

Living Textbook | **CUTTING THE CHAOS**

WHAT'S DRIVING THE DEMAND FOR PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZERS?

Editor's note:

In the name of research, professor Carrie Lane has crawled through cobwebbed attics, reorganized overstuffed closets and learned to wield a label maker – a cherished tool among organizers – with lightning speed.

For the past year, she's been interviewing professional organizers in Los Angeles, Orange County, and other places across America. She's attended talks and seminars on how to get organized and worked alongside organizers as a paid assistant.



CARRIE LANE
CAL STATE FULLERTON

In this Living Textbook series, she writes about the field of professional organizing and what it can tell us about work and life in modern America. Here's the first installment.

For those who are naturally organized, paying someone to help sort your files, clean out your closets, or reorganize your kitchen drawers seems unnecessary, even absurd. Yet more and more Americans are doing exactly that, and they're doing so for reasons that are as interesting as they are varied.

In this column I will discuss the phenomenal growth of professional organizing, in which organizers are hired to help people organize and manage their increasingly busy and clutter-filled lives. Having spent a year interviewing and working alongside professional organizers, I've gained a sense of what the work entails and why so many people now see hiring an organizer as a natural, even necessary part of the quest for a better, simpler life.

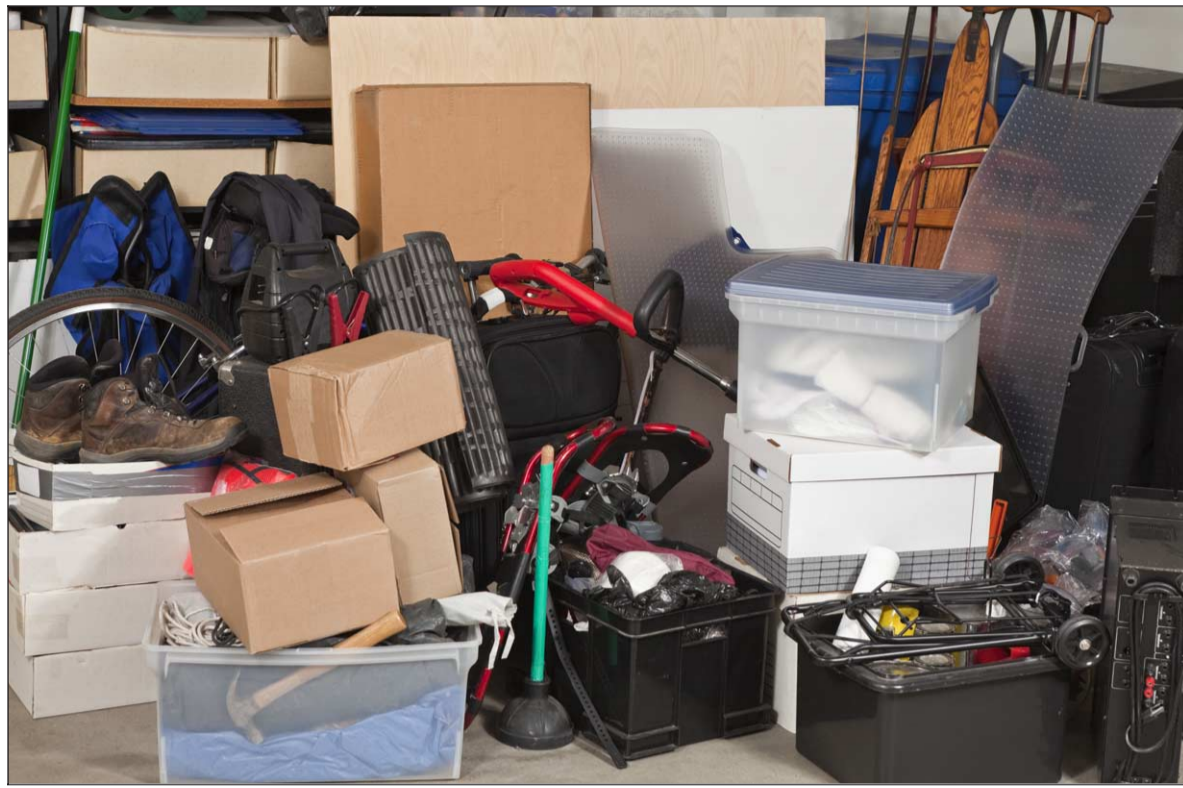
Organizers starting out in the early 1980s had to constantly explain what, exactly, a professional organizer was. Today, when organizers introduce themselves, the response they hear most often is, "Oh! I need one of you!" To explain this shift in thinking, I've compiled a list of seven central factors fueling the rising demand for organizing services:

