



Jan. 9, 2007

Money-makers

FIVE QUESTIONS WITH HOLLY UVERITY **Expert says root of disorganization is indecision**

By KATHERINE FESER
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Resolving to be organized isn't something Holly Uverity saves up for the New Year. As the founder of Houston-based Office Organizers, teaching people how to get organized has been her main concern since 1993.

Uverity has held a variety of leadership positions at the National Association of Professional Organizers, most recently serving as chair of the national leadership committee. The group has about 40 members in its Houston chapter.

Uverity has helped countless time-crunched employees better manage their work spaces. She recently shared some of her time with the Chronicle's Katherine Feser.

Q: What's the most common problem you see in the workplace today as far as organization goes?

A: I would say that the root of all disorganization is the inability to make a decision. There are many decisions that people could make about any given piece of information, whether it's an e-mail or a phone call or a document. People get so bogged down in that decision-making process. The upshot is they make none, and so the clutter accumulates.

I see my job as kind of walking people through that decision-making process. I can't tell you whether or not you should keep a document. I don't know if you'll need it again or not. Why would you need this? Who else has it? Where would you find it? When would you need it again? Do you have a central storage place? Could anyone else see it? All these things come into play. My job is to help people work through the process. Once they understand the process and see it is about making the decision, they can do it themselves, which is the ultimate goal.

Q: How much does it cost to hire a professional organizer?

A: It depends. Some organizers charge by the hour, some charge by the project. Some charge for travel, some don't. Some charge for buying products and some don't. Some might tack on an extra 10 or 15 percent for the products. Some might charge the actual time they spend out shopping.

Organizers run their own businesses individually. There's no industry standard.

The range would probably be somewhere from \$35 an hour up to \$150 an hour.

The important thing to know is that price should not be the determining factor of why you hire an organizer. It's very much like hiring an interior designer or a physician or a tax consultant. Somebody is really in your personal stuff. Do you trust this person? Are they a NAPO member? How long have they been in business? How comfortable do you feel with them over the phone? Those are the kinds of things you want to ask prior to hiring somebody.

Q: With information coming at us from so many sources — cell phones, PDAs, computers — do you have any tips for managing this constant communication?

A: Turn it off. I'm serious. I'm a huge believer in taking vacations, taking time away.

For example, on Mondays I don't take clients. I try to make as many phone calls as I can. I catch up on paperwork. I catch up on e-mails. I do things once a week. I'm still bombarded with the stuff, but I have a set time to deal with it.

Even people who are in sales who say, "I can't turn off my phone. I'll lose clients." Well, you still have to get your paperwork done. You still have to fill out those call reports, those expense reports or whatever else your boss requires. At some point, turn off your phone. You have to quiet your brain. You just have to do it.

We're driving ourselves insane. We're not paperless. The paperless office is never going to happen. What's happened is, we're having the paper in addition to all the technology. We have to learn to manage both, and the only way you can manage the technology is to periodically and systematically turn it off.

Q: Have you seen any fundamental changes in the way people work and organize their offices since you started your company nearly 14 years ago?

A: The biggest change that I've seen is people buy a lot more stuff than they used to.

I used to walk into a client's office and they didn't have all the gadgets that they have now.

People think that the tool will get them organized, that the box or the bin or the tray or the spinning caddy that's got 15 compartments is going to get them organized, and that's not the case.

In terms of how the people actually work, they're still piling stuff up on the floor and on the corners of their desk. They're still not filing properly.

They're still keeping way too much.

None of that has really changed.

I would say the difference is there's more stress now.

There's more emphasis on organization. Their time is at a premium much more than it used to be.

Q: What's your favorite office product?

A: Spiral notebook. It's the single best organizing tool out there.

A huge problem is all these little scraps of paper. Everybody grabs the back of an envelope or a pad of stickies or the corner of a letter and they write all this stuff down ...

If you put every single thing in a spiral notebook, you never lose it.

All you have to do is just find the notebook.