

Smart Moves: Tips on cleaning your home office

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Are you preparing to put your house on the market and know you must remove an abundance of extra items before that can happen? If so, professional organizers urge you to allow extra time to declutter your home office.

"It's very time-consuming to go through everything in a home office, so you must make it a priority," said Laura Leist, author of "Eliminate Chaos: The 10-Step Process to Organize Your Home and Life."

Leist, who owns a professional organizing firm, said many sellers face tremendous problems dealing with the stacks of paper, books and magazines that crowd their home offices.

"People don't know how to make decisions about paper, what to keep and what to toss out or put through the shredder," said Leist, a former president of the National Association of Professional Organizers (www.napo.net).

Ronni Eisenberg, author of "Organize Your Home Office," said the process of decluttering a home workspace isn't nearly as hard for younger people who grew up with computers as it is for older people.

Regardless of how difficult it is, clearing out your office is a pre-sale necessity.

"People can't picture themselves living in your house if it's filled with clutter in any room, let alone the home office," said Susan Pinsky, a veteran organizer and author of books on the topic.

- **Take a hard-nosed approach to sifting through papers.**

Many who work from home are troubled with containers brimming with unsorted papers. These include business reports, computer printouts, junk mail, utility bills, credit card statements and clippings from magazines and newspapers.

"More than 80 percent of the papers people save are never referred to again," said Pierrette Ashcroft, who leads a consulting firm called Smart Productivity Solutions.

The problem for home sellers is that any kind of clutter, including papers, makes a home look untidy. That can cause visitors to conclude that a property has more issues than meet the eye, says Mark Nash, the author of "1001 Tips for Buying & Selling a Home."

As those involved in the purging process soon realize, it can take much more time and brainpower to sift through papers than other kinds of clutter.

"With papers, it's one micro decision at a time. You can much more quickly throw out a bunch of old T-shirts than a box of unsorted papers. That's because the papers might contain valuable items," Nash said.

One way to expedite decision-making is to give yourself guidelines on what to save and what to toss. For instance, small-business owners might choose to keep all their receipts for tax-deductible expenses, like office equipment and supplies, but throw out those for clothing and food purchases.

•**Digitize many papers rather than filing them.**

Many who work from home struggle to stay organized through the use of extensive filing systems. But Ashcroft said filing all but the most important papers is usually a waste of time and energy.

She advises those trying to declutter a home office to scan many documents into a computer rather than trying to store them in filing cabinets.

"I'm practically paper-free in my own home office. I use a rapid scanner and can scan up to 200 papers in two minutes," Ashcroft said.

•**Reason your way through your book collections.**

Many professionals, including those who don't work from home, keep more reference books than they ever use, according to Ashcroft.

"People have an emotional attachment to books," she said, noting that bulging bookshelves are often found throughout a home, not only in the home office.

She recalls one client, a doctor, who left medicine to pursue her passion as a potter. Though she never planned to return to her former profession, she kept a huge collection of medical books that she never opened.

The problem for bibliophiles preparing to sell their home is that shelves crammed with books make a property seem less appealing to buyers.

Ashcroft advises sellers to remember that many books can now be quickly and easily downloaded onto an e-reader such as the Kindle or Nook.

•**Avoid taking bad habits with you to your next home.**

Nash, a longtime real estate broker, has worked with a number of clients who failed to complete the hard work of going through papers before moving. Instead they simply packed them in boxes and stashed them in their garage. But failing to cull through papers in advance merely postpones the problem.

He recommends that sellers "edit" their papers, office supplies and technology well in advance of a sale to make sure they have time to finish the process.

"Why haul clutter with you when moving expenses can mount up quickly? It's vastly better to get a fresh start at your new place," he said.