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USA > Society & Culture

from the March 29, 2006 edition

Professional organizers help fight 'battle of the bulging files'

By **Marilyn Gardner** | *Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor*

Whenever Fibber McGee opened the door of his famously cluttered closet, an avalanche of junk spilled out, bringing laughter to listeners of his 1950s radio show.

Today millions of closets resemble Fibber's, but nobody is laughing anymore. As Americans struggle with an overload of possessions at home and at work, they are turning, often in desperation, to a growing army of personal organizers to help them deal with stacks of papers, racks of clothes, and jumbles of toys, tools, and books.

"The industry is exploding," says Barry Izsak, president of the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO). Membership nearly doubled between 2003 and 2005, from 2,000 to 3,700. With businesses bearing names such as Absolutely Organized, Keep it Simple, Chaos to Calm, and All Sorted Out, members - 95 percent of whom are women - offer hope that an ordered life is attainable.

In the process, their services are becoming fashionable. "In the past, people hid their disorganization," says Betsy Wintringer, a spokeswoman for the

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Thursday, 05/04/06



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group. "Now it's trendy to have an organizer."

The profession has come a long way since the day in 1979 when Barbara Hemphill asked the Small Business Administration in Washington for help in starting her own organizing business. "They just laughed me out of the room and said, 'No way, lady, that's not a business.' "

Ms. Hemphill, author of "Taming the Paper Tiger," was among nearly 900 professional organizers who gathered in Boston last week for NAPO's annual conference to hone business skills, share techniques, and check out the latest organizing products. These range from a Baby Briefcase for storing a newborn's papers to storage bins, family life organizers, gift-wrap organizers, and plastic containers for board games. "Systems" and "solutions" are the operative words.

Professional organizers cite a variety of reasons for the proliferation of clutter and disorder. "The paperless office is a myth," Mr. Izsak says. In addition, consumers are bombarded with messages from marketers to shop, shop, shop. "People are running out and buying all this stuff without thinking where they're going to store it or how they're going to use it. It all adds to the existing clutter - the pasta machine, the breadmaker, the cappuccino maker."

In the past, Izsak notes, "People didn't have the money to buy 50 business suits, 27 pairs of black pants or jeans, 112 pairs of shoes. They didn't need a place to store it all."

Then there is the matter of time. A majority of women are working. "If they don't get much help from their families, they're overwhelmed," says Elizabeth Hagen, author of "Organize Your Life and Make Every Moment Count."

Both at home and at work, paper ranks as the No. 1 challenge. "People don't know what to do with paper," says Mrs. Hagen. "They don't have a clue."

Some also don't realize that getting organized is not just a matter of aesthetics - creating neater spaces. It can also bring financial gains. Elizabeth Tawney Gross of Albuquerque, N.M., who counsels women with home-based businesses, says, "Women can make more money to help their family if they're organized. They don't mess up. They have available to their customers the products and information they need."

As organizers help clients fight the battle of bulging closets, garages, and attics, they find themselves having to temper the unrealistic expectations that magazines and TV programs create.

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"Organizing shows make it look so easy," says Ann Saunders of Simple Organizing Solutions in Baltimore. "What they don't show is the agony the homeowner goes through in parting with items." She knows one organizer who spent more than 200 hours on a house for a TV makeover. That translated into 22 minutes on air. "It's very deceiving," Ms. Saunders says.

Empty nesters moving to smaller quarters often face challenges in paring down, professional organizers find. So do some older people as they make the transition to a retirement community.

Even children sometimes need help. "Nowadays, when we have a lot more money than time, kids are neglected," says Lanna Nakone of Rutherford, Calif. "Parents buy things for them instead of spending time with them. They're overloaded. When they get organized, they thrive."

In Los Angeles, professional organizers go into elementary schools to work with third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders. "They make children aware of the value of being organized, and help them think differently about their time and stuff," says Deborah Kawashima, director of the program. That helps them keep track of homework and permission slips for field trips.

"Sometimes we can't get through to the moms, but we can to the kids," she says.

This kind of early exposure to order can prevent later problems. Being organized, Mr. Izsak says, is not an inherited trait but an acquired skill.

"Unfortunately, most of us were never taught," he says. "That's why we struggle."

For adults, that struggle can adversely affect relationships and jobs. Noting that being organized saves time, space, money, and energy, Hemphill adds that people sometimes also tell her, "You saved my career, you saved my marriage."

Scott Roewer of Washington, D.C., one of a small group of men in the profession, likens clutter to snow. "You can shovel snow all day, but until it stops snowing, it continues to build up," he says. "So with clutter. Until you solve the problem, find homes for things, and change habits, clutter will continue to pile up every day. Clutter is simply delayed decisions. Having systems in place makes it easier to make decisions.

"People can say all day long, 'Oh, I want to get organized,' " he continues. "But if they're not mentally ready to change habits and make adjustments to their daily lives, it's probably not going to happen. But once they're ready, it's easy."

Fibber McGee, are you listening?

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