

**National Post**  
**May 1, 2004**

## **Canadians Pay Neat-Niks to Nuke their Clutter**

*By Deirdre McMurdy*

Cristi Cooke couldn't quite put her finger on what was wrong. Sitting at the desk in her home office, the Ottawa-based management consultant felt distracted and had trouble focusing on her various assignments.

"I was completely scattered and kept darting from one thing to the other. I couldn't prioritize," she recalls. It was only after meeting and retaining a professional organizer that Ms. Cooke finally figured out her problem – and how to address it.

"My office didn't look especially messy, but there were lots of neat little piles of stuff everywhere. I could never remember where anything was because I didn't have any sort of filing system. And it was bogging me down," she says. "My productivity is hugely improved now – and I don't have the constant feeling that I'm out of control."

Ms. Cooke is by no means alone in her decision to hire someone to help her get a grip on clutter. Faced with soaring demand, membership in the Professional Organizers of Canada has grown by 30% in the past year to over 200.

The extreme popularity of such publications as *Real Simple* magazine, as well as several television shows devoted to the subject of organizing.

Individuals aren't the only ones turning to professional neat-niks. The growing number of small business start-ups in the age of outsourcing is also giving professional organizers a boost. Mr. Golberg, for example, specializes in developing systems for entrepreneurs who often get bogged down in administrative processes.

"They have limited resources and they just want to focus on what they're good at," he explains. "We help to contain the frustration of filing and paperwork."

When it comes to individual clients in particular, there's a strong seasonal element to the demand for professional organizers: Business traditionally booms in the spring when people confront the gridlock that's occurred in closets, crawl spaces and garages over the winter.

"We've posted record bookings across North American in the last week." Says Tyler Wright of Vancouver-based 1-800-Got-Junk? removal service. "There's always a massive purge that takes place in the spring. And the amount of renovating and decorating that's going on is also increasing our business volume."

He says the typical Canadian family spends, on average between \$150 and \$450 to declutter in the spring. And since the firm started to franchise operations in 1999, it has developed 11 operations across the country.

"When we pull up with our trucks, there's always a lot of tension and anxiety in the air. People have trouble separating from their stuff, even if they don't use it or want it," he observes. "But you wouldn't believe the relief on their faces when it's loaded up and we drive away."

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In fact, professional organizers say that the psychological part of their jobs – getting clients to part with excess items, to understand why they are surrounded by chaos and how to develop a system that sustains order – is the greatest challenge.

“People often don’t understand the emotional toll of living with chronic disorganization,’ says Sherry Borsheim of Simply Productive in Vancouver. “It zaps their personal energy, paralyzes their forward momentum.”

Denial can also be a significant hurdle.

“By the time they call in a professional organizer, they’re usually in acute pain, are at their wit’s end,” says Ms. Borsheim. “Especially when it’s a successful professional, there’s a sense of embarrassment and failure. They are ashamed to ask for help with what they consider to be a basic function – but they have no idea where to begin.”

So what are the most common problems encountered by professional organizers?

One is the desire to change. A wife may call an organizer on behalf of her husband, but if he’s reluctant to address the perceived problem, no solution will stick.

## Tips from the Pros

1. If you haven’t worn it for a year, toss it.
2. If you have a problem casting off expensive items of clothing, overcome your guilt by donating them.
3. Put unused items that you’re reluctant to part with into a sealed box. Write a date on the box three to six months in the future. If you haven’t broken the seal on the box by that date, toss it or have someone do it for you without telling you it’s been done.
4. Don’t buy containers before you start to declutter. Wait until you know what you’re disposing of first.
5. Avoid piles. Process and deal with incoming clutter immediately.
6. Start in one corner of a room and systematically work clock-wise. Only handle items once and move onto the next.
7. If you don’t use it or live it, ditch it.
8. Invest in a software system, such as The Paper Tiger software, to organize your personal documents. It acts as search engine for all your papers.
9. Can’t find information need? Ask yourself where you’d look for it if you don’t have an orderly filing system and what name you’d give the file. Then do it.
10. Centralize your clutter. Instead of spreading it around, designate a certain spot for mail, forms and other daily inflow.

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