

Cutting Through the Chaos & Clutter, Simple steps for getting organized in 2010

By: **Michael Kooi**, Living North

Carol Willoughby has a problem: “I have holes in my hands,” she explains with a slight glint of pride in her eyes. “I have four sets of keys because I know that two sets will be lost at any given time.”

As the owner of a successful visual communications company in Duluth, Willoughby finds her mind focused much more frequently on creative ideas for her clients than on where her keys or her pencils belong. This past year, however, the growth of her company, called Let the Whole World Know, pushed her out of her main office and into a cramped space on the second floor of her house. As minutes and hours drained away each day in search of errant files and elusive office supplies, Willoughby realized she needed to get organized or risk becoming a victim of her own success.



Before



After

Of course, you don't have to run a business to feel frazzled in the face of modern life. These days, just keeping up with the kids or trying to answer every cell phone call or e-mail can turn even the tidiest space into a vision of the apocalypse.

Here are some tips from organization and motivation experts on getting – and staying – organized for 2010:

- Be honest with yourself. If you want to get organized, there's no avoiding an honest evaluation of what is driving your chaos or clutter. That's according to Kim Schlichting-Yeakle, owner of Northland Organizing Inc. “For the most part, it's self-inflicted,” she says. “People have too much going on.” This often leads to the accumulation of more stuff and less time for simple tasks like putting it all away.

Emotional attachment also leads to clutter – especially with the possessions of lost loved ones. “It can be brutal,” says Schlichting-Yeakle. “Every item is a decision. It's about letting go.”

- Suit your system to your strengths. In most cases, a simple organizational system that plays to your talents will suit you best.

Recognizing Willoughby's flair for the visual, Carrie Hegstrom, founder of Harmonized Spaces, developed a simple color code to separate Willoughby's business files from her personal files and employed labels to indicate the proper place for all of her office supplies. “File cabinets were like black holes to me,” Willoughby says. Now, a quick scan of colors and labels instantly directs her every search. “I get a huge sense of satisfaction from producing items on demand,” she says.

- Get everyone involved. Whether at home or the office, you'll need the people around you – be they kids or colleagues – to buy into your system. Doing so “takes the weight off of one person” and improves your prospects for success. But earning that buy-in is often the hardest part, warns Hegstrom. “Accountability is a key,” she counsels, “but you also have to make it easy for everyone to help pick up the slack. You have to keep things simple for the kids.”

- Go all the way. What's the most common downfall in trying to get organized? Hopping from system to system without fully implementing one, says Hegstrom. “They say it takes 28 days to kick an addiction and 21 one days to establish a new habit.”

Staying motivated for that long can be tough. But Jen Bertsch, founder of Moxie Coaching, believes it can be done by thinking in terms of your larger goals. Between sticking with it and giving up, what is going to get you closer to where you want to be in your life? she asks.

Time savings has been the biggest benefit from getting organized as far as Willoughby is concerned. “Time is money,” she says with a grin.

Yet even with the benefits of an office reorganization by Harmonized Spaces and a closet makeover by Northland Organizing, Willoughby acknowledges that a relapse is never far away: “It's like alcoholism, I guess.”

In the end, getting organized requires setting priorities and living your values consistently. If you value family over career, cut down on your work hours to free up time with the kids. If you value order and efficiency, schedule time and budget money to maintain your organizational system.

When in doubt, Hegstrom's simple rule for cutting clutter may work best – whether it's an activity or an heirloom: “If you don't love it, chuck it.”

Mess?

WHAT MESS?

As with any challenge, the first step is realizing you have a problem.

Northland Organizing's Kim Schlichting-Yeakle provides five telltale signs of an organization problem. They're when you:

- Frequently misplace common items like keys or cell phone,
- Can't find important documents like your Social Security card,
- Can't have people over for a simple dinner,
- Can't even see the surface of you dining room table or
- Are embarrassed when friends drop in unexpectedly