

One Size Does Not Fit All

*Judith Kolberg's Keynote Address
to the Japanese Association of Life Organizers (JALO), 2013 Annual Conference*

In 1970, a manufacturer of panty hose decided to lower production costs. They made panty hose “One Size Fits All.” They determined what they thought was “the average” size of women’s legs. Women who were larger sizes were assured the nylon would stretch to fit and women who were smaller were told it would shrink to fit them. What do you think happened? Women abandoned “One Size Fits All” in droves and the manufacturers returned to offering panty hose in various sizes.

Categorizing Is Not “One Size Fits All”

Even our most fundamental organizing principles are not “One Size Fits All.” We assume, for instance, that all people categorize the same. Categories make it possible for us to put like-things together, a building block for sorting things, knowing where they are and retrieving them, and for organizing just about everything.

Parents teach children at an early age that their toys go here and their clothes go there and it is not a good idea to mix your toothbrush in with the soap dish. When they get older the categories get more precise. Legos go here, stuffed animals go there, and dolls go over here. In grade school an exercise called *What Does Not Belong* shows a picture of a bird, a shoe, a dog, and a cat. Most children realize the category is “animals” and they circle the shoe because it is the only non-animal and does not belong.

But one size does not fit all. Susan is seven years old. She circles the bird. When her teacher asked her why, Susan said “Well, the dog grabbed Mom’s shoe and ran around the house with it. Mom got mad and ran after the dog. The dog spooked the cat and Mom stepped on the cat’s tail. The cat ran under the couch. We don’t have a bird.”

One size does not fit all for adults either when it comes to categories. My client Jane has very bad arthritis which makes it difficult for her to file papers away in her filing system. We were redesigning her filing system and I notice that articles about her hobby, collecting birdhouses, was filed in with materials about arthritis. When I asked Jane why, she said “Watching the birds in the birdhouses makes me forget about my arthritis pain.” Jane doesn’t organize like you and I do, but she gets to her goals of putting her papers away and finding them again.

I had a client whose dining room table was very cluttered. “I’m afraid if I put it away I’ll never find it again” she worried. We organized the stuff on her dining room table by shape rather than category. All things round or circular went in one bin. So that might be batteries and coins, buttons and bottle caps and rolls of tape—stuff that normally would not be organized together. Another bin was for square or rectangular stuff—business cards, post-it notes, tea bags, CDs, and coupons. All totally unrelated stuff except for their shape.

Getting Things Done Is Not “One Size Fits All”

We don't all get things done the same way. “I got lost in my bedroom closet the other day,” my client Betty says. “I went in to go through the clothes, but when I came out, it was worse than when I went in. I looked through old handbags one by one, and pulled out the lipsticks, rolling each one up and down to see if it was worth keeping. I applied many of them in front of the bedroom mirror. I emptied all the loose coins into my pockets until my pants nearly fell down. There were dry cleaning tickets to ponder (“Did I ever pick that dress up?”) and gift cards to explore (“I wonder if it is still good?”) Before I knew it over an hour had passed. I had to quickly toss all the handbags back in the closet, throw the lipsticks into the bathroom sink, and run to the car with all the coins in my pocket to pick the kids up from school. I never even looked at the clothes.”

Betty often loses track of time this way by focusing on details to the exclusion of the big picture. “At work they count on me to concentrate on details and block everything else out, but using my time that way doesn't always work with my organizing projects.” Betty needed something different. She hired a professional organizer who helped her keep the big picture in mind while organizing and taught her how to use the alarms in her smartphone, on her computers, and in her appliances and her clocks to keep track of time.

One Size Does Not Fit All When It Comes To Where We Work

How many of you have noticed people working at the tables in Starbucks? Students studying, people having business meetings...I even saw a guy doing his taxes. It made me wonder why one person might find Starbucks loud and distracting and another might find it just the right place to get things done. So, one afternoon, with the manager's permission, I interviewed twenty people. Now this is not real science, but I discovered what I call the **Starbucks Effect**. Apparently, some people find the background noise of the coffee machines and the din of the voices around them kind of soothing. “I always get stuff done at Starbucks,” the guy doing his taxes said. “The library is too quiet. It drives me crazy and home is too distracting. I like the controlled chaos around me. It helps me focus.”

