

INTRODUCTION

There are many ways to describe what it means to get organized. “Organizing is the process by which we create environments that enable us to live, work, and relax exactly as we want to. When we are organized, our homes, offices and schedules reflect and encourage who we are, what we want, and where we are going,” eloquently states Julie Morgenstern, in her book, *Organizing From the Inside Out*. Barry Izsak, a former President of the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO) describes getting organized this way: “Organization is a valuable component of a fully realized life, integral to personal productivity and professional success.”

No matter how it is defined, getting organized allows us to enjoy a better quality of life. 71% of respondents to a 2012 survey conducted by NAPO indicated their quality of life would improve with more organization.¹ Because getting organized is so strongly tied to quality of life, it has remained among the top ten New Years’ resolutions for two decades.²

I’ve been privileged, as a public speaker, to travel to Japan and The Netherlands. I’ve had organizing clients in Bermuda and Costa Rica. And I’ve corresponded regularly with readers of my organizing books in Korea, Brussels, England, and Saudi Arabia. Everyone I’ve spoken with shares the view that quality of life and organization are paired. “Professional organizers are uniquely able to influence a client on reaching goals, managing stress, and getting things done,” notes Mayumi Takahari, President of the Japanese Association of Life Organizers. Reaching goals, managing stress, and getting things done are at the very heart of a good quality of life.

I recently addressed a conference of professional organizers from all over the world. Can you imagine a conference of 1,000 extremely well-organized people *in one hotel?! It must have been a nightmare for the hotel personnel. “Hello, front desk. Yes, this is Ms. Anal in Room 501. I’m attending the conference of professional organizers. I was wondering why the soap dish is on the left side of the sink rather than the right side?” Click. “Hello? Hello? Front desk?”*

We organizers can dedicate entire workshops to the issue of filing categorically or hierarchically. But before you write us off as obsessive-compulsives who probably color-code our children, I want you to know that some very important knowledge that directly affects your quality of life came out of that conference.

My address to my colleagues, entitled “Getting Organized in the Era of Endless,” reported a seismic change in the history of getting organized. The Era of Endless, which is upon us, is a real game-changer for people like you who are trying to get organized...and for the professional organizers trying to help you. As a busy person you're bombarded from all directions with endless information. You feel it in places usually reserved for leisure, like parks and restaurants and ball fields that vibrate with invisible tethers to endless work. You feel it in the palpable frustration of losing your train-of-thought and the incompleteness of a task-at-hand because of endless distractions and interruptions. Your closets and garages and homes and offices quake with a seemingly endless amount of stuff.

All this endlessness—endless information, endless work, endless interruption, and endless stuff—butts right up against the one thing that remains intractably finite—time. Time can seem to fly, we can bide our time, sometimes the time is ripe, other times it is golden. We might live on borrowed time, or be ahead of our time, or, for that matter, behind the times; but no matter how we describe our relation to time, *we cannot make more time*. Time can be more effectively used and more efficiently allocated, but what there is of it is all there is of it and there will be no more of it. We can (and do!) make more information, connections, work, things to do, distractions, interruptions, and stuff but time remains finite. It is *not* growing, expanding, or becoming in any way *more*. Time is seemingly undergoing the opposite of endless. It feels like it is shrinking relative to all this endlessness.

It is tempting to blame technology for the challenge of getting organized in the Era of Endless. And certainly, technology plays a role. The stores, the banks, and our wallets are open 24/7 so we can get more stuff by simply turning on our smartphone. Work that is no longer restrained by buildings and time zones and bosses and offices

bleeds over into our non-work life. Devices bring the awesome reach of the Internet to our fingertips, pockets, and vehicles. We can connect via emails, text messages, voicemails, tweets, alerts, comments, links, posts, tags, digital photos, videos, blogs, feeds, and apps. The same devices and apps that bring us entertainment, news, what's new, creativity, and information bring us interruptions, distractions and temptations. Blaming technology doesn't get us any closer to how to get and stay organized in the Era of Endless. It is against the very nature of technology to wish it would slow down or go in reverse. No. It is up to us to adapt.

Recently, the Judith Kolberg Award was established by the Institute for Challenging Disorganization (ICD). I'm extremely honored. As a thought-leader in my industry I am not satisfied to merely give you insightful thinking about the Era of Endless and the challenges it poses for getting organized. I am, first and foremost, a professional organizer. My job is to give you practical organizing solutions appropriate to the Era of Endless so you can adapt to this unique era. But first, let's take a step back and see just how getting organized has reflected and encouraged, in Morgenstern's words "...who we are, what we want, and where we are going."

Part One of this book traces the light-hearted history of getting organized through the lives of prehistoric Mona and her descendants. It ends with Elly, a descendant on the brink of the Era of Endless. Part Two describes the Era of Endless and its unique organizing challenges through stories about Elly's family, particularly her daughter Lisa who is living headlong in the Era of Endless. Parts Three through Six contain practical strategies and solutions.

