

Organizing your work space

By Cathy Herholdt

The old saying, "Everything in its place," turns out to be some really good advice for those who need to restore order to their homes or work places. In fact, it's not just a motto, but a life-long way of living for professional organizer Laura Leist, owner of Eliminate Chaos.

"I haven't always been a neat freak, but I have always had a place for everything," says Leist from her expectedly tidy home office in Bothell. Leist began her venture five years ago after several years of pondering how she could escape the hectic corporate world of constant travel and busyness. On a flight to Europe, she realized she could help others in her position manage their lives by helping them get and stay organized. What began as an idea for a personal assisting business evolved into her current, very successful company that has served over 700 clients since its inception.

Being disorganized is an epidemic in our nation, mostly, believes Leist, because we simply have too much stuff. At the rate of 40 to 50 per month, new clients are calling Leist and her five Eliminate Chaos consultants for help digging out from under the clutter. Performing more than 10 organizing jobs per week, this group had better be organized themselves to manage the magnitude of this work flow.

The process begins with a walk through of the home or office. Those she helps are often so overwhelmed by clutter, they're brought to tears when they talk about it. "As (clients) walk us through the house, you can hear the pain in their voice and what they're struggling with," says Leist.

But by the end of the day, they're usually feeling much better. Despair is replaced by hope as they begin to see the forest through the trees ... or the desktop through the papers, more like. Leist and her crew get right to work, digging in to the piles of junk, so that their clients can see visible progress by the end of the day, even if it's just one file



Photo by Cathy Herholdt

Laura Leist, owner of Eliminate Chaos, shows how computer software and disks can be kept in order in a binder.

cabinet, they are aware that improvement is on the horizon.

The crew begins by taking everything out of the space to be organized, be it a closet, cabinet or entire room. Leist creates "staging areas" in hallways or spare rooms where stuff can be sorted. As they sort, they talk about what needs to be kept and what can be thrown out, given away or sold. Then, they look at what's left and the space available and determine how to store things. This includes recommendations for handy products that help make the best use of space.

Leist uses a 10-step procedure that culminates with the most important part of the process: maintenance.

"It's the same as a diet," she explains. You have to stick with it or all that work is for naught.

The National Association of Professional Organizers has declared April 11-15 "Organize Your Files Week." Because papers tend to be a hindrance in most homes and offices,

Leist spends a great deal of time helping people create filing systems that work. She recommends starting with the big stuff and staying focused. If you get side tracked with projects like scrapbooking photos from the past ten years, you may get discouraged. "Those type of jobs show the least amount of visible change," she said.

Sorting and purging is the biggest part of the job. Leist says we can all get rid of the majority of stuff in our file cabinets. Most of us hang onto papers we don't need, like paid bills, credit card statements and insurance policies. She whittles these down to the bare necessities such as only keeping the declaration page of an insurance policy, or trade documents for investments, but not the quarterly statements. You need to keep tax documents for seven years, but much information, such as bank statements, can be found online these days, making stuffed file cabinets unnecessary.

Once the piles are purged, Leist begins putting things in their place. This includes using a variety of tools of the trade to keep things in order. A simple binder with CD-sized slots holds computer software and games. Magazine boxes — her personal favorite — house everything from printer paper and labels to school and church directories, and of course, magazines. Photo boxes also have multiple uses from storing memorabilia and greeting cards to office supplies. A file cabinet is a must — the average being able to store 18,000 sheets of paper. Maintaining it will involve annual or bi-annual pulling and archiving of files.

If scribbled phone numbers, "to do" lists and scraps of paper are a problem, get a notebook that you refer to everyday. In it, jot everything down, then throw loose papers away.

"Organizing is really about having a system," says Leist, who designs a unique system for each individual. "If it works for them, they can usually maintain it."

Leist says we can all experience benefits from being a little more organized, not the least of which is more space in our home. "You could find 40 percent more space in your existing home if it was better organized," she said.

And, you can bet, her clients are thrilled to be out from under all that clutter.

"You see such a huge change," she said. "People are so happy. It's very rewarding."

To contact Laura Leist, visit www.eliminatechaos.com or call her at (425) 670-2551.



A cluttered office space before the help of Eliminate Chaos.



After purging and organizing this office, it becomes a much more effective workspace.