People need all kinds of different spaces to do all kinds of different tasks. Small spaces and cubicles in quiet places are great for intense, solitary work. Big open spaces with windows tend to work better for creative projects, brainstorming or strategic work. Purposeful, small group work needs a table. I have a client who works across the street from a fancy hotel. You can find him in the lobby of the hotel instead of his office when he is preparing his quarterly report to the Board of Directors. “There are many different kinds of places to sit, a great wireless connection and I like business people from all over the world coming and going. It makes me remember I am part of the world and not just someone in a little office over there” he told me pointing to his office.

One Size Does Not Fit All Because Of Organizational Diversity

There is a wide array of reasons why one size does not fit all when it comes to organizing. Some folks never learned organizing skills and need remedial help. It is not as if these are explicitly taught in school, although I understand our Dutch colleagues are trying to remedy

that by getting organizing skills introduced into school curriculums. Getting organized is a highly modeled skill. If your parents never took out a calendar, made a to-do list, or helped you organize your toys; if you didn't put your bookbag by the door at night so you wouldn't forget it in the morning, you could be clueless. Some people live a life of constant stressful transitions from place to place and have never had a chance to organize their stuff. Aging is not always accompanied by memory problems and mobility issues, but just in case, it is good to see many organizers learning about organizing and aging. In the US, one out of every five residents will be 65 or older over the next fifteen years.

We know that a system not suited to a person's learning style can be problematic. Victor is a kinesthetic organizer, someone who organizes best when movement is involved. I could tell even before I met him. In his phone call to me, Victor said, "It *boils* down to this. If I don't *shape up*, I'm going to get a bad job performance evaluation. I have to get a *grip* on things but it has been hard to *hold on*. I really need to get my *arms around* my organizing problems." When we met at his office, Victor paced while he talked. He moves, he gestures, and he talks with his hands. I won't bore you with all the details of our organizing sessions but the first thing I did was get him to buy a new computer chair—one on casters that rolls, rocks back and forth, and swivels, something he can leap out of. I bought him Silly Putty to fondle when he goes to meetings. It helps him listen. We programmed his computer and smartphone to pop up digital sticky note reminders of appointments and tasks. "I love my wireless headphones!!!!" he texted me the other day. I'm happy to see that NAPO has added a Learning & Thinking Styles class to the education curriculum.

Another driver of variety and diversity within the organizing tent is technology. There are 775,000 apps, most devoted in one way or another to helping us get organized or save time and there are huge differences in peoples' ability to use them. Physical limitations impact organization. Neurological obstacles can actually *prevent* people from getting organized at least in the conventional way. Some people with traumatic brain injury can't put like-things together. People who are AD/HD can find it difficult to finish a task because they cannot screen out distractions. Folks who have anxiety disorder are not great at making even small decisions like whether to part with a broken pen or not. People who are depressed notoriously have low energy and struggle with mental clarity which makes organizing sessions hard on them.

De-acquisition Methods

One size does not fit all when it comes to getting rid of our clients' excess stuff. Some of my clients are very much into donations, others are not so generous. Some prefer to sell their stuff. Some are adamant about recycling, while others toss things liberally into the trash. It will take every kind of de-acquisition method we know of to cope with what I believe is an impending intergenerational tsunami of stuff. Perhaps tsunami is too strong a word to use here in Japan, but what I mean is that the vet generation is dying and leaving their stuff to the baby boomers who have a ton of their own. Gen X and Gen Y have less stuff because they are simply younger and have not acquired as much yet, but they contribute a special kind of stuff—electronics, which cannot be returned to Earth like previous generations of stuff.

There are many de-acquisition methods to deal with this tsunami of stuff and you do not have to be expert at all of them, but in your toolkit it is useful to know people who are good at these methods who you can partner with or refer to. For instance, I do not know much about selling used electronics online but my neighbor's 17 year old son does. He keeps 25% of all the sales. In America, conducting a successful yard sale has become a business.

System-Creation Helps Make A Better Fit

So there are a lot of perfectly lovely, intelligent adults who value organization as much as you or I, for whom one size does not fit all. We have to build systems and use approaches that fit the person rather than making the person fit the system. System-creation is something we organizers excel at. Shoot, you might even end up ***being the system***. I remember a client, Anna. A high-society lady, Anna called me and said, "My husband and I have travelled the world. We have met interesting people and have accumulated many wonderful things. But as we have aged, suddenly what looked like treasures is starting to look like more like clutter. Can you come and get us organized?" Of course I said yes. Anna and I had Co-cola and pecan pie, typical Southern delights. Anna sat me down on the couch in her tasteful but cluttered living room. As I quietly folded beautiful linen napkins and unobtrusively replaced rare, fragile Christmas ornaments into their boxes, Anna whipped around picked up coats and jackets and hung them in the closets, she stuffed toys her grandchildren had outgrown into large plastic bags to bring to donation, she re-shelved books, tossed out broken picture frames, old mugs and souvenirs. Anna neither asked for my advice nor my assistance. After an hour she said she was pleased with the organizing we had done. I was body doubling Anna, passively being there but not actively organizing. She was doing the organizing but *I was a critical part of her system*.

