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Work Space

When it came to keeping her life in order, Heather Greenwood Davis was 'out of control and needed help'

By Heather Greenwood Davis

My issues were first identified in the Grade 4: "Heather needs to be more organized."

That sentence has followed me ever since.

Teachers rolling their eyes, my mother's ever-wagging finger and the grades lost because the assignment was late had no effect. "It looks messy," I would tell my teacher, my mother, my husband, as I hunted for some slip of paper through the piles over my lifetime, "but I have a system." I sure did.

Step 1: Dump your papers in a pile in a corner until they are about to topple.

Step 2: Start new pile.

Fast-forward to a few months ago, when despite having an office at home, I found the piles had so taken over that I needed to work in the kitchen. It was out of control. I needed help.

"You are totally not alone," Deanne Kelleher, president of Kaos Group, tells me when I call her to explain my desire for change.

Kelleher started her company 10 years ago so that she could bring her organizing skills to big businesses that were losing out on profits due to poor time management and weak organizational structures. Four years ago, she became a member of the Professional Organizers of Canada and began combining her business know-how and her organizing skills to help smaller businesses and homeowners.

We agree to tackle the project together. I had no idea then, that it would be six weeks and constant re-focusing before I got where I needed to be.



RENÉ JOHNSTON /TORONTO STAR
Heather Greenwood Davis has discovered that completing the tiresome and emotional task of organizing her office has given her more time and freedom.

Diving In

"For some people this works," Kelleher tells me waving her hands over the piles scattered around the office on her first visit, "but if your taxes are late or your bills are late, it's a sign that there's a problem."

"Lady," I think, "if those are the symptoms, you definitely have the disease." The cure, it seems, won't come without sacrifice. "It's just about allocating the time. People never give themselves the time they need to do this," Kelleher tells me. "And how much time is that?" I ask. "To start? About six hours," she says with a straight face.

Six hours?! To start! That's almost a working day!

Remembering that Kelleher did not pass out when she saw my office, I offer her the same courtesy.

She seems not to notice and explains the mandatory confidentiality agreement that she wants me to sign: Now, if she finds six years of unpaid taxes she won't be able to talk about it. I'm hoping the same is true of my slovenly ways.

"My house must be the worst you've ever seen," I tell Kelleher every three minutes after we've started. She disagrees. "Most people were never taught how to do this," she says I nod, but continue to watch her for signs of disgust. She shows no outward signs.

"One of the biggest factors to getting organized is knowing what you have," she tells me. "You need to inventory and assess what you have and that will help us determine your space needs.

"It's hard work because you have to pick up every single solitary sheet of paper and make a decision." Did I hear her correctly? Are we standing in the same room? There are thousands of pieces of paper in my office. Maybe even tens of thousands and my husband Ish can only be blamed for about 25 of them.

There is also my magazine addiction. About 200 of them, including about two dozen issues of Real Simple - a magazine dedicated to living a simple, clutter-free existence. (What? A girl can't dream?)

"Everything you have can have a home, all that home needs is a label and a space," she says.

Sounds simple. Too simple.

Drowning

I like Kelleher. She is upbeat, fun and as a mother of two small children can relate to finding an empty juice box in a desk drawer. That's why I felt so bad when only three hours after we started, I kicked her out of my house. It was too much.

Every paper had to be justified. Why was I keeping it? Did I really need it? When would I use it? Could I replace it?

Every. Single. Paper.

If I can't defend it, it goes. If I can, then it needs "a home" and is re-sorted into a host of boxes and lined up with its siblings in a type of time-out section along one wall.

It's endless and the pressure of having someone right there the whole time was like having a gun to my back.

She left willingly.

Later, when too embarrassed to call, I email her to apologize, she calls me right away.

"It's a difficult process and it can be exhausting," she sympathizes. "It's like the thing you procrastinate about for so long that becomes such a huge thing in your head when it isn't."

We decide that the paper project will be my solo project. I tell her I'll have it done in a day or two. That was the first lie.

The others followed quickly in the days to come ("Yup, I'm almost done." "Absolutely I can see the light.") and compounded my guilt.

