

## A clean sweep of it

OK, enough laughs about Terry Wehner's work space ... the rubble has been cleared

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With a job that keeps her in constant motion, Terry Wehner has never maintained a tidy desk. The owner of a Hallmark store in Woodland, she navigates a daily bombardment of purchase orders, invoices, personnel files and bank statements.

During the recent holiday retail rush, the situation got so bad that she set up an extra table to hold the overflowing stacks of paper. Dust bunnies built up. Twenty-dollar bills went unaccounted for.

All of which made Wehner eager to submit her workspace as an entrant in The Bee's Messy Desk contest. So were her employees, one of whom e-mailed the newspaper with a desperate description: "As you walk down the narrow hall to Terry's office, you can almost hear the 'Psycho' soundtrack following you, knowing what waits for you beyond her innocent-looking door."

They all wanted Wehner to win the promised desk makeover, courtesy of local professional organizer Jessica Chapman, owner of Room to Breathe in Sacramento. The winner also was to receive up to \$250 of organizing supplies.

After sifting through more than 100 entries, Wehner emerged as one of three finalists and was chosen in online voting by Bee readers earlier this month.



Jessica Chapman, right, owner of Room To Breathe in Sacramento, shows Terry Wehner how color-coded folders can help organize her business files. Wehner's original mess won The Bee's Messy Desk contest and a professional office makeover from Chapman.

- [See additional images](#)

Sacramento Bee/Paul Kitagaki Jr.

That entitled her to a four-hour professional organizing session, held on a recent Monday morning. By the end of it, the results were dramatic. The clutter on Wehner's extra table was neatly filed away and the table folded up, no longer needed. The wood polish on her original desk reappeared. A filing system for storing invoices and purchase orders was in place, along with an orderly alternative to the random sticky notes with important phone numbers that normally were posted throughout the office.

As Wehner put it, surveying the results, "I have space again!"

The competition to reach that point was stiff.

In addition to digital and printed photographs of what, frankly, can only be described as complete chaos, some messy desk offenders sought The Bee's attention with creative pleas.

Two contestants wrote poems (For example: "Things get lost/In this dive/It's been this way/Since '85").

There also were wives who submitted their husbands' desks (sometimes with their knowledge, sometimes without). And there were employees who submitted their boss's desk, only to write frantic follow-ups begging to be removed from the contest because their boss refused to be in the paper.

Above all, most entrants said they had every desire to gain control of their clutter but had too little time and felt too overwhelmed to figure out how to cope.

To choose the finalists, The Bee eliminated nominees whose offices were simply too messy to easily transform in just four hours. The Bee also wanted a winner who was truly enthusiastic about tackling the cleanup. (Nominations of begrudging spouses, for instance, were eliminated.)

Because many entries were so desperately disheveled, it was difficult choosing only three finalists. But in the end, they emerged: John Parvis, a general manager at Innovative Energy who said papers on his desk piled up because he's always too eager to move on to the next project; and Steve Pavlos of Central Pacific Mortgage in Folsom, who said his office is messy because he's a packrat.

And then there was Wehner.

When the votes from readers were tallied, Wehner easily cleared the pack, garnering 84 percent of the 446 votes cast. Parvis and Pavlos trailed far behind.

On Monday, as the professional organizing session was set to begin, Wehner explained that her clutter problem was caused by a lack of any system for dealing with paper overload. She said she also gets distracted by frequent demands to help out on the store sales floor.

"I'm constantly pulled out, so I never finish what I sit down to do," she said. And, "I've never known where to put things."

That's not entirely accurate. Wehner had already set up five filing cabinets, one each for product catalogs, personnel, invoices, bank statements and reference material on topics such as purchasing strategies and negotiating leases. But not everything got filed in a timely manner, contributing to the piles building up throughout her office.

The first thing organizer Chapman asked Wehner to do was sort the overflowing paperwork into separate piles: catalogs, invoices, bank statements, purchase orders, daily reports, items that "I have to deal with," trash and shred.

Buried in the mess, Wehner came across the dust and dollar bills, not to mention old recipes, receipts from dinners long past, and phone messages from a year ago.

There also were some gems, like a reminder to bill one of her product suppliers.

"Space, space, desk visible!" Wehner shouted out in joy, as the piles began to disappear.

Once her desk and tabletop were cleared, the next hurdle was supplies. Chapman, the professional organizer, provided heavy-duty bars for Wehner's filing cabinets strong enough to hang the heavy catalogs that the card shop owner frequently receives.

Chapman also bought a flip-style desk stand that uses transparent pages designed to, in this case, hold phone and fax numbers. Those numbers had previously been haphazardly taped to Wehner's computer and shelves.

Another purchase was an "x-file" from which to hang legal-sized file folders on her desktop. These were intended for filing invoices and purchase orders, while keeping them close enough to cross-check for accuracy.

Another big help: plastic, color-coded pocket files that sit vertically on Wehner's desk. Chapman suggested Wehner label them: "To read" (providing a container for magazine and other articles, which can be easily transported for reading during waits in doctors' offices or in airports, for instance). Another file got labeled

"Action," for items that need immediate attention. Another was designated "Gift show," for information about a forthcoming conference. And another was "To file."

"You have to be discerning, you can't put everything in there," Chapman advised, noting that files shouldn't become catch-alls.

