

F E A T U R E   A R T I C L E

**Clutter Doctor**

Professional organizers to the rescue!

By Irene Kew

Weeding our homes of junk and getting organized may be the chore we all find excuses to avoid, but crowded closets, jumbled drawers and overflowing shelves, experts say, can impair our focus and productivity.

“For some people, clutter can cause anxiety, embarrassment and paralysis,” says Kit Davey, a professional organizer and owner of **A Fresh Look** ([www.afreshlook.net](http://www.afreshlook.net)) in Redwood City. “Refusing to deal with it or, alternatively, constantly shuffling it all around takes time away from the things in life which really matter. Simple statistic: If you spend 10 minutes a day looking for your car keys, that’s over 60 hours a year of frustration and wasted time!”

Clutter also hurts your pocketbook. “Clutter causes financial stress when you purchase items you already own but can’t find,” says professional organizer Tamah Vega, who owns Fremont-based **A Sense of Home** ([www.asenseofhome.com](http://www.asenseofhome.com)). Where clutter is severe, it could also lead to depression, she adds.

Fortunately, there’s help. Over the years, specialty stores like The Container Store, Hold Everything and Lillian Vernon have sprouted up to help get our papers and possessions in order. Even better, professional organizers – the personal trainers of the new millennium – are rolling up their sleeves to purge the unnecessary and eliminate our pack-rat tendencies.

The National Association of Professional Organizers has grown from five founders in 1985 to more than 3,000 members, and is now adding an average of two members a day. The fastest growing Bay Area chapter of the organization now boasts 180 members, says Angela Wallace, professional organizer and media liaison for the group.

According to Wallace, the most common problem in Silicon Valley home clutter is we’re constantly accumulating possessions. It doesn’t help that skyrocketing property prices force most to live in small spaces. “The affluence of our society allows us to buy too much stuff,” she says. “It can also be mental clutter...Take making decisions, for example. Try evaluating cell phone plans or looking for a health insurance plan. There are so many choices that it consumes much of our time making decisions and it bogs



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us all down." Fast changing technology also means we end up changing our cell phones, computers and TV sets more often than we need to.

While there's no professional certification required for this industry just yet (which means you, too, can become a professional organizer!), these clutter doctors – who charge from \$50 to \$150 per hour – wade through closets, shape up garages and transform our unruly homes into shipshape surroundings. Each professional organizer may have their own style, but all typically go through a sort, group and purge process with their clients. Once that's done, the professional organizer will work with you to figure out where things go and how to keep them in place, Vega says.

It's not just as simple as throwing an organizer your door keys and leaving them to clean up your mess. "We always try and teach our clients basic guidelines for how to stay organized and keep clutter-free," Vega explains. "Part of the misconception is we come and do it all for them, but that's usually not the case. Most [organizers] work side-by-side with clients... because it's an educational experience. We are trying to change their view of how they are living so it can change their behavior and then their environment."

You don't have to worry about organizers turning into anti-clutter fascists, insisting you throw out everything you haven't used in years like the sticklers you might see on HGTV's *Mission Organization* or TLC's *Clean Sweep*. Vega says, "We're not there to force someone to part with things. We're there to help them deal with what they have and to find the best way to work with what's in their home."

### SOME HELPFUL HINTS:

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#### Stop the Flow

"For example, don't stop at garage sales. Stop subscriptions to magazines you don't have time to read, go from the mailbox to the recycling bin and sort before you put the mail down." – Kit Davey, *A Fresh Look*

#### One In, One Out

"When you do choose to bring something home, make sure you purge or get rid of something you no longer need." – Tamah Vega, *A Sense of Home*

#### Everything in its Place

"Create systems that fit your lifestyle. Maintain the systems." – Joan Cross, *Organize 911*

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To find out more about professional organizers, visit [www.napo.net](http://www.napo.net) and [www.napo-sfba.org](http://www.napo-sfba.org).

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