TOO MUCH STUFF

With the increased availability of inexpensive, disposable goods, people of all socio-economic levels are able to accumulate far more belongings than their homes can accommodate, even though the average home size has doubled since the 1950s. One in 10 households now rents a storage unit to stow their surplus belongings. A UCLA study of middle-class families found that three-quarters of households cannot park their car in the garage because it was too full of stuff, and that the volume of possessions in most homes creates additional stress for mothers. As books have documented, over-accumulation has had negative impacts on our environment and economy, so it's no surprise many Americans have started looking for a solution to all this stuff.

TOO LITTLE TIME

Most people say they'd be a lot more organized if only they had a bit more time. Americans across all regions and socio-economic classes are increasingly strapped for time, as the demands of both work and family expand at record rates. Americans work longer days, take less vacation and retire



SHUTTERSTOCK

How did our lives get in such a mess? There's no shortage of explanations.

later than their peers in other industrialized countries, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. A Pew Research Report found that both mothers and fathers now spend more hours per week with their children than did parents in the 1960s. With more time spent working and taking care of children, few Americans can find the time to sort the mail, purge the damaged sporting equipment or tackle that pesky junk drawer.

TOO MUCH TECHNOLOGY

Technology is another major contributor to disorganization today. Whether for work or for play, we spend more time engaging with technology than ever before, leaving less time for dealing with the actual real-life spaces in which we live and work. Americans today are also barraged with more

Biography

Carrie Lane is an associate professor of American studies at Cal State Fullerton, where she teaches courses on work, community and American culture.

She is author of "A Company of One: Insecurity, Independence, and the New World of White-Collar Unemployment" and winner of the 2012 Society for the Anthropology of Work Book Award.

Although she could probably help you get your sock drawer in order, you should visit napo.net or challengingdisorganization.org if you want to find a real organizer in your area.

information than they can process or store. This has created yet another subspecialty, digital organizing, which could involve creating a workable filing system for your overcrowded computer desktop or helping you deal with the thousands of digital photos you're terrified to lose but can't print out. Many organizers also

believe that technology, if used effectively, can play a role in banishing disorganization, as going paperless saves desk space and organizing apps can help you manage everything from receipts to business cards to shopping lists.

LACK OF KNOW-HOW

With more women working out-

side the home and more families requiring two full-time incomes to stay afloat, fewer households have a full-time homemaker. This means there are far fewer people in this country who specialize in organizing the home and its inhabitants. As one organizer said, "I can't believe there are people out there who don't know how to write a grocery list." But there are, which is why she now teaches a class on the topic for her local adult school. Similarly, the disappearance of home economics from school curricula, while a boon for female students who wanted to take shop or computer programming, instead, means fewer young people are exposed to basic household management principles.

LOSS OF COMMUNITY

In the past, disorganized individuals might turn for help to an especially-organized friend or family member. As families disperse and communal ties weaken (at least outside of social networking), many are left without the help they need to get a handle on their proliferating possessions. The market has stepped in to address this absence. As sociologist Arlie Hochschild describes in "The Outsourced Self," Americans have become increasingly comfortable hiring professionals such as dating coaches, surrogates and "Rent-a-Grandmas" to assist with personal tasks. Organizers are another manifestation of this trend, as they often end up playing the dual role of organizing expert and supportive, nonjudgmental friend, a line that can be tricky to walk.

