

Kitchen & Bath Business

Call to Order

Don't let chaos get in the way of your success

By Ellen Sturm Niz

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Eighteen thousand. That's how many sheets of paper fit inside a standard four-drawer filing cabinet. Look around your office space: How many sheets of paper do you have? Hidden in filing cabinets, scattered on your desk, stacked on the floor? Chances are, you're overwhelmed by paper. And most likely, paper isn't the only area of your business you need to get organized.

According to a recent survey, three out of four workers agree that they become more stressed when their office is a mess. The same study also found that 43 percent of Americans surveyed described themselves as disorganized, and nearly half say disorganization causes them to work late several times a week and frequently miss crucial deadlines. If you find yourself in the same boat, working late, missing deadlines, wildly trying to juggle multiple clients, it's probably time to get your business organized for maximum efficiency of time and money—and the subsequent blissful reduction of stress and frustration.

Interior designer Melinda Gray, of Austin, TX-based **Melinda Gray Interiors** recently found herself in need of some organizational help when her business, then based in Seattle, began to spin out of control. "I'm a visual person and I couldn't stand to go in my office because it was so full of stuff," said Gray. "I realized I needed help because not being organized was keeping me from building my business and being there for my clients."

Gray turned to Laura Leist, CPO, founder of Seattle-based professional organizing firm **Eliminate Chaos** and president of the **National Association of Professional Organizers**. "I'm really good at what I do," said Gray, "but my strength is not in that kind of organization. It's in all the details for my clients." Leist led Gray through the process of sorting through everything and creating organization systems that worked for her. While the process took time, Gray says it was worth it. "When everything has a space for itself, now I know where it is," she said. "What a concept! It's there in a file cabinet."

Gray also learned that organization is a journey, not a destination, and has to be worked on constantly. "Following through with it was hard," said Gray. "It's easier to say I'll put it away later, but you have to be disciplined. Like learning anything, you have to practice. I had to focus on maintaining the systems so it would become more automatic."

Gray highly suggests other designers organize their businesses. "It might be painful, but focus, get through it, move on and design!" she said. "There's something to be said for coming into an office and it being neat. It's less stressful and more creativity can come forward."

GETTING STARTED

Whether it's with an interior designer like Gray or with another client, Leist says the organization process is the same. "There are five things that need to happen no matter what your business is," she said. She identifies those five areas as:

- Paper management (files, paper flow)
- The stuff (anything that is not paper and not furniture)
- The space (furniture, layout)
- The computer information
- Life management (or what is often called time management)

"You don't have to do it all, but the client needs to set priorities on what is most important to them," said Leist, who is also author of *Eliminate Chaos: The 10-Step Process to Organize Your Home & Life*. "Then we create a plan and process for how to tackle each area."

While Leist says there is no required order for what area to tackle first, she often finds designers do best when starting with something that has a visual impact. "It boils down to what is causing the individual the most stress and anxiety," she said. "For most people, it's the paper and the stuff." For example, even though paper is the single-most time-consuming thing to organize, designers have a lot of product samples, which would fall under stuff. "For them, I may choose to start with the stuff even though paper is usually a bigger problem," said Leist. "It is easier to see results and stay motivated."

Wherever you start, stay with that area until you get it done and then move on. "Don't dabble here and there or you'll never see results," said Leist. Once you're ready to get started, follow the 10-step process Leist swears by:

1. Make the time to get organized. "Everyone recognizes they need to get organized but no one puts it on their calendar like a meeting with a client," said Leist. The amount of time you need to allot depends on what it is you're trying to organize, how much you have to organize, how fast you make decisions and how easily you stay focused. "One of the biggest mistakes people make is underestimating the amount of time it's going to take," said Leist. "Rule of thumb, it will take two to three times longer than you think."

"When I sit down with someone to figure out how much time they even have to work on an organizing project, they get a deer-in-headlights look," said Leist. "It never really hits them that they need to plan to get these things done. They end up doing them on evenings and weekends, have no life and wonder how they get behind." Leist suggests that people may need to make as small a commitment as going through three or four folders a day: "You can't do it in one fell swoop."

