

Below is the article in the Chicago Tribune about my work with this client.

A Home Office That Really Works

By Anne Brennan | Special to the Tribune

Is your home office working for you? Chances are there are piles of paperwork, bills, tangled cords and stacks of folders waiting to be filed.

Not only is a cluttered office an eyesore, it's inefficient — lowering productivity and compounding stress.

If it's time to give your home office a performance review, consider borrowing these ideas from organizational experts. ***While TV programs showcase the extremes of chaos in the house, most people fall in the middle, says professional organizer Elaine Quinn of Space Craft Organizing in Chicago.***

For example, the home office of Hilary Bailes, a Chicago interior designer, looked pretty together, but after she hired Quinn to organize her kitchen, Bailes realized she could streamline her home office too.

"I really like the space and I enjoy being there," Bailes says of the result. "It's much more efficient. It's not just about organizing, but thinking about how you work. I have things close to where I need them."

Part of Bailes' challenge was downsizing from a big office to her smaller home office. She threw away 10 bags of trash, including stacks of paperwork and outdated carpet and fabric samples. Bailes estimates she spent about \$700 on organizing the kitchen and office.

"We purged and repositioned things," Quinn says. A bookcase took up too much space, so they removed it. They also grouped together like items (carpet samples, in Bailes' case).

They maximized desk space with a custom desk and created zones. The project also spurred Bailes to go wireless, connecting all her computers throughout the house. They also separated Bailes' personal records (household information, passport, etc.) from her business.

Before you head to the local home store or office-supply store (a rookie mistake) for new files and bins, assess your needs. There's a lot of trial and error in organizing, and you'll have to customize for your individual situation, but there are some typical issues to consider.

The home office and closets are the Achilles' heels in the home, says professional organizer Cynthia Ivie, of White Space in Chicago. "The home office is often an afterthought," she says. "It's a jury-rigged office and isn't efficient. You don't entertain there, so [people feel] there's no need for it to be attractive."

The office challenges clients of organizer Jessica Brodsky too. Brodsky estimates 75 percent of her Chicago-based business, File It Under Complete, involves helping with this space. "People are so overwhelmed," Brodsky says. "There's a misconception that organizing an office is excruciating. People are so scared. But if it's intuitive, [for example] filing should take a second."

For some clients, creating an efficient office only takes three hours — for others, 30 hours, she says. "Remember, it's a process. The room didn't get cluttered in one day," Brodsky says. "Focus on one corner or drawer at a time. I can get overwhelmed too, but it makes the process a lot smoother."

Like any project, it pays to define your goals. First, you'll need to decide who's going to use the space. The office often becomes a multipurpose room, Ivie says. She worked with a couple who were lawyers and had a room that was part office, part kids' playroom — a recipe for disaster.

Another strategy for organizing is to reframe the question "Where should I put this?" Ivies says. A better question is "Where will I find this?" ***Everyone has a preferred method, Quinn says. Some people keep all their instruction booklets, for example, in one file. Quinn prefers keeping them near the appliance or product for quick reference.***

Paper — bills, mail, receipts, etc. — perplexes most homeowners. People are more attached to paper than anything else,” Ivie says. “They’re afraid to be caught without it, but actually there’s very little you need to keep.” You don’t have to keep years of credit card statements or utility bills, the organizers say. If you need a record for some reason, companies can fax the statement or you can find proof of the transaction online.

The organizers are unanimous about the need for a paper shredder. Never throw out anything with personal information on it.

Furniture arrangement is key, Brodsky says. “You don’t want to file if the cabinet is across room,” she says. “You want to be able to reach what you need.”

Whatever system you create, it’s all about finding things easily and quickly, Ivie says. Any system can be changed. “It’s not set in stone,” Brodsky says.

The ultimate goal for organizing an office, or any room, for that matter, is to have time to do what you want to do, Ivie points out. With more organized offices, some of her clients have started new careers or a side business or have been able to travel.

And if they learned anything about organizing their home offices, they know just where to find those extra checks and vacation photos.

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