

Tackle that paper pile

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STAFF WRITER

You could put up a sign in the home office that reads: "*Feng shui ist verboten.*"

Clutter and paper piles literally suck the life right out of a home office. Look to the left. Paper on the floor. Look to the right. Files that have sat for months.

Next to the printer are sheets of paper printed from a computer of a newspaper article about that restaurant that sounded intriguing (at least it did three weeks ago), or those search engine results for airfare, hotels, car rentals.

On the desk itself, financial articles are strewn about like leaves on a fall afternoon.

And it all just sits there.

"It can be extremely overwhelming," said Donna Lindley, professional organizer at Organize Your World in Rochester Hills and a member of the National Organization of Professional Organizers.

Clutter can be a problem when no system is in place, said Rebecca DeLoy, owner of Come to Order in Plymouth and also a professional organizer.



If you set the mail down one day in the dining room, another day on the dishwasher or on a desk, you will have the mail all over the house. There has to be a system for everything you do."

"A lot of times (people) look at a pile of papers and they feel overwhelmed," said Lori Drouillard, professional organizer with Design and Declutter in West Bloomfield. "They end up jumping around the room.

"The most important thing to do is to pick a project and finish it. If you think of something else to do, make a note and get to this later."

SET UP ROOM

Lindley says paper piles take up more space because more junk mail hits the mailboxes, because of new privacy laws and so many people are on the "do-not-call" lists.

"E-mail is a large reason for it. (Computer users) feel the need to print it out more."

But home office users also need filing systems not just on the computer, but in the traditional file cabinets, too.

Lindley advises her clients cleaning a home office to make space on the top of the desk.

"Don't worry about the piles of papers, just set up enough room for a basic system," she said. "You want to have a system set up to handle papers to be filed."

And if today's mail has bills that need to be paid or have some urgency to them, then place them somewhere where they won't get buried.

"The biggest thing is don't worry about the other piles," Lindley said.

Papers can easily pile up when they aren't filed or acted on quickly.

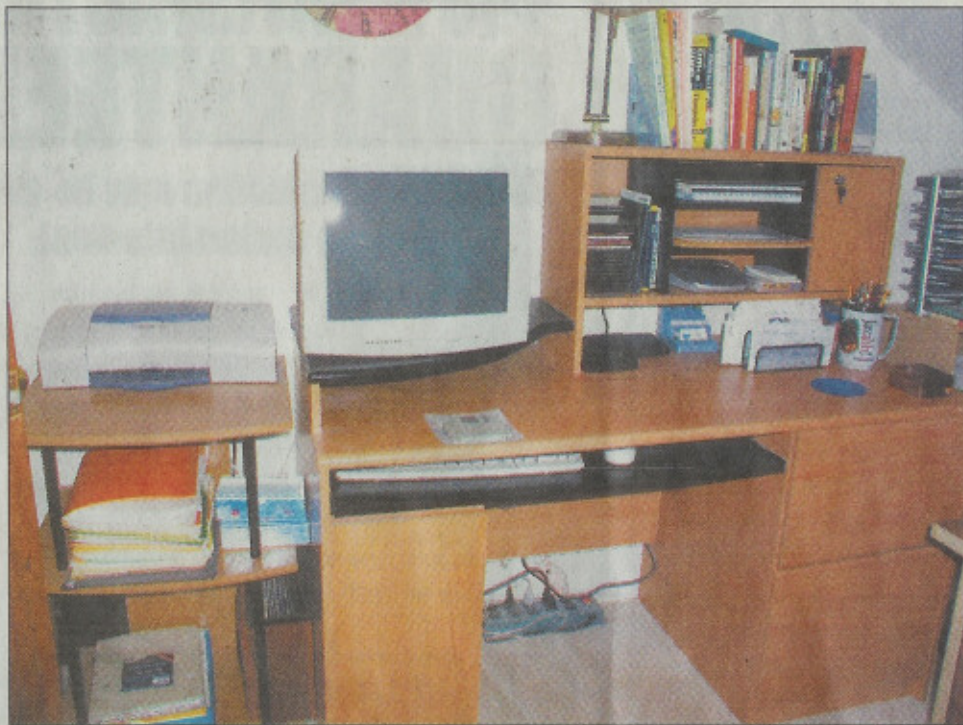


PHOTO COURTESY OF DONNA LINDLEY

Organizing the bills on top of the desk will remind the office user to pay them, while other documents that don't require immediate attention can be filed and placed nearby for easy access.

