

THURSDAY

DAYTON DAILY NEWS • 11.04.10

# Life

YOU'VE ONLY GOT ONE. LIVE IT UP.

A photograph of a desk workspace. In the foreground, a white laptop is open. To its right, a blue pen lies on a white notebook. In front of the notebook is a white mug filled with coffee. The background shows a window with blinds, through which some greenery is visible. The overall scene is brightly lit, suggesting a clean and organized workspace.

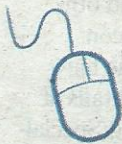
## 8 STEPS TO GETTING AN ORGANIZED HOME WORKSPACE

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# 8 steps to getting yo

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» Looking for a professional organizer? Check out the online database available on the website of the National Association of Professional Organizers.



By Susan Dalzell  
Contributing Writer

Many of us have a room whose door is best left shut when company comes to visit. It's the space where mail and magazines and receipts mingle, morphing into piles that skitter off the edges of desks. The filing cabinet drawers are stuffed almost to the point of immobility with old bills and birthday cards and brochures. All of the surfaces are cluttered with things such as kitchen scissors, teething toys and enough spare Post-it notes to compose a novel.

Maybe your home office isn't as bad as all that, but the chances are pretty good that yours could use a bit of tweaking in the organization department.

"The home office is the No. 1 room people want us to work in," said Lori Firsdon, who co-owns Encore Professional Organizers in Dayton with fellow organizer Barbara Warner.

A messy home office is more than just an eyesore. It wastes time, money and energy and can

even be emotionally draining. Here are eight tips to help you get that space in tip-top shape.

## 1. Don't buy containers ... yet

Long before you've started organizing, it may feel good to run to the store and buy lots of nifty containers for sorting. Don't. You'll most likely only end up with more clutter.

"Always wait until after you've done the purge," Firsdon said. "Afterwards, if you find you have six piles, then you only need to buy six containers."

## 2. Have a plan of attack

"I tell people to pick a corner of the room and start left to right, working top to bottom," Firsdon said. "If you don't get finished, you know where you started."

Donna Sanchez, owner of Hidden Spaces Professional Organizing in Dayton, recommends completely clearing out your targeted areas. "If I'm doing a roll-top desk, I take everything out

of the desk first. You don't want to try to organize around the chaos. Pull it all out, see what you have, and you can think more critically about what to keep and where to store it."

As you sort, make three piles: recycle, shred and deal-with. "Have a shredder on hand. You want to be ready to shred the confidential stuff and toss the non-confidential," Sanchez said. It's going to get messy and that's OK. "It will always get worse before it gets better," she said.



**Before and after shot of an office organization.**

Contributed photo by Encore Professional Organizers

## 3. Think seasonally

Firsdon encourages her clients to think about the seasons of life when they start purging their offices. Paperwork left over from your children's school days — if they're now graduated and married — is probably ripe for disposal. So are files and papers from previous jobs or former residences. Only keep items that relate to your current life.

## 4. Remove irrelevant items

You are not the only one keeping baby toys or

# ur home works

cameras or broken iPods on your desk. The pros said that all kinds of random items end up on our work spaces. "Clean your desk off and think of it as just a work area, keeping out only the current things you are using," Firsdon said. "If the purpose of the space is to pay your bills and to read, then eliminate everything that doesn't fit those goals."

Even items that seem like they should be in an office may not be necessary. As you get organized, you may uncover multiple stockpiles of things like highlighters or pens or notepads. "If you're finding 30 legal pads and boxes and boxes of pens, put away what you need and give away the rest to schools, churches or charities," Sanchez said.

## 5. Purge your documents

Paper makes up the majority of clutter in most offices. "The biggest problem everyone has is they have every piece of paper they have ever touched," Sanchez said.

A lot of the paper sitting around your office is probably a duplicate of what can be found online. Some documents may be found on your online accounts with banks and other institutions. Other things you save, like recipes or crafting ideas, are often also readily available on websites. Thanks to search engines, they are probably easier to find online anyway.

Sanchez keeps an Excel spreadsheet on her computer and uses it to consolidate a lot of information that she used to have to store on multiple sheets of paper. She records things like the name, number and brand of the paint she used for her living room walls and prescription numbers for her family's medications. It's also handy for keeping addresses and contact numbers up to date and can be personalized to include comments on things like when you first met someone.

Firsdon and Warner advise giving your accountant a call before digging into the files that are packed with out-of-date receipts, bank statements and bills. Ask him or her for a record retention schedule to figure out how long papers need to be kept so you can throw things out with a clear and easy conscience.

## 6. Have a filing system

Once you have purged the unnecessary, make what you've kept findable. "I tell my clients that 80 percent of what they file never gets looked at again," Firsdon said.

One basic method is to separate papers by

categories, such as bills, things to read, business cards and recipes. It sounds basic, but many people never get around to actually labeling and creating the separate folders. Firsdon and her partner Barbara Warner have created a template of file categories for use in home offices, available in the resources section of their website, [encoreorganizers.com](http://encoreorganizers.com). Similar lists can be found on [lifeorganizers.com](http://lifeorganizers.com).

Keep the folders in check, Sanchez warns, or you'll end up back where you started, with an overflowing filing cabinet.

"Organization is about creating rules and boundaries," she said. "If you say you're keeping one folder for magazine articles, keep only one folder. If you have more than can fit in that folder, it's time to clear it out again."

