

Chaos Theory:

Laura Leist and Eliminate Chaos get paid to put your things in order

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When Laura Leist first started her business as a professional organizer, she found herself in the same situation time and again. She'd be hired to deal with the physical clutter in someone's home office, but when she got to chatting with her clients, she found they didn't have good systems in place for keeping track of customer data and business processes.



Leist, who has a degree in management information systems and a background in the corporate world, found she could help her clients better manage their electronic data and work flow.



"It's all organizing — it's just organizing the data that's key to their business," said Leist, owner of Snohomish-based Eliminate Chaos.

That realization led Leist to branch out into working with commercial clients as well as residential ones, a decision that has proved sound during the recession. While she has fewer clients this year, each project has been significantly bigger, keeping the nine-employee company busy. She expects revenue of \$600,000 to \$800,000 for this year, about 35 percent above last year's total.

Leist said the recession has prompted some businesses to make strategic investments in organizing services.

"I think they're looking at their bottom line, and how productive their employees are, and how much more productive they could be with the right information, electronic or paper, at their fingertips," she said.

Leist says she has learned several key lessons since she started her business in 2000:

— It's critical to delegate work: not just administrative tasks, but core services. Leist said that if you are careful to hire the right people and make sure they're well-trained, you have to trust that you've made the right decisions.

— Particularly during the recession when many people are feeling cautious, it's more cost-effective to market to existing and past clients than to attract new ones.

— When tackling ambitious projects, you have to eliminate unnecessary distractions and learn when to say no.

— Stick to your goals and vision, and put them in writing, but make sure to re-examine those goals every year.

And, of course, Leist is a firm believer in taking the time to get and stay organized, but that has always come easily to her. As a child, she said, she wouldn't let the cleaning lady into her room because she was so particular about the way things were lined up on her desk. She still labels all the drinks at her annual barbecue, although her friends make fun of her for it. And before she started her own company, she got high marks in every performance review for organization and efficiency. Friends told her that becoming a professional organizer was a natural fit for her.

But Leist's business is different from a typical professional organizer's. Most such companies tend to be one- or two-person shops, focused on the residential market and on physical objects. Eliminate Chaos is bigger and more diversified. The decision was made several years ago to diversify and pursue the business market, and today the company has five divisions: residential; home office; relocation for residential and commercial clients; seminars; and business, including space planning, downsizing, decluttering and training on Microsoft Outlook.

Leist said that small changes in process and work flow can add up to substantial savings. In one of her early commercial jobs, she worked with a company that wasn't using the scheduling feature on Outlook because the company wasn't on the right server, so six-figure executives would be walking the halls and calling each other trying to schedule group meetings. Leist figured out that that method was costing the company about \$60,000 a year in lost time and productivity. So she got the company switched to a different server and trained the employees on how to use calendars.

Today, she said, many companies still don't have efficient email systems, so employees are wasting time deleting email on both mobile devices and work computers.

One key to Leist's success has been writing several books, something that got started almost by accident. She was asked to teach a class at a conference of the National Association of Professional Organizers and was told she had to write her own materials. She produced about 60 pages of content for the class, and a number of people approached her and asked if they could buy the handouts. She ended up writing three books on how to use Outlook.

A few years later, Leist got a call from Sasquatch Books asking her if she wanted to write a book. Over the course of six months, she wrote "Eliminate Chaos: The 10-Step Process to Organize Your Home and Life." She couldn't cut back at work, because she had to make sure she finished all the projects that were being photographed for the book. So Leist would write all weekend, and from 5 a.m. to 7 a.m. during the week. Whenever anyone invited her out to do something, she'd say "AB — after the book." Leist said that when other people ask her about the experience, she tells them they're never going to get rich writing books. But writing has raised her profile, added to her credibility and opened up more speaking opportunities.

Despite the growth of her business, Leist still works out of a home office, albeit a large one. She said most of her work is done on-site with clients, so it wouldn't make sense to lease commercial space. But she has also started teaching classes in her home that include tours of the whole house.

"We use our house as an example of how to organize your own home," she said.