



Before she hired organizer Rene Wakefield, the writer had a home office littered with piles of work materials. Wakefield brought a label maker, trash bags, files, and bins.



Now the author has an organized office that fits two adults, eight bookshelves, files, framed photos, and more. She calls it "A Study in White."

Photographs for The Washingtonian by Ron Bunt

Clutter Control

Think you need all those papers and files? So did I. Then I got organized.

By Ann Cochran

Four sessions with a professional organizer: \$960. File and storage boxes: \$98. New storage unit: \$250. A contractor to replace fixed shelving with the adjustable variety: \$800.

About \$2,000 later, my husband and I have an organized home office that fits two adults, eight shelves of books and binders, files, fax machine, scanner, framed photos, a vintage ceramic poodle, and a vessel for the birdseed I scatter on the deck each morning.

I call it "A Study in White." Office equipment is hidden in white boxes and baskets. Magazines are standing up in open white containers. Even the furniture is in shades of white, from pickled oak to putty. The effect? The peace and calm that come from order.

Organizing a home office, like any room in your home, involves cleanup, sorting, and decisions only you can make. Long-neglected offices can be overwhelming. Many people hire professionals to help. In our service-friendly culture, support is available. If you are self-employed, support is tax-deductible.

Could any competent person do it solo? Sure. Just like we can exercise and eat right without health clubs, diet books, or Oprah. Professional organizers, like personal trainers, have strategies

and experience—but the magic is in their presence. The job gets done when a plan is in place.

I met Rene Wakefield of Pro Organizers in Bethesda at a business-networking event. Our initial consultation in early January—New Year's-resolution season—was a one-hour, two-way interview and planning session. We met in the messy room I call my office, which my husband, an association executive, also uses for our personal-finance management and his church-leadership projects.

With light streaming in from the sliding glass door, Rene and I stood in the 11-by-12-foot space between two desks, two chairs, and tall and short file cabinets punctuated with piles of junk that hadn't found a permanent home since our October 2003 move.

Rene asked questions about my workday. "How often do you look through these old *Washingtonians*? Do you need this stationery, or can it be stored? Are there more work-related books in other rooms?"

We discussed professional goals and how my surroundings facilitated or blocked them. Her evaluation of my home office would include filing capacity, storage options, flat work surfaces, lighting, supplies, mail handling, and

desk ergonomics.

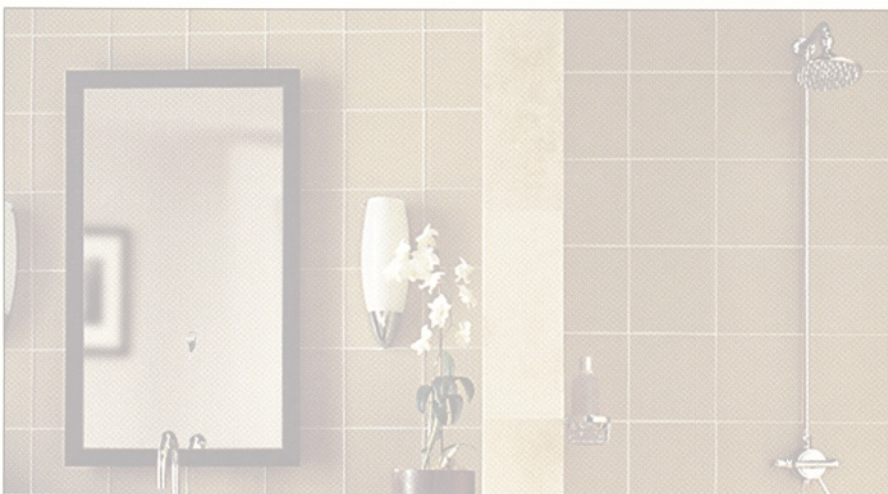
We scheduled our first three-hour session for January 20. "Some clients initially request two eight-hour days, thinking they can get this chore over with," Rene told me. "But having more short appointments allows clients to live with stages of progress for a while and decide if a system is working."

