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# Home-Office Chaos, the Final Frontier

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I HAVE always had a messy home office.

My idea of a filing system is a nine-foot-long table, completely covered by scary-looking disorganized stacks of paper, with one tiny area carved out at the end where I work inside a protective perimeter of empty Diet Coke cans.

The benefits of this design were clear when my children were small. In those days, if I stayed very quiet behind the clutter, people looking for a snack or a ruling in a hair-pulling dispute often did not notice me and went off to find their father instead.

But there is not much hair-pulling to interrupt me anymore. And one day this month, I walked into my office and heard rustling. Was something nesting under the piles of old newspaper?

Suddenly I saw the place through someone else's eyes. While the rest of my friends had been spending the last few years turning their home offices into quiet oases worthy of being photographed by a shelter magazine, I had decorated my space in a style that could be described only as Early American Lunatic.

The printer spewed paper onto the floor. An unsightly phone cord snaked across the room. I even had a second, disassembled work table propped up in the corner because I had no room to set it up. And where did that ugly smoke-colored plastic letter-holder thing come from, anyway?

I vowed to change things. I moved the long table against the bookshelves, moved the printer to a shelf and off the table, called an electrician to install a new phone line and sorted through piles of paper.

The result? Neat piles of paper, stacked up next to an ugly smoke-colored plastic letter-holder thing.

The next step was to shop. Online, I saw lots of really beautiful — and often pricy — office accessories that might be able to take me to the next level of office fashion, including linen-covered letter-size boxes (\$24.99 at [Daytimer.com](http://Daytimer.com)), hot-pink calfskin personal organizers (priced at \$195 at [Katespade.com](http://Katespade.com)) and storage boxes with contrast stitching and brushed-silver faceplates (\$25 to \$60 at [Kangaroomstorage.com](http://Kangaroomstorage.com)).

But I was afraid to buy anything. The wrong organizing equipment could turn into extra clutter.

The truth was, I didn't know how I wanted to set up my office, much less what accent colors to choose. Before I could trade in my chaos theory for calm, I had to figure out whether to file my notes in hard-sided magazine files (\$11.95 at [Lincolnstationers.com](http://Lincolnstationers.com)) or powder-coated foldout letter holders (\$15 from [bludot.com](http://bludot.com)).

It was around this time, while trying to avoid staring morosely at a nasty tangle of electrical cords — connected to a phone, a computer, a printer, a lamp and an answering machine that I had never even programmed — that I stumbled across [Seejanetwork.com](http://Seejanetwork.com), where the home-page motto was “The Destination for Office Style and Organization.”

I looked closer. The site, which featured hip, chic office supplies from more than 20 manufacturers, featured a photo of a “Desk of the Month” that was outfitted entirely in operating-room white. It looked so clean.

I had two choices. Either I could try to untangle all those cords at my feet, or I could phone Holly Bohn, chief executive at [Seejanetwork.com](http://Seejanetwork.com), and throw myself on her mercy. I called.

“My office is a nightmare,” I said.

“Do you have children?” Ms. Bohn asked.

“Do you think that's my problem?” I asked.

“That's everybody's problem,” she said.

She explained that if I wanted to achieve true peace and order, I had to stop trying to keep my work separate from the rest of my life.

“Today’s woman, whether working in the home, out of the home, with kids or with no kids, we’re the consummate multitasker, running the show, running the house, working, organizing after-school activities,” Ms. Bohn said. “You need a command center.”

Like the Starship Enterprise. I liked that idea.

“You have to know if you are a stacker or a filer,” she said. “I like the look of things put away in drawers, and I’ve spent days making files and putting them in drawers and feeling incredibly organized. But I did not keep it up. I have to go through my stacks and look at things to get them done.”

“I’m a stacker, too,” I said.

“Letter trays are good for stackers,” she said. “I’m really big on finding ways to separate things. I break things down into categories that fit my life. But I don’t separate things into too many files, because then I can’t find anything either.”

Ms. Bohn stacks her company’s Structure Letter Trays (\$20.95 for two) on her desk and also uses plastic pouches (\$5 for a set of three Project Envelopes) to transport pesky papers from kitchen to office instead of letting them pile up hopelessly on the counter.

“When I was repainting the house,” she said, “I grabbed a pouch, stuck in pictures of houses and paint chips and everything else and wrote on the label ‘house color.’ When the project was done, I dumped everything out.”

But how about making it look good?

“If it’s color-coordinated, everything in the same basic color school, it’s not going to look as messy,” Ms. Bohn said.

After I hung up, I eyed my command center.

Colorful books lined the wall behind my table. I decided on a beige and white color scheme that would not fight the bright dust jackets.

The letter trays Ms. Bohn used were too long to fit on my shelves, so I ended up at [Westelm.com](http://Westelm.com), where I bought flax-colored canvas-covered magazine files (\$19 each) to line up in a neat row. When they arrived, I designated one file per child — to hold school schedules, summer-camp and college brochures and report cards — and others for “Household” and “Travel” and “New Book Project.”

The files looked really good, so good I could not resist buying Seejanework’s white pencils (\$4.95) and silver-plated Trophy Cup Pencil Vase (\$25) to sit in front of them on the now-empty table.

Perhaps I got a little carried away. From Westelm.com, I also bought a flax-colored three-drawer box (\$54) to store passports, birth certificates and maps. But I was disappointed, after it arrived, to learn that the drawers had no guides and thus did not open smoothly. Although it so adorable on the shelf next to the magazine files, after three days of agonizing, I returned it to a nearby West Elm store.

To hide ugly cords, I bought 10 feet of Hosa split plastic tubing (\$10.95 at [cableorganizer.com](http://cableorganizer.com)) in white.

I even assembled the second work table — in case I need a backup file system.

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