Chapman also purchased a cross-cut shredder, which she recommends just about everybody should own to shred documents with personal or financial information. And she suggested Wehner keep a single spiral notebook on her desk, where she mark the things she has to do each day and checks them off once they're done.

The work was intense, but Wehner remained enthused.

Several days later, Wehner called the process re-energizing, saying said she had continued the job of sorting through paper and has plans to weed out her filing cabinets.

"It's so exciting. It's a much better environment to be in," she said.

And at least one of her employees is equally enthused.

No longer reminiscent of a "Psycho" soundtrack, the revamped office "reminds me of the music at the end of 'Sleeping Beauty' - like the heavens had opened up," said sales associate Ariane Metz.

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### **Advice on cleaning the clutter**

- \* Make time to be organized every day, even if it's only 30 minutes or less. Use that time to delete old e-mails, sort through files, or deal with paper piles on your desk.
- \* At the end of every workday, write down notes on what needs to be accomplished the next day. You'll have a game plan when you arrive at work.
- \* On your desktop, keep only those supplies you use on a daily basis.
- \* Create an "action" file for letters and documents that need your attention. But note: Be diligent about checking the file, not using it as a storage folder.
- \* Create a "to read" file. This includes magazine articles, trade publications and other reading materials. Take it with you to the doctor's office or on a plane flight.

\* Be brutal. If you don't need it, toss it. Source: Jessica Chapman, owner of Room To Breathe, a professional organizing company

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### **Our readers weigh in...**

The Bee's editors had a lot of fun reading through entries and choosing the finalists in our Messy Desk contest. We thought we would share some of the highlights with you:

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A half-dozen readers and several Bee editors thought we had a winner right under our noses when a picture of Deputy Attorney General Ward Campbell ran with a story on his efforts to uphold death penalty verdicts.

One state employee hypothesized that cutbacks on support staff probably led to the chaos surrounding Campbell.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words: Ever obedient to reader demands, we asked Campbell whether he would accept the nominations. Alas, he was too busy working on his cases to set aside the time.

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The police might second Citrus Heights resident Tracy Raugust's nomination of her husband: "One day our home alarm went off while we were out of town. The police were called to make sure everything was OK. They surveyed our home and said everything appeared to be OK. However, once they got to the window, looking into my husband's office, they concluded the room had been ransacked. It was so embarrassing to have to say, 'No, officer. That room ALWAYS looks like that.' "

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At least one reader was irked that we chose only finalists whose desk could benefit from a four-hour cleanup, the time our organizer had allotted. "Nowhere was it stated that the clutter had to be completely 'cleanuppable' within that time-frame," wrote Davis resident Robert Isman. "Had you stuck to the criteria in the original announcement, I'm sure you would agree that the messiness of my office far surpassed that of your winner."

For those who had similar thoughts, relax. Bee editors plan to go back through the photos and choose one desk for a Superfund cleanup later this year.

Unhappily, Mr. Isman's desk doesn't even come close to beating out contenders in that category.

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We also heard from readers such as Mike Tsuchida, who were concerned that our contest would not only condone but also provoke disorganized behavior. "I can't wait until the next time a messy desk employee issue comes up, and the defense will be they are trying to win your stupid contest," he said. "Nice job."

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One employee found that a boss was not amused by the fact that a nomination was sent in without approval. This plea was sent to editors: "My boss ... was livid that we submitted his photos for this contest and told me that if his desk photos ended up in the newspaper I would be fired. PLEASE destroy them immediately."

We complied.

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### **'Twas a desk with a mess...**

State worker Alice Low didn't win The Bee's Messy Desk contest, but she gave it a heck of a try. Few entrants outdid her creativity, which included this ode to accompany her entry:

'Twas the week after Christmas,  
And all down the halls,  
No voices were traveling  
O'er the cubicle walls.

My stacks were quite high,  
The Post-it notes deep,  
The computer hadn't been seen  
For many a week.

A picture was sent,  
To the Sac Bee with care,  
In hopes that some help  
Soon would be there.

So me in my kerchief,  
Under piles of old maps,

Settled in my cube,  
For a long winter nap.

Then in through the doorway  
On January Nine,  
I woke to a noise  
That sounded so fine.

What to my startling  
Eyes did appear,  
But a professional organizer,  
With supplies and no fear.

He worked without stop,  
All day and all night,  
He cleaned up my clutter  
And made my cube right.

On Post-its! On print-outs!  
On piles of old scraps!  
On file folders! On floppies!  
And yellow old maps!

No trash cans and dumpsters  
And recycling halls,  
They dashed away! Dashed away!  
Dashed away all!

My cube was then silent,  
I heaved a great sigh,  
"Happy New Year to all,  
and to my mess a goodbye."

**About the writer:**

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Before: Everything had its place in the office of Terry Wehner, owner of a Hallmark store in Woodland, but that place was everywhere. Sacramento Bee/Paul Kitagaki Jr.



After: What a difference four hours of professional organizing makes. The clutter is gone, and an orderly filing system has Wehner beaming. Sacramento Bee/Paul Kitagaki Jr.



Ward Campbell was too busy to clean. Sacramento Bee file, 2005/Anne Chadwick Williams



Robert Isman entered his vertical mess. Courtesy Robert Isman



State worker Alice Low didn't win The Bee's Messy Desk contest, but she gave it a heck of a try. Courtesy Alice Low