2. Gather supplies, such as garbage bags, recycling bins, boxes and containers to use for sorting.

3. Create a staging area where you can spread out and work on your organizing project away from your day-to-day business responsibilities.

4. Sort through everything, making the difficult decisions about what to keep and what to get rid of.

5. Eliminate the items you decided to get rid of, either by donating, selling, recycling or trashing them.

6. Of the items you decided to keep, group similar items together into categories that make sense for your business. When it comes to filing, for example, the most important thing to determine is what the filing structure will look like. "What is the skeleton of the system? What are the key words that come to mind with my business?" asked Leist.

"Don't just slap a label on a file and throw it in a drawer. Think about how it fits into the overall system," said Leist. Perhaps you want one file drawer for active client profiles and projects and a separate drawer for everything it takes to run the business. The files in each drawer should be named with a consistent system. Perhaps the active client profiles and projects drawer is alphabetized by last name, while the second drawer is alphabetized under categories like "Advertising" with smaller files within it, such as "ABC Magazine" and "WKRP Radio."

Also consider which files are needed every day and therefore close by, versus files that are just things you need to keep for reference. While reference files can be stored off in a filing cabinet, Leist suggests creating a "Daily Action Center," a large file box that sits under or near your desk with all of your current projects—bills, clients, projects, events, anything pending or follow-up, business travel, etc. "You can keep it at your fingertips but out of the way instead of having piles on your desk," she says. Leist likes to use **Smead Viewables** three-dimensional file labels instead of the standard plastic label inserts. "You can see the label from every side," she said. "People think they are the coolest thing they've ever seen. And they can be color-coded, which most designers especially like."

7. Examine the space in your office to store these items with a realistic eye. Maybe it's not enough space and you need to carve out an area somewhere else. Maybe you need to re-evaluate and see if there are any other items you can eliminate. Then figure out what products you can use to contain these items and maximize your space. "Don't shop before you know what you need," said Leist. "That's just putting a band-aid on a problem, not finding a solution. Just going to The Container Store isn't going to solve any problems if you are shopping without a plan and don't know what you need."

8. Shop for the containers, bookshelves, etc. that you decided you need.

9. Bring those items into the office and set up your space.

10. Devote time regularly to maintaining your system. "Designers are very creative people who don't like to sit in their offices and do office work," said Leist. "It's so boring, they don't like to do it, so it piles up." Leist says designers, or any business manager, must plan time on their calendars each week where they

are just doing office work, filing, paying bills, catching up on invoicing, etc.: "You have to make time to run your office."

The amount of time needed will vary from person to person, and it will grow as your business grows. "Recognize that if you can't get it all done, you need to re-evaluate the time you have allotted," she said. "If you really can't or don't want to do it yourself, don't be afraid to hire an assistant who can help you do that. It will go quicker and you'll get better results—but only *after* you have good systems in place. There is a big difference between someone who can create these systems and someone who can maintain them," she warned.

TIME MANAGEMENT 101

Most people complain regularly that there aren't enough hours in the day, but Leist says there can be if you find a way to realistically plan your schedule. Perhaps the best way to organize your time is to approach it from a backwards standpoint, suggested Leist. "Put kids, personal or office time on your calendar as re-occurring appointments," she said. "That will give you a really good visual of how much time you have left over, realistically how much time you have to work with clients."

Another approach is to figure out how much money you want to make a year. "Ask, 'How many hours do I need to bill a year? How much do I need to charge for my services to make that amount of money?'" said Leist.

Leist strongly suggests using an online calendar. "When you schedule an appointment, you can set it as tentative in Microsoft Outlook, for example, and then change when it is confirmed, which keeps you from double booking," she said. "It also color codes your appointments by type, and lets you include the phone number of the person you are meeting, add driving directions and insert email messages into the calendar entry so you can sync it to your [handheld device] and have all the info in one place."

Leist also suggests reviewing your calendar for the next day and even looking forward to the next month to help stay on track. "Plus, look back and make sure any unfinished business didn't slip through the cracks."