CHRONIC DISORGANIZATION

Among organizers and other experts, there is some debate as to whether there are more chronically disorganized people out there or whether they are simply more visible today. Chronic disorganization, defined as long-term, debilitating levels of disorganization, has been linked to a number of conditions, including ADHD, OCD and dementia. Once called "packrats," individuals who suffer from chronic disorganization or hoarding disorders are the focus of much attention among organizers, who can now take classes and obtain certifications specifically geared to working with this population.

INCREASED AWARENESS

As mentioned above, more people than ever before are familiar with the work of professional organizers. This is partly a matter of word-of-mouth (the single best source of clients for Los Angeles organizers, as well as the successful efforts of previous generations of organizers to publicize the profession. But much of the awareness around organizing is due to the explosion of reality television programs featuring organizers, such as TLC's "Clean House" and "Hoarding: Buried Alive," OCN's "Extreme Clutter" and, most notably, A&E's "Hoarders." Although organizers disagree about whether these shows really help the people they feature, they unanimously credit them with expanding awareness of the profession.

Having explored why so many people are hiring organizers these days, in my next column I'll explain how the organizing process works, offering stories and insights from my own experiences as an organizing assistant.

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL LOOK AT PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZING

By **CARRIE M. LANE**
CAL STATE FULLERTON

I'm a pretty organized person. My house is relatively tidy, I can usually find things when I need them, and I get an absurd degree of satisfaction from regularly cleaning out my closets and cupboards. So when I learned that people actually make a living helping others organize their belongings, spaces and schedules, I wanted to know more.

As an anthropologist who studies the changing ways we live and work in the United States, I was fortunate to be able to turn my personal curiosity into a research project.

Professional organizers are generally hired to help individuals, families, and businesses develop and maintain systems for organizing their homes and workplaces. Every organizing job is different, and every organizer has her or his areas of specialization. Some manage moves, others work with families and others assist seniors downsizing into smaller homes. Some do closets, others garages. Some help wealthy clients manage multiple homes; others help

make tiny apartments feel more spacious and livable.

There have always been people whose jobs entailed keeping other people organized, whether as secretaries, personal assistants, office managers, accountants, interior designers or homemakers. But it was only in the 1970s and 1980s that organizing emerged as a profession unto itself. Around that time, news articles around the country started featuring individuals (mostly women) who would, for a fee, help disorganized people get organized. A 1978 New York Times headline read, "They'll Help Unscramble Your Life"; another proclaimed, "Organizer Creates Calm Out of Chaos." Many of these organizing entrepreneurs were former office workers looking to work on a freelance basis. Others were full-time homemakers who needed a career flexible enough to accommodate their childcare and domestic responsibilities.

In the early 1980s, a small group of organizers in and around Los Angeles decided to gather to discuss their shared interests. These early meetings were mostly informal gatherings

where organizers swapped stories and tricks of the trade while contemplating how to raise awareness of their industry.

The Association of Professional Organizers, soon renamed National Association of Professional Organizers, was formed around 1982. The association now has about 4,000 members in 24 countries, according to its website. Most are women, and they range in age from 20-something to 80-something. In 2001, another group, the Institute for Challenging Disorganization, joined NAPO in the quest to publicize and professionalize the work of organizing. The institute's mission centers on understanding and serving the chronically disorganized whose quality of life has been compromised by their long-term struggle with disorganization and whose previous efforts at getting organized have failed. This includes people who hoard, a group that has received much attention of late due to television programs such as "Hoarders" and "Hoarding: Buried Alive." Both associations now offer professional certifications, for various types and levels of organizational expertise.

FIRST DAY BACK

Find The Good & Share It

Find, buy and wear unique Goodwill apparel on your first day back to school. Share your #FirstDayBack looks on Instagram and join us in helping local Orange County families get and keep jobs.

#FIRSTDAYBACK

ocgoodwill.org/locations

All outfits in this photo were found at Goodwill of Orange County stores.