

## Organizing addicts make a pastime of being neat

By Rita Pyrellis  
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While some of Kim Rode's co-workers have a hard time finding a pen on their cluttered desks or locating an e-mail in their clogged inboxes, she is the picture of calm and order amid the chaos.

Her pens and folders are arranged by color, her business cards are neatly filed in a customized organizer, and at the moment, her inbox contains only six e-mails. The rest are labeled and archived accordingly. She rarely lets paper and other stuff accumulate in her workspace, but when it does, she has a label-maker and an assortment of containers at the ready.

"I don't like keeping a paper trail, and if my e-mail inbox goes past one screen, I start panicking," says Ms. Rode, 43, a sales associate at Urban Archaeology, a manufacturer of home and commercial fixtures in the Merchandise Mart. "My co-worker Jennifer says I start twitching when I come over to her desk."

Jennifer Cal, 36, a sales associate who sits nearby, doesn't understand why. Aside from the 1,700 e-mails in her inbox and a 10-inch-high stack of papers, she says she's fairly organized — just not compared to Ms. Rode.

"She counts her pens. If too many Sharpies start accumulating in her pencil cup, she cleans them out," says Ms. Cal, who can't resist needling her colleague by moving her stapler or mixing up her pens.

Ms. Rode admits that she can be a little obsessive — every workday at exactly 5 p.m. she pulls out a small monthly calendar and marks off the day with an X — but she doesn't understand how messy people can be productive. She recalls a former boss who kept stacks of unopened FedEx packages in his office. "He had them on his chair, and when we had to meet in his office, I'd sit there like the Princess and the Pea with my legs dangling. How do you work like that?"

Ms. Rode is among the growing number of the overtaxed who are distressed by disorder. According to a 2009 survey by the National Assn. of Professional Organizers, 71% of those polled said their quality of life would improve if they were better organized, 65% described their home as at least moderately disorganized, and 27% said disorder keeps them from being effective at work. The organizing profession itself has seen a boom in recent years. Since 2003, the association's ranks have doubled, bringing its membership to 4,200.

Magazines like *RealSimple*, with its focus on living an uncluttered life, and *Martha Stewart Living*, the bible of all things domestic and sender of a daily e-mail "organizing tip of the day," are the rare success stories in the troubled publishing industry. The Container Store, with its towering aisles of bins and baskets and esoterica like sock clips and greeting-card organizers, does a booming business.

### FUN WITH FILING

Actual obsessive-compulsive disorder requires a rigid ritual around organizing, Chicago psychologist Ted Rubenstein says. "If they don't clean it just right or don't touch their folders four times, they can't move forward," he says.

Short of that, but beyond the merely tidy, are people who organize for the sheer pleasure of it and who engage in retail pursuits or online communities that foster it. The organization of craft items has an entire subculture.

Jen Khatchatrian, 39, jokes that she's a recovering organizational-products junkie. "The Container Store is like crack," Ms. Khatchatrian says. "I'm going to file my own restraining order."

Ms. Khatchatrian says her disdain for disorganization stems from her messy parents. "I grew up really wanting structure and order, so now I label everything," she says. "Every drawer and shelf in my kitchen is labeled. I even have a label for the Crock-Pot. It's just comforting to know that everything has a place."

Nowadays, Ms. Khatchatrian prefers to recycle and repurpose existing containers rather than buy new ones, as chronicled on her blog, "Eco Chicago Style." But she's still a big fan of reality television shows like TLC's "Clean Sweep," Style Network's "Clean House" and HGTV's home decorating show "Curb Appeal."

"I love those shows," she says. "You see the potential for your own life."

Many organizers like Ms. Khatchatrian say that orderly living and working spaces make them feel secure and in control. Others, like Sheri Roney, a leadership training consultant in Palos Heights, say that being organized gives them a sense of accomplishment in and of itself.

"I love to have lists and scratch things off — it makes me feel productive," she says.

The converts are always the most devoted. "I used to be a procrastinator, and I never wrote anything down and I always felt jumbled up inside," Ms. Roney, 31, adds. "Once I started putting together lists and setting deadlines, I could relax."

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— Jen Khatchatrian

Ms. Roney says she, with her color-coded closets and china, balances out her husband, who is the opposite of organized. The two have an 18-month-old son. "It has caused some tension between us, but I have to realize that (my husband's) brain works differently and he probably won't notice when something needs to be cleaned," she says. "When he tries to put things away, and it's not done a certain way, I might rearrange things when he's not looking."

## PRECISION ENGINEERING

The perception that women are more organized than men is a popular one. But Jackie Tiani, president of the National Assn. of Professional Organizers' Chicago chapter, says most of her clients are men who are successful largely because of their organizational skills. They just manifest differently.

"Organization is seen as being neat, which is equated with making something pretty, especially in the home vs. the office," she says. In other words, it's OK to be organized if you're putting together a business deal but not if you're arranging the linen closet.

Building engineer Phil Duffin disagrees. Equally efficient at arranging his work and home environments, Mr. Duffin, 45, has a garage that looks like a showroom. An amateur racing enthusiast, he works on cars in his spare time. Although his garage is packed with tools and parts, everything has its place. "One drawer has the wrenches, the other has just screwdrivers; the nuts and bolts are in order," the Buffalo Grove resident says. "I've got the 3/8ths over here and the 5/16ths over there."



Nicole Bahnsen of Lockport has a label for everything, including the box that holds her labeling supplies.

Photos by John R. Boehm

His friend Nicole Bahnsen of Lockport understands him well; she takes pleasure from creating more-efficient ways of doing things. Most things in her house are stored neatly in color-coded bins. "Pink is springtime, orange is Halloween, dark green is Christmas. It makes life so much easier." Her clothes are hung by season and arranged from light to dark. Her office closet is neatly stacked and labeled with monochromatic boxes, and there is not a single "junk drawer" in her house. Everything has its place.

Ms. Bahnsen, 26, a marketing associate, has decided to start a personal organizing business called Simpler Times, though she worries about having enough work. But not everyone wants to make a pastime of cataloguing embroidery floss or wood screws.

### IN ITS PLACE

Standolyn Robertson, a regular expert on A&E's reality show about packrats called "Hoarders," says a professional organizer's goal is to help clients organize their time effectively, not necessarily their possessions.

"Professional organizers get a bad rap because some people think that we're obsessed with our label-makers," says Ms. Robertson, a Boston-based consultant. "This is about using time in a way that makes life easier. I tell my clients, 'If you want to lose weight, get organized. If you want to avoid paying late fees, get organized. If you want to spend more time with your family, get organized.' "

Christina Razzi, 42, a busy mortgage broker and single mom of two young daughters, shares that perspective. She's been a client of the Chicago-based consulting firm Chaos To Order for 10 years.

"My closet is the best room the house," she says. "My clothes are color-coordinated so it's appealing to the eye, my boots are hanging; everything has its proper place."

That's important to her because "time is money, as they say," says Ms. Razzi, senior vice-president of Chicago Financial Services.

That morning, she and her daughter had scrambled to find a karate uniform that had been put in the wrong drawer by the cleaning woman.

"Five minutes spent looking for my daughter's karate clothes is five minutes I could have spent on a business call," Ms. Razzi says. "Last night, I had a hairstylist over to do my hair at 8 p.m. I'm just too busy to do all this for myself, and I'm more than happy to hand it over to a professional."