On our first morning together, Rene came armed with the tools of her trade: a label maker, big trash bags, hanging files, and plastic bins. She told me that most first-time clients react with skepticism when an organizer brings in trash and recycling bags. They can't believe they will discard as much as they do.

Believe it.

We began by removing all nonwork items from the office and brought back in only a few decorative things that were creative, colorful, or sentimental. I was glad to be able to keep my white ceramic poodle, a suitcase piggy bank that says TRIP MONEY, the Nantucket basket where I throw business cards, and my late mother's Hummels.

"People think that organizers must live in sterile, labeled environments," Rene says. "Not so—everything in your office should help you achieve your professional goals or be aesthetically pleasing."



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I had homework after each session, usually filing. One assignment was to dive into a tall pile of material I'd gathered at conferences for travel writers. How much of that did I really need? Could I organize it into vertical files instead of horizontal piles?

Boxes are another variation on piles, just more hidden, but still something Rene wanted me to rely on less. As I worked on a story, I kept everything I used—catalogs, pamphlets, printouts, notes—together in a box. I thought attractive boxes made this acceptable, but Rene helped me see that it takes only a few minutes to review the contents of a project box. As she predicted, in every case the necessary remainders fit nicely into regular or accordion files.

Boxes did come in handy for stationery, paper, envelopes, and photos, which need to lie flat, so I didn't have to empty all of them.

Early on, I learned I wasn't going to be able to distribute my things all over the house. "Don't even think about putting those magazines upstairs—and some in the TV room and some in the office," Rene said. "Work must be corralled in one room." When I whined that it wouldn't all fit, Rene told me to get busy weeding through and editing until it did fit. She insisted that most clutter comes from lack of decision-making, not lack of space.

There would be no lack of decision-making in the course of our time together. Rene reassured me that we would do it together, step by step.

Articles on productivity and work satisfaction claim that people use only 20 percent of what they file. Despite predictions of computers' eliminating paper, most of us are drowning in paper. Thinning out files was a new experience. I used to judge each file "in" or "out." Rene taught me to make file decisions in shades of gray: I didn't need to discard entire files. I could look through them and decide what needed to be kept.

It took less than three hours to review my files: four deep drawers jammed full. I didn't think it was possible, or bearable, but Rene fed me more than 300 files in small batches. Removing replaceable and outdated material freed a lot of space. Now that I don't have to force a piece of paper in anymore, it's almost a pleasure to file and retrieve. Rene, whose motto is "It's not where you put things—it's where you find things," recommends annual decluttering as long as one doesn't ignore organizing the rest of the year. Filing should

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Before, the writer tossed story materials into boxes and bags. Now she has a place for everything: Papers go in organized files, office equipment hides in white boxes and baskets, and magazines stand in white containers.

be a part of every workday.

Slogging through my files, I discovered odd habits I'd developed, like folding pages in half. It never occurred to me that folded pages take double the space. As I reviewed my files, I unfolded and stapled pages together. My goal is to try to keep file drawers no more than two-thirds full.

Rene prefers staples to sticky notes, which are for temporary use only. The adhesive weakens, and the note can float off. Paper clips are just as bad; they tend to capture unrelated material.

The organization process was about more than taming papers. Rene asked about my goals: Was I using too much space for subjects I cared little about?

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Ann Cochran (appliedcommunications@comcast.net) is a regular *Washingtonian* contributor. Her freshly organized office is in Cabin John.



Was I cramming research I would use someday into a corner?

It was good to think about my work focus. I had saved many articles and brochures on inns, restaurants, art, gardens, sports, and activities in the Mid-Atlantic states, but my files were not well organized. It wasn't too much material, but by throwing it into boxes and bags, I wasn't taking advantage of the research I had done. Now it all has a place, divided up into states, then subcategories.

I had one fat "to do" file, which Rene split into five: reading, proposals and leads, correspondence, calls, and filing.

