

Clutter expert gives writer a clean slate

Columnist sees desktop again after bulldozing through paper mountain



Anthony D'Ambrosio

An expert on "decluttering" tamed the paper mountain in our columnist's home office.

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I'm guilty. I admit it. I'm a clutter hound.

Stacks of newspapers and books are a common sight on my desk, and there's typically a slue of Post Its stuck to everything, and an array of nuts and junk food within easy grabbing distance.

Recently my husband, with whom I share a home office and who's sort of a neat freak, at least compared to me, got mad at me because an avalanche of my stuff spilled over onto his desk, leaving him little room to work.

I have tried to clean out my desk before, but I'm always too busy to do a thorough job, and frankly I've been overwhelmed with the thought of tackling the desk mayhem.

That's where Barb Bergeron, a professional organizer who runs SOS Organizational Service in Chester Springs, Pa., comes in.

When I realized she worked near my home in Wilmington, Del., I figured I should practice what I'm preaching in my column this week. So I decided to hire her and see for myself if there's anything to this productivity boost that supposedly comes with organization.

Clutter is bad. That's what you hear from experts of all sorts. They all say the same thing: Disorganization breeds frustration and a less-than-productive worker.

Who wants to drop the ball on productivity in this economy when employers are looking to save money by firing workers? "You don't want to be sticking out as having the most Frappuccinos on your desk," warns Karissa Thacker, a workplace psychologist.

And you don't want to be picking through the clutter trying to figure out what you should take if you are laid off, handed a cardboard box and given five minutes to clean out your desk.

Today's worker has to be ready for change at a moment's notice, and clutter is only weighing us down.

To help get the clutter monkey off my back, I needed help.

I emailed decluttering expert Bergeron a digital photo of my office, and that didn't deter her from taking the job.

Here's how it went down:

She arrived at my office at 9:30 a.m. and surveyed the cluttered landscape.

She then asked me about how I work and the space on my desk where I do most of my writing and reading during the day. She called this my desk's "beachfront" property — the space that I wanted to be clear so I could be the most productive.

Alas, it was covered with newspapers, books, food and a host of other things I didn't really need on my prime **real estate**.

She did offer me some kind words as a sea of dust rose from my desk and shelves as the detritus was moved around. "You're creative," she said. That meant the right side of my brain was dominant, she said, causing me to love horizontal spaces and visual systems.

She wasn't kidding. I had a lot of horizontal piles and stuff everywhere.

Traditional vertical filing systems like standing file folder holders and bulletin boards probably weren't for me. She was right about the bulletin boards. I had one right behind my computer, and it was covered with pieces of paper I never looked at after they were pinned to it.

"Very few people use bulletin boards well," she explains.

It was essentially a dust collector and was quickly banished from the office.

The endless personal items also went, including tons of family photos stacked high, journals from my teenage years, and a host of memorabilia from family trips and outings.

Her theory is simple: "Does it belong in your office?" If not, get it out and store it.

The part of my office that was most embarrassing was all the food shoved in nooks and crannies, everything from Sweetarts to three-year-old sunflower seeds.

I figured she'd make me toss the snacks out pronto. But she actually created a "pantry" for me on a bottom shelf that contained all the food in one place. (I did throw out the sunflower seeds.)

She was all about putting like items together, like forks with forks and spoons with spoons in a utensil drawer.

That meant a shelf or two for office supplies, another for reference books, and two for "actions" items, things I'm working on at any moment. Those action items were set within the easiest reach and stacked horizontally to appease my creative brain.

I kept getting kudos from Bergeron throughout the process because I was willing to throw stuff out and didn't protest too much. But I never admitted to her that I had a sinking feeling in my stomach when I saw the size of the trash pile.

We finished organizing the workspace by noon, and I couldn't believe the transformation. Honestly, I was actually uncomfortable sitting at my desk because it seemed like someone else's office.

As she was packing up to leave, I wondered if my desk would ever look this good again. My clutter was my own fault — not because I wanted to be disorganized but because I got consumed by work and was unable to stay on top of the junk jumble that became my desk.

She suggested that every day, when I have a work lull, I take 10 minutes and "push your chair out and stand up." Then I should file, act and trash, or FAT, as it's called in organizer lingo. File what needs to be filed, act on the things I need to act upon and trash what needs to be trashed.

"FAT chance," I was thinking to myself as I showed her out.

But something happened a few hours after Bergeron left me in a sea of organization. I found a copy of a key research paper I needed for a project that I thought I had accidentally thrown away. I had a working pen handy when I was on the phone and wanted to write down some information. My husband asked me for a large paper clip and I was able to hand him one within seconds.

I know, it doesn't sound like a big deal. But I have to admit, it's only been a few days and already I feel more productive.

I can't promise my husband he won't experience a downslide of paperwork and books onto his side of the office again, but for now the piles are gone and there's a place for my Sweetarts.

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