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Professional Organizers Arrange Their Success

By **MARK HENRICKS**

If you've ever thought that it would be great to be really organized, you may be more right than you know. Entrepreneurs who start businesses as professional organizers report unusually high levels of satisfaction, and many say they earn more than they did as corporate employees.

"I keep doing it because I love it; it's instant gratification," says Sally Allen, owner of A Place For Everything LLC in Golden, Colo. Maria Gracia, founder of Get Organized Now! in Watertown, Wis., says, "It's a very rewarding field emotionally, and it can also be financially rewarding." And Barry Izsak, president of Arranging It All in Austin, Texas, concludes, "My life is so good. I never dreamed I'd be doing something that is so easy for me, and making so much money."

Professional organizers get paid to help other people and, sometimes, businesses, straighten out their belongings, get rid of unneeded stuff and generally arrange their material possessions. It's a sizable and growing field. The National Association of Professional Organizers has about 3,000 members, according to the president, Mr. Izsak, who says the Glenview, Ill., group has increased its ranks by about 50% in the past year.

Austin homemaker Carolyn Lawrence hired Mr. Izsak to organize her family's 4,000-square-foot, five-bedroom home because clutter had taken over while she was pregnant with her second child. "It totally affects the way you feel about the house and yourself," Mrs. Lawrence says of the mess, which included a junk-stuffed closet she almost never opened. Although she considers herself a tidy person, the situation was overwhelming. "I didn't know where to start," she says.

An Orderly Business

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After Mr. Izsak spent about 20 hours over several visits, the unused closet neatly stored scrapbooking and art supplies, and the rest of the house was similarly organized. "I felt like I had control and I felt like I liked where I lived," Mrs. Lawrence says. "And I had more time with my family because things had a place they needed to go."

Organizers say such warm client reactions are a major benefit of the work. "We get lots of pats on the back," says Jim O'Connor, president of Clutter Control in Lake Forest, Ill. "And I never have to ask for the money. They usually write a check at the end of the day."

Those checks can be sizable. Organizers commonly charge \$45 to \$55 an hour, according to Ms. Gracia, whose Web site sells organizing products, including a how-to book for would-be professional organizers. Organizing a large home may cost several thousand dollars, and business organizations can be higher. K.J. McCorry, owner of Officiency Inc. in Boulder, Colo., charges \$85 to \$150 per hour to organize electronic data on companies' computer hard drives. Ms. McCorry says, "it provides an income that I'm very comfortable with."

Ms. McCorry says she makes far more than when she worked as general manager for a food company before starting her firm in 1996. Other professional organizers also say this is the best-paying job they've had, including Mr. Izsak, who reports earning a six-figure income from organizing.

Mr. Izsak says there are more than 40 different types of professional organizers, ranging from garage specialists to experts in feng shui. Engagements often start with an interview to determine the client's problem and desired outcome. After that, the organizing begins and may extend over several days or sessions over a period of weeks.

Decisions, Decisions

Much of what they do is discard unwanted objects. "The biggest problem is getting rid of things," says Mr. O'Connor. "People don't want something, but they don't want to throw it away or have a garage sale." Even when he's making the decision, it can be tough to toss some stuff. Charities won't accept many items, such as waterbeds, and materials such as paint and chemicals often can be disposed of only at special hazardous-waste facilities.

Marketing is another challenge, and successful organizers work hard at this part of the business. Mr. O'Connor visits real-estate offices regularly to pitch his services as someone who can help homeowners prepare their properties for sale. Ms. Allen also targets real-estate agents with gift certificates agents can give clients. Other organizers join lots of business groups, give talks on how to organize and engage in direct-mail campaigns. "This is a very proactive business," says Ms. Gracia. "You have to do a lot of self-promotion. If you have the organizing knowledge, you also have to have the marketing knowledge."

The National Association of Professional Organizers sponsors seminars and provides other training for would-be organizers. There are also numerous books and online resources on the general topic of organizing. Experienced organizers advise beginners to start by helping relatives and friends organize their spaces without charge, in order to develop a reputation before going into business.

Practicing What You Preach

As the ranks swell, there is some question about how many organizers the market can support. Ms. Allen says there were only 600 in the national association when she joined in 1997, and competition is becoming an issue. "I find certain areas in Denver that I'm not being called to anymore because there are other organizers in that area," she says.

But after a few years in business, many organizers report having more business than they can handle. Some subcontract jobs to other organizers, while others write books or, like Ms. Gracia, turn to selling products. One of the few drawbacks to the work, it seems, is that professional organizers are likely to be criticized for any disorganization in their own lives.

Ms. Gracia recalls one correspondent who hassled her for failing to quickly respond to e-mail. "They wrote back and said, 'If you were so organized, you'd be able to get back in 30 minutes,' " she says. "You always get people who expect you to be Superman. But I've kind of learned to let that pass."

-- *Mr. Henricks, an Austin, Texas, journalist, is the author of "Not Just a Living: The Complete Guide to Creating a Business That Gives You a Life" (Perseus Books, 2002).*

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