

# Chicago Sun-Times

## Packrats' Panacea

### Burgeoning Firms Target Organizationally Impaired

By Delia O'Hara

**"I'm** a paper person," says Linda Pollak, president of her own marketing, public relations and corporate events firm.

"I hang onto paper. I shuffle paper. I clip articles out of the newspaper. I have lots of copies of things I'm working on. I think it's important to get things in writing, and then I keep everything. I have piles in every quarter of my desk"

But every so often, Pollak "freaks," both at the office and at home, she says. Then she calls Monica Friel, president of Chaos To Order, one of a burgeoning group of firms that help other people get organized.

"Monica puts everything in one pile, which makes me nervous, because all those papers are in piles for a reason. Monica says they shouldn't be in piles, they should be in files. So we go through them; when Monica is here, they are easily handled. Once the system is established, it works OK," Pollak says.

If the system breaks down, though, Pollak says, papers get out of hand.

This is supposed to be the electronic age, but faxes, junk mail, photocopies and records are flooding into all our lives at an ever accelerating rate.

It is the rare soul who just naturally tosses out every bit of today's junk mail with the evening's trash, writes checks for bills as they come in and puts records away in a file drawer under entries such as "utilities" and "medical."

Most of us fall somewhere along the continuum that begins with the truly organized and ends with

people who have their bathtubs tied up storing pre-World War I copies of National Geographic.

"How someone handles paper tells a lot about that individual," says Washington, D.C.-based organizer Barbara Hemphill, author of *Taming the Paper Tiger*.

"All the various papers in our lives represent hopes, fears, failures, successes, dreams. The reason clutter piles up is because decisions haven't been made ... Our job as organizers is to help people make those decisions."

What it comes down to is that papers must be handled on a regular basis. A filing system must be kept and used. Sadly, it's likely that some things must be thrown away.

The National Association of Professional Organizers has more than 500 members nationwide.

About 20 of those are in Chicago, says Friel, who started her business in 1990 and now has "hundreds" of clients. About 75 percent call for repeat services.

It's possible to bring a cluttered desk under control in a couple of hours, says Friel, who charges \$60 an hour.

#### *Tips for Staying Ahead of Clutter*

**Monica Friel, president of Chaos To Order in Chicago, offers these tips on cutting down on clutter:**

- **On the mail.** When the mail comes in, walk straight from the mailbox to the trash; try to throw out as much as possible. With bills, throw away all inserts and the envelopes, keeping only the bill and the envelope to send it back in. Also, think about getting yourself off some of those mailing lists.
- **On your desktop.** Keep only the things you use every day on top of your desk, create categories -- and files -- for them, and file those things away in the drawers. Try not to get too detailed; if you break things down into too many categories, you won't be able to stay on top of them.
- **On financial records.** The Internal Revenue Service is interested in your financial records for 10 years at the longest. Unless you have some other reason to keep them -- unless you enjoy looking at them now and then, for example -- after that you can throw them out.