It's about three weeks later, when she visits to move on to the next steps, that I have to come clean. The office is in shambles.

Half of the room is in the old system and half has been resorted according to Kelleher's model. I've made some progress, but most of it was done in the wee hours of that morning and only because I knew that she was coming this evening. I'm miserable.

How could it possibly be good for business that I was spending hours sorting paper and less and less time working? Sensing my frustration and desperate need for motivation, Kelleher comes up with the perfect solution: Shopping!

Up For Air

Now this is what I'm talking about.

Kelleher and I are at Business Depot to choose the furniture and accessories for the office and we are like two kids in a candy store. If this were all there was to reorganizing the office, I'd do it daily. I recall the last six weeks and shudder.

Kelleher and I have already discussed, based on the papers and books that survived the big purge, what I need and now we have to convey it to Gary Chen, furniture consultant at Business Depot.

Chen is a rarity in the shopping world: He not only knows about the furniture but he's friendly and not on commission. Kelleher and I tell him what we need and then he shows us the options. He's bang on every time.

The Desk

- What we had: A simple table that was crumbling from the weight of an identity crisis. It had to support a fax, a printer, a scanner, my computer and also function as workspace.
- What we need: A real desk that will provide space both for the equipment and leave me room to work without looking or feeling cluttered.
- What we get: An L-shaped desk with a hutch that fits perfectly on one wall of the office. The system is expandable and pieces like the filing cabinet, drawers and bookcase can be configured in any number of ways to give me more space.

The Chair

- What we had: A hard-backed kitchen chair that punished my back.
- What we need: Something comfortable to sit in but not so comfortable that I fall asleep.
- What we get: The world's greatest chair. The Global Executive Knee Tilter has flexible lumbar support that conforms to your individual body shape. Every time I sit in it, it feels like I'm getting a hug. If it could applaud as well, I'd marry it. On Chen's suggestions we also get the wood floor castors, which mean that a chair mat isn't necessary.

The Lighting

- What we had: We were practically working by candlelight. The room has no overhead lighting but there were two halogen lamps in the room.
- What we need: Task specific lighting.
- What we got: A desk lamp, a floor based reading lamp and a tall touchier. The variety of lighting means I have choices in location, within the room, to do my reading and writing.

Other Stuff

- What we had: A mishmash of boxes, cups and tins to hold the pens, pencils and other writing utensils.
- What we need: A co-ordinated functional system that is eye-pleasing, too.
- What we get: Kelleher promotes a four-tray system. Each is labelled: To Do, To Pay, To File, To Read. They provide a first stop for all new papers entering the office. We find a set of trays that fit the cubbyholes on the hutch and label them accordingly. My existing year-at-a-glance calendar is marked with the day each month that I'll empty the boxes. For the magazines that were allowed to stay, boxes and magazine holders keep things neat.

We throw in a kid-proof/slob-proof warranty that will protect it all from ink stains and coffee rings, and arrange for the delivery, free from Business Depot. Three hours after we had arrived we leave the store tired but happy.

Charting a Better Course

With the knowledge that the furniture is arriving, sorting the rest of the office is a breeze. I'm able to picture what the office will look like when it's done and it's a real motivator. And unexpected benefits are found along the way: \$25 U.S. in a folder, three gift certificates among the piles, not to mention the floor space I'd been living without. Having to sort through the magazines cured me of my habit and I'm pleased to say that I haven't bought one since. At night I follow Kelleher's suggestion that I organize the next day's activities before I go to bed and it's working.

"If I can teach you how to save half an hour a day, that's 125 hours a year," she reminds me. "That is time you can use to grow your business." Now when I head into the room to work, I enter to a clear desk and an open mind.

I'm not saying that the office will never be cluttered again, only that I've seen the other side and I'd like to stay there.

Go to www.businessdepot.com to locate a store near you and view their products.

Heather Greenwood Davis is on the path to home and office organization. This is the fifth instalment in the Organizing Chaos series. Reach her at heather@greenwooddavis.com