¹ National Association of Professional Organizers, Quick Poll, 2012

² FileHeads Professional Organizers research, *New York Daily News, Reader's Digest,* and *Women's World Magazine*, 1990-2010

A RIDICULOUSLY SHORT HISTORY OF GETTING ORGANIZED

Anthropologists tell us that earliest humans, like other primates, groomed one another. At some point, the evolutionary story goes, humans began to live in larger and larger groups and all this manual grooming began to take up more and more time. Early humans needed all their time for survival pursuits like hunting for food, roaming for food, and driving hostile animals away from their food.

Humans, it is thought, developed language partly as a way to *economize their time*. “Vocal grooming”—the use of words—was way more efficient than manual grooming for keeping the family and allies happy.¹ A few choice words could soothe and offer assurance, comfort, and the promise of protection instead of all that hair-parting, back-scratching, insect-removal grooming, however nice it must have felt.

Picture the first cave woman. Let’s call her Mona. Mona has a large, extended family to groom, an infant to feed, hostile threats all around her, and several men fighting over her. It would have made any woman scream. Mona reached over to the emotional side of her big brain, integrated it with the verbal processing portion way over in the other hemisphere of her brain, focused her mind against all the distractions around her and transformed a simple sound into a meaningful word. Awesome.

No, “awesome” was not likely the first word. What’s awesome is Mona’s big-brain ability to economize time (yea, yea, language development is important, too). The economy of anything, whether it’s money or space or time, is the effort to achieve the maximum effect for the minimum effort. The maximum effect Mona was trying to achieve was to cut down on all that manual grooming and instead use less effort with vocal grooming. Economizing her time, a fundamental organizing skill, also turned out to be a vital survival skill.

Mona economized time in other ways. She probably figured out how to maximize daylight and darkness. With her big brain she likely surmised from experience that spearing fish is dangerous and unproductive at night so getting it done in daylight gave her a survival edge.

Her cavemen clan surely took note that leading a raid on enemy tribes under the cover of darkness was an efficient use of night time. Self-preservation pretty much filled up Mona's entire day.

Economizing time *to jam non-survival activities into her 24 hour day* was not very important until hundreds and hundreds of years later when Mona's kin got a little agriculture going. Growing food rather than clubbing it produced a bit of down-time and engagement in activities beyond the crushing need to survive and procreate. It wasn't exactly *leisure time* in the sense we think of leisure today, but spending time in a diversity of activities provided advancement of the species, such as a little cave painting or maybe a walk to the shore to see the sunset.

How Mona chose to spend her time might have been severely limited but that does not mean Mona's day was devoid of decision-making. Probably she ate bark and beef and decided beef was a better choice because it agreed with her stomach, whereas bark contained more fiber than anyone ever needed. As the choices in her life multiplied, personal preferences may have emerged. "If I eat one more banana, I'm going to turn into an ape," Mona might complain. "I'd rather have a coconut." Decision-making in big brained humans is innate. We have an innate capacity for choosing and for deciding rather than merely reacting or letting the coconuts fall where they may. Organizationally speaking, making decisions expresses a certain mastery over our circumstances, adding yet another measure of quality to life.

Decision-making has another value. It is a great economizer of time. When we make decisions, we move a myriad of little tasks along to accomplishment, allowing us to make progress on more complex projects, keeping us on path to achieve goals. Decision-making today is as vital as spear-throwing was to Mona and her kin.

Cleanliness may be next to godliness, but orderliness is most assuredly next to humanliness. Refuse, garbage, and waste that breed itchiness, stench, and a certain squish between the toes when walking barefoot didn't seem to bother Mona much more than it did other animals. But lack of order probably got her goat. The word *order* is derived from the Latin *ordinem*: to give order to, to arrange. Orderliness was very likely another organizing survival skill. "What a mess!" Mona

might have said. “My food is mixed in with these damn rocks and sticks. If I separate out the sticks from the foody things maybe the kids won’t keep choking over dinner and we can get through a darn meal together. I’ll sort out the little rocks and put them over there with the big rocks and maybe move the whole stack of rocks way over there so I don’t keep tripping on them. Maybe I’ll put all the sticks together so I can have them handy to stoke the fire, pull the bugs out of my ears, or whatever.”

Did Mona sort and categorize? There is evidence from caves and other early dwellings that even the most primitive humans put like-things together and separated them from other like-things based on function. There were distinct areas for cooking and eating, tossing garbage, and even leisure activities like carving stones.

Could it be that the human inclination to orderliness and the ability to sort and categorize gave Mona’s family and tribe an evolutionary edge? I’m not the first to suggest this. In the book, *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder*, authors Eric Abrahamson and David H. Freeman observe that for cavemen:

“...a preference for certain types of order must have conferred certain advantages in his fight for survival: a knack for categorizing mushrooms into poisonous and non-poisonous varieties, for keeping hunting grounds free of human signs that would tip off prey, for storing precious tools and hides in one corner of the cave to enable fast packing and swift flight in case of emergency...”

The authors go on to say that “We are literally born categorizers and for good reason: *there isn’t enough time* when we encounter each new entity in the world to go through the process of carefully observing and analyzing it so that we can finally decide if we need to pet it, eat it, flee from it, or smile at it.” Sorting and categorizing, it turns out, are also great ways to economize time. Child development research supports the inborn ability of humans to categorize. Even infants, as young as six months can associate pictures of Siamese kittens and Tabby kittens and other kinds of kittens into the category “kitty.”