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PILING ON

When organizing your home office, Donna Lindley says you should ask the following questions:

- Does this paperwork require action? Is it recent enough or is it something that is outdated?
 - Is it difficult to obtain again, or is it something that can be conveniently printed from your computer? "If you can, then you can throw it out," Lindley said.
 - How old is it and what is it? Anything with tax implications should be kept for seven years, and legal documents should be held onto permanently.
- "We have what we call a FAT system," Lindley said. "Every time you pick up a piece of paper, it's either file, act or toss."

CLUTTER

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"There's a saying that today's mail is tomorrow's pile."

Filing can be tricky, Lindley said. "You might be a husband-and-wife team that has set up files. Car insurance might be filed under 'vehicle,' and the vehicle information might be filed there, too."

Lindley's company offers PaperTiger software that helps cross-reference titles and lists where information is stored (and more importantly, where the file is located) to help find the needed information.

Before sorting, Lindley wants to know exactly what information will be kept where.

When organizing, "take a look at what you have and try to keep the system simple," Drouillard said.

But life appears complex when clutter overwhelms families. And that is because they don't attack the paper tiger and just let it lie once it arrives.

"Paper is the No. 1 issue with our clients, by far," Lindley said. "People don't have a system to handle action items. (An action item) may be an upcoming class, it may be a wedding invitation with a map, or a bill to be paid. That is probably the biggest problem."

FURNITURE CHOICES

Many homeowners who have home offices don't like file cabinets.

"They're using different systems because they don't like to file," Drouillard said. "There's different products available that they can use, such as baskets. They're organizing a piling system.

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Rebecca DeLoy
Come to Order, Plymouth

"You can have filing cabinets, but nothing will go in there if you don't like to file."

You can place these items behind doors.

"I ask them if they want it neat and tidy or whether they can find things, and they always say they want it (set up) so they can find things," she said.

Home office users need to look for an efficient use of space and select materials that are beautiful.

"Aesthetics are important," she said. "When you're choosing a desk, get one that's made out of a material that you prefer. The details and decorating are important and it does help use the space and use it properly."

DeLoy said home office users need to ask themselves what they want.

"The first thing they do is assess their needs," DeLoy said. "Do they need bookcases, filing cabinets or a cork board? What is their style of working?"

How the material is stored depends on what it is, DeLoy said.

"Is it all paper, manuals or magazines? Manuals aren't going to stand up on a bookshelf. You might need a space container like you'd use for magazines or special bins.

"You need to keep things you need to access right away in a place that is very accessible. Things that aren't needed a lot can be tucked away on a top shelf.

"Most times people can't get started (organizing) on their own because it's overwhelming. That's why it's important to get an organizer. Sometimes they need an organizer who can get them started, and then they can carry the re-organization all the way through. Sometimes they need help the whole time."

Bookcases, filing cabinets and cork boards can be effective office furnishings. Manila folders can be placed in overhanging folders for better organization

(For example, insurance and warranty folders can be collected in the overhang folder for the car.)

"Sometimes the cork boards can be receptacles for those miscellaneous items that you don't know what to do with," DeLoy said.

"You have to figure out your goals for what you want to do with the room, whether it will be used for business, homework or to pay the bills. You'll figure out then what your furniture needs are."

But don't fret if you have piles and piles of paper to sort.

"It is much easier to do if you break it down into smaller projects," DeLoy said. "And don't be afraid to throw things away. Ask for help. Don't be afraid if you cannot do it by yourself."

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