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## **Operation Organization: The home office**

### **Professional organizer will try to help a Penfield woman conquer her clutter**

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Staff writer

Karen Tuccio had just bought the home of her dreams when she lost her job to downsizing. "I was devastated for a day," says the 44-year-old Penfield woman. "Then I was like, 'Let's make this a positive change.'"

So the former purchasing agent for Valeo Electrical Systems in Rochester started working out of her home as a floor and cleaning product sales rep. She also pursued a master's degree in educational policy at the State University of New York's Empire State College. She even delved more into acting, attending classes and auditioning for TV commercials.

"Organizing took a back seat," admits Tuccio. "My motivation was, 'I need to figure out what I'm doing. Am I going to go to school or work or look for a job?'"

In the meantime, the paper clutter invaded. Unemployment documents. Textbooks. Sales materials. Research binders. She started squirreling it all away in "to file" piles inside her new office furniture, which, by the way, she wasn't sure how to use. "Nothing was like it was before." She also had multiple files, labeled by category, on the same subject. She might label one "Morgan Stanley," another one "financial statements" and a third one "investments."

"There were too many 'in-process' files," she continues. "People I wanted to meet and jobs I wanted to research and networking opportunities. I was going down so many paths at the same time I didn't have the time to prioritize."

She also didn't know how to set up a system for all her new activities. And she never got around to the monthly filing of bills and tracking of expenses she used to do. She just took action on whatever project came her way, without filing it. In the process, she lost her sense of order and ability to find things.

"It's like I found myself going in so many different directions that I didn't have my system in place," she says. "I didn't even have all my boxes unpacked."

Then there was the issue of what to do with the incoming mail. It had joined all kinds of other clutter . office-related and not . on a folding table she'd set up in her dining room.

"It starts interfering with productivity," says Tuccio. And the visual chaos made her feel chaotic. Budgeting time for school projects also proved problematic. She'd spend all her time on an essay for one class, then realize she'd left no time for research or other projects due at the same time.

"I would say that most people that go through what I am now end up creating more clutter, adding more stress and not knowing where to turn or how to get out of it," says Tuccio. Singles like her, she adds, have to face it all alone.

These problems are common among people with home offices, says Ann Michael Henry. An organizing and productivity consultant, she agreed to help Tuccio as part of our Operation Organization series.

"When we get stressed, we tend to think more emotionally, not rationally," says the founder of Mise En Place, an organizing service in Victor. "We tend to revert to old habits that don't serve us well. We tend to feel like we need to gear up and go faster, faster, faster, because we've got so much coming in at us."

It's actually more efficient, she says, if we pause, regroup and prioritize. Then we can do what's most important first.

It doesn't help that we have to process and deal with an ever-growing mountain of stuff. For instance, Henry says paper clutter has increased by 50 percent the last five years, "despite the fact that computers were supposed to turn us into a paperless society."

As technology has evolved, she adds, so has the expectation that it can, and should, enable us to work faster. "Despite the lie that technology gives us more time," she says, citing a computer guru's thoughts on the topic, "it only increases management's expectation of output, resulting in a situation where we give partial attention to everything and subsequently pay little attention to most things and master nothing. The theory is you can do more, do it faster." It pays to be mentally organized first, says Henry. The stuff will follow.

That's why she works to put processes in place to deal with the three major problems in home offices: mounting paper and e-clutter, inefficient project management and poor prioritizing. In next week's installment, we'll see how Henry launched some major strikes in each of these three areas, to help Tuccio clear her office . and her mind.

"It's about having the processes so you know how to handle everything that comes at you," says Henry. "So there's that format in your head: 'I have a process, this is how I apply it, and this is how it plays out.' It makes it less overwhelming."

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