... she learned my office... considered all the personalities... and put together a system for my staff that's very practical, not theoretical. That was two years ago. We still utilize it every day," Barsky said.

Professional organizers usually get new clients one of two ways. Someone feels frustrated and calls for help. Or their boss looks at a cluttered desk and calls for help. If the person says "there's nothing wrong here... I won't take the job."

She asks that new clients not clean up before she arrives. Seeing things the way they really are helps her figure out what might work for the person.

She comes in with a lot of ideas, but often has to come up with something original. One procrastinator kept letting piles get too high. So she replaced his desk with a slightly tilted drafting table. So if the piles get too high they fall on the floor. It's working, she said.

She teaches how to use Palm Pilots and other such devices as "more than an expensive Rolodex." She stays up-to-date on how to get the most out of contact-management and calendar software, as well as new time-saving devices - such as one that quickly scans business cards into computers.

For some she comes up with a color-coding system to help prioritize and identify tasks and projects, and she teaches how to put things that demand attention within arms reach and less-frequently-needed stuff farther away.

She sets things up so you can see what needs attention - and be frequently reminded to act. But her work is more than modern gadgets and smart office arrangements.

It is also about developing good relationships, budgeting time and efficient decision making. "Clutter is the result of decision-making delayed," she said.

And her work is about quality. Time wasted looking for something robs one of time for proactive work. Falling behind on that adds to the number of things one must deal with reactively and under stress.

She's worked with clients as few as four hours and gotten results. She's worked with some for four years.

She seeks to debunk what she says are common myths. Clutter, she said, is not a sign of creativity - it actually takes up time that could be spent being creative. Neatness, she adds, is not necessarily evidence of an organized person.

Looking ahead, Bergeron sees a day when CPOs will be as common as CPAs. There are now 33 listed on the NAPO Web site in Pennsylvania; 10 in New Jersey.

She said 40 percent of the paper and e-mails that most workers get daily should be trashed right away. Another 40 percent needs to be saved in an organized way and 20 percent requires action.

With e-mail systems cranking out 8.5 billion e-mails daily, the trash percentage is rising.

"Subtle changes continue to overload us," she said. "One never finishes organizing."