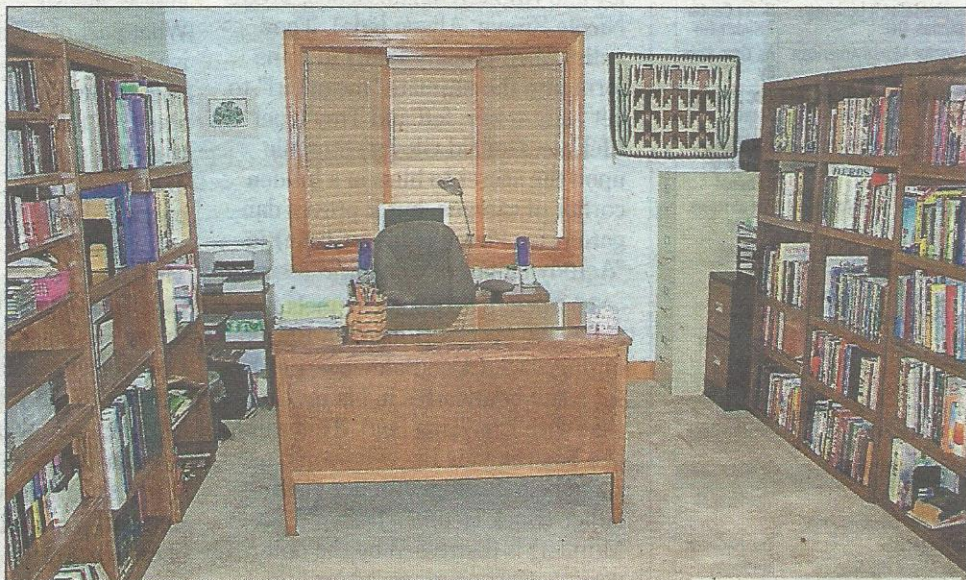
For filing things like bills, receipts and bank statements, Sanchez recommends a method based on the calendar. She uses 24 folders to represent the months in a two-year span. Each month, she empties out the file filled with documents from exactly two years ago and refills it with current statements from this month. For taxes, she does a similar system, but keeps seven folders, labeled one through seven. When it's time for year eight, she dumps out file No. 1 and starts over.

"It keeps everything together and saves you from having to rifle through multiple folders to throw things out. I can get rid of the entire folder at one time," Sanchez said.

## 7. Use furniture for its purpose

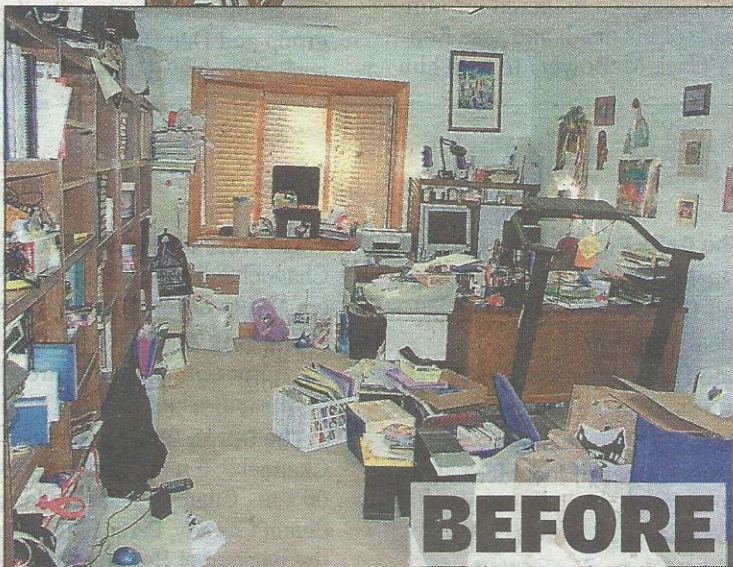
Don't store anything but paper in your filing cabinet. Don't stack papers on your bookcases. Don't use that extra chair as a holding station for your stapler, calculator and extra printing cartridges. It sounds basic, but the organizers said it's a problem they see again and again. Use furniture for its intended purpose and you'll be amazed at how much more efficient it can be.

# pace organized



**AFTER**

Before and after of a home office makeover by Hidden Spaces Professional Organizing. Contributed photos



**BEFORE**

## 8. Lose the guilt

It can be tough to get rid of things that you've saved, whatever the reasons are that you've saved them. Some of us keep things for the ideal idea of ourselves, whether it's because we'd like to be a fabulous cook who prepares all those great saved recipes or a witty conversationalist who can discuss the articles published in all those issues of the *New Yorker* or *Rolling Stone*.

If the sight of that pile of unread magazines or uncooked recipes is making you feel bad, get rid of the pile. "Why would you keep something in your office that is making you feel that way?" Firsdon said.

Go ahead. Create a bit of space for the real you and see how much better it feels.

## Five key questions for purging

As you're cleaning out the office, keep these five questions in mind as you decide whether to keep, file or pitch items.

What is the worst thing that will happen if I get rid of this item?

If this item was missing, would I replace it?

Can I find this information or item someplace else?

Does this item help me to meet my goals?

Do I feel energized when I look at this item?

Source: Lori Firsdon, co-owner, Encore Professional Organizers in Dayton