My stacks had grown out of control. There was a tall pile in the kitchen, a short one in the bedroom, and the most embarrassing pile gathered dust in the office. With Rene standing over me, I went through it in bearable batches. Most was tossed, the rest filed. Rene hit the label maker while I voted paperwork in or out.

Some of the articles I'd saved didn't have a clear purpose or destination. Now when I travel, I still bring reading material for clipping, but I write a purpose on a temporary sticky note or directly on each page I save. "File: Leesburg restau-

rants" or "Call: Order catalog."

Going through all those files had another lasting effect. Now when I flip through magazines, I evaluate harshly. Do I really need it? I'm likely to keep the scissors closed unless the information is compelling.

We filled a few clear plastic storage bins with seven years' worth of financial records, home-improvement documentation, magazines with my articles in them, and other things well suited for basement life. When you find yourself in a cleanup frenzy, don't forget about the records you do need to keep.

I was excited to see red and green plastic bins on sale during my project, but we chose clear ones we could see into. Plastic was an easy choice over cardboard, for sturdiness and protection from dampness. Wal-Mart, Target, and the Container Store had bins in the \$6-to-\$10 range.

"People tend to overbuy office supplies," says Rene, who found 76 untouched legal pads in one client's office. "It's the Costco effect." Who has room to store all that stuff? Luckily, we didn't

have that problem, but Rene moved our paper inventory from out in the open to behind closed doors in my desk.

Rene advised me to open my mail near a recycling receptacle and make quick decisions about what I'd discard. Do I really need to leaf through another Victoria's Secret catalog? She suggests placing mail in folders: "To pay," "To read," or "To do."

While we were focusing on my work environment, my husband decided the office needed its own phone. With a portable phone in our kitchen a few steps away and a land line in the bedroom on the same floor, I didn't think a new phone would help. I quickly discovered that it eliminated the distraction of running to answer a call.

Because I do not interview clients in my office, beauty was not a priority. We wanted to use what we had—adding only for function, not appearance.

But there are other ways to organize. Some people use built-in cabinetry and custom furniture to fit their space and needs. Another option: new, matching

furniture and file cabinets. Some organizers get involved in furniture purchases; others refer clients to interior designers.

Whether you expect to buy furniture or not, make that decision at the end. After the organization is complete, you will know what you are keeping and how you are storing it. The one piece we bought was a TV/VCR cabinet that has one long open shelf, a two-shelf section behind doors, and enough depth to accommodate a basket and my vertical file organizer.

As I'm right-handed, the ideal place for that standing organizer would be in my direct line of vision to my right. But because of outlet and furniture limitations, my printer claimed that spot. No matter how big or small the desk, a flat, empty workspace to the right (or left if left-handed) is helpful. I have that with my worktable on wheels.

After the purging, new shelving, and one furniture purchase, Rene drew up a few floor plans. One was the obvious winner for office flow, but it did not result in the most at-

tractive placement of furniture. Our office door is glass, and the office is in the center of the house beside the living room. Again, practicality trumped appearance. Rene also took a rolling table that had become partially stuck at my husband's desk—there was too much equipment underneath to move it—and freed it up for me to use. I need to spread my work out when I write. Now, instead of leaving my office to use the kitchen or dining table, I stay put. Another distraction eliminated.

Was the cost worth it? Absolutely. This investment—four \$240 sessions—gave me a comfortable, attractive space where it is a pleasure to work. I find what I need quickly. Equipment and supplies are within reach.

A few years ago, an Ikea survey found that 31 percent of its customers felt more satisfaction after cleaning out a closet than after sex. I can't say I felt the same way about my organization project, but I do get a little thrill every time I enter my uncluttered home office.

For a list of area organizers, visit www.washingtonian.com/organizers.html.

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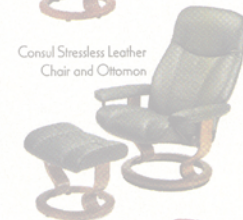


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