Come home to calm

Cutting the clutter out brings surprising rewards to both mind, spirit

Space organizer Jane Veldhoven, left, chats with client Kay Rhodenizer in her reorganized home office. Calm your clutter to uncover a feeling of peace. (TIM KROCHAK / Staff)

'The desk is not a storage area. It's a work surface. It's for projects you're working on right now'

JANE VELDHOVEN
Professional organizer

By **KELLY SHIERS**
Features Writer

KAY RHODENIZER said she knew she had to get organized when storage boxes began to take over her office, so much so that she was reluctant to have clients meet her there.

It came about the same time that the lawyer and businesswoman began to run a second enterprise out of the same space in her home.

"I was just out of room. I couldn't find anything," she remembers.

Enter professional organizer Jane Veldhoven, whose cluttered clients often call after they've become overwhelmed by their surroundings.

"I think what happens is that the higher the piles get, the more paper that is on the desk, on the floor, and everywhere else, the more people become immobilized. They don't know where to start, so they keep avoiding it."

But help is on the way.

Veldhoven, who organizes and unclutters homes and offices, says she begins by finding out the client's ultimate goal.

By the time they've sorted, trashed, stored, and maybe refurnished and painted their way there, some clients joke it'll be a long time before they stop hearing her voice ask, "When was the last time you looked at this?" while holding up a piece of paper, or repeating, like a mantra, "The desk is not a storage area. It's a work surface. It's for projects you're working on right now."

But that's rushing ahead. And organizing an office is nothing if not an exercise in patience. With a dose of ruthlessness thrown in.

Veldhoven says half her business is organizing home offices. For some people those offices are their places of business.

But in many other cases, home offices do double — and triple — duty. They're the spaces where bills get paid, receipts and records are tucked away, e-mails are answered and kids do homework.

No wonder, then, that clutter can quickly get out of control.

HELP AT HAND

- Looking for ideas to change your home office space? Check out Veldhoven's Get Organized Professional Services website at www.get-organized.ca.
- Searching for a professional organizer in your area? (There are currently nine working in Nova Scotia.) Check out www.organizersincanada.com

Not everyone will hire a professional organizer to get the job done. But by seeing how Veldhoven goes about the process, you may get some ideas on how to get organized yourself.

It takes Veldhoven about an hour to meet with a new client to get a sense of what they're looking for in their space, how many people use it, and what's gone wrong.

Imagine the shock on some faces when she unexpectedly sticks a hand along the bottom of an exploding pile of papers, grabs one, and learns just how long that pile has been in the making.

With a practised eye, she then tells the client how much stuff will have to go in order for the space to work.

"Some people want to keep everything and just want me to organize the space. In most cases that won't work because there's just too much stuff," she says.

"That's the reason for the mess in the first place and more stuff will just keep coming."

Usually, a home office redo will take about three days for her to complete.

Part of the time, she'll work alone to "open every door, every cupboard, every closet and look under everything," but when it's time for her and the client to get together, she tries to keep each of those sessions to half a day. Any longer, and the whole process becomes too tedious and too time-consuming for the client.

Kay Rhodenizer's home office before its transformation. (CONTRIBUTED)

Alone, Veldhoven says she begins by sorting: stuff that looks like garbage, bills, things that are yet to be done.

That's good enough until the client joins her, and answers some questions (see questions box) to help refine those piles.

After they've decided what's trash, they now face everything the client wants to keep. It's time to get down to the real work. (At this point, it might help if you can hold on to your sense of humour.)

"This is the part where you end up keeping half of what you thought you wanted to keep, hopefully," she laughs.

Ruthless?

"Yes, I am. All to the aim of how much space do we have to keep stuff in, and we have to get rid of a certain amount in order for this to function properly."

After the purge (again with the questions), what's usually left falls into two categories: piles of reference materials, and things that are being worked on at the present time.

First, tackle the reference materials with a filing system, she says.

"Putting a filing system together really is not a huge deal, but it can take a day. I like to have it nicely labeled so you can see everything clearly and it will take two seconds to put something away. If it looks nice and tidy, we tend to keep it that way."

Use up to five different categories. For example, personal bills and children's names — colour-code them, and within each section, organize alphabetically.

A good trick is to file things under the words that first come to mind when you think of them, rather than where you think they should go.

When you've completed the job, you have filed away everything you are finished with, but are likely to have to refer to again.

What remains are the things that require action.

"The key to those is we have to write down what we need to do. . . . We either have to take some type of planner, calendar or even spiral notebook, if that works best, and write things down."

But where do you put those pending items when the professional says piling them up on the desk — a work surface, not a storage area — is not an option?

"For people who work well with files, we'll do a separate drawer in the desk or a roll-away cart only for the stuff in progress. For some people, we'll put something like a hanging file system on the top of the desk. Then the pending stuff is right there, they can see it, it's labelled."

See **CLUTTER** / B2

CLUTTER HAPPENS

So you've cut out the clutter. Now, how do you stay organized, and not get overwhelmed by all the new stuff that's bound to come in?

Professional organizer Jane Veldhoven suggests you ask yourself these questions every time a piece of paper crosses your desk — before you add anything to your to-do list, your in-box, your storage shelf or your filing cabinet:

- Does this require action?
- If I don't have to do anything with it, can I identify a use for this information?
- Would it be difficult to get this information again? This is a key one. Remember the Internet makes getting information all the easier.
- Is the information recent enough to be useful?
- When was the last time I used this? Try the very generous one-year rule. If you haven't looked at it in a year, it's likely time for it to go.
- Are there tax or legal reasons for keeping this?
- And, finally, if you answer no to all of those questions, but are still afraid to get rid of it, ask: What's the worst possible thing that could happen if I throw it out?

Clutter

Continued from / B1

If files aren't your thing, try the literature sorters or wall pockets that are found in office supply stores. Label each one (with a child's name, your name, bills, outgoing mail, for example). Since they won't hold a lot of stuff, they shouldn't get out of control.

But beware. Buying new containers won't solve any of your problems if you haven't sorted your stuff first. Buy first, and you'll have a lot of pretty baskets, in all kinds of useless sizes, that you won't know what to do with.

Finally, it's looking good, but it's now up to you to keep it that way.

"You need to spend 15 minutes at the end of every day putting things back in the homes we've made for them and clearing off your desk for the next day," Veldhoven says.

"It's just maintenance. You can't fix a piled-up desk in 15 minutes. That won't get you de-cluttered or get you organized."

And Rhodenizer's verdict?

"I love it," she says. "I feel absolutely organized and the space is way more functional. I work more effectively, plus, . . . from a visual point of view, it's way more peaceful and less distracting to know where everything is and not have to look at all the stuff you haven't done yet."

(kshiers@herald.ca)

OFFICE SPACE

How do you organize your home office space? Professional organizer Jane Veldhoven makes these suggestions:

- A U- or L-shaped desk, with shelves, works best.
- Filing cabinets should be within reach of the desk. If you can turn your chair sideways or backwards and reach the cabinet, you'll use it. Put the cabinet across the room, where you'd have to get up and walk to it, and chances are you won't.
- A phone stand on your desk keeps the phone within easy reach, and also gives storage space underneath.
- Make sure you have adequate lighting.
- Buy your storage containers, baskets and wall pockets after you sort, not before.
- Aim to have a few empty shelves and containers when you've finished. After all, more stuff will come in, and you'll likely want to keep some (but not a lot) of it.
- Don't be afraid to paint. Yes, it's a work space, but an ugly space won't inspire you to keep it organized. The nicer it is, the better the chance that you'll keep it neat and tidy.