Social Organizing Helps When One Size Does Not Fit All

This story also highlights another important point. We bring great benefit to our clients just by showing up. Instantly, organizing which is a solo, isolated activity becomes less boring and more engaging. You do know, don't you, that some people find getting organized just plain boring? I know you are shocked because you love it so much. I remember a large office organizing job that required me to use the assistance of other organizers from my NAPO chapter. "I love to organize supplies," one of my assistants said so she got to work on the supply room. It was filled to the ceiling with reams of paper and boxes of envelopes, loose pens, staplers, pads, scissors, cords from computers, and wires from who-knows-what. About a half an hour into the job, I checked on her progress. She was seated at a table busily sorting paper clips. She sorted them by size and then by color. She sorted the plastic ones from the metal ones. She was happy as a clam.

So I know how much we organizers love to organize. I feel the same way. I was at a coffee shop the other day and organized their bulletin board, took down the expired flyers, made sure the business cards showed, and I don't even work there! I recall at a NAPO conference professional organizers standing around and arguing whether the bagels go on the right or the left of the coffee urn! And I'll never forget the organizer who told a story about color-

coding her children! We love to organize. It comes natural to us. **But most people find getting organized dull, so making it more social, doing it together is half the battle.**

What Makes For A Good System?

While it is true that One System Does Not Fit All, I have learned a few features over the many years of organizing that most of our clients like and respond to. In America we have a rather crass saying called KISS, which stands for keep- it-simple-stupid. You are not stupid, of course, but the idea is that simplicity always works. The fewer steps to remember the better. The fewer decisions to make the better. Dr. Kathleen Nadeau who co-wrote a book with me, talks about her simple wardrobe. "I wear shades of white and beige in the summer with one or two bright colors. In the winter I wear shades of black or gray with one or two bright colors and that's it." In the face of an unstable worldwide economic outlook, corporations are taking what they call 'complexity reduction' steps as they simplify their processes, procedures, and organization.

No system is ever perfect. But if it brings consistent results, that can mean a great deal to someone who is disorganized. You already do this when you tell a client you have to open your mail consistently every day. Always put your keys on the peg by the door. Be consistent and you won't misplace them. Consistency is the heart of routines and habits.

There is a piece to system-creation that some organizers forget to include. It is a feedback loop. A feedback loop is a way for you and the client to communicate about whether the system is working or not, to be able to check in to see if it needs to be modified, abandoned, or even to know if the client is using it. A feedback loop doesn't have to be anything fancy. You can check in by email, plan a phone call, text each other, or discuss it at the next organizing session. But it adds that one element of professionalism that I feel we sometimes neglect.

Organize With the Whole Person In Mind

I believe it takes great powers of observation to be a good professional organizer. We observe, not to diagnose, but to look for clues to what organizational support will make a difference. And one thing more, when we observe the inside of our clients' offices and their homes, their closets and garages, their documents and their stuff, we get a better sense of them as a whole person. "As organizers, we often see people at their worst," my wise colleague Denslow Brown taught me. We have to remind ourselves that we are working with a unique individual who is more than just their clutter. We see not only their incomplete projects but their passions and hobbies. We see clutter from their past but we also see their memories and history. We see not only their excess stuff, but their enthusiasm. Some people see potential and opportunity and possibility in every object and their clutter is an expression of rampant enthusiasm for the future. How many of you have heard a client say, "I am keeping this name tag holder, for instance, because I might need it someday."? *Someday* lies in the future. "Just in case I move I'll keep these empty boxes." "I might learn to cook so I better keep these cookbooks." Who here has a just-in-case client? We've all had clients who think this way. The trick, of course, is to not let enthusiasm for

the future, or mementos from the past overrun the present, and to remember you are working with a whole person with dreams and ideas, disappointments and history.

Beyond Organizing

Early in your career, long before you are ready, you will attract clients who have problems outside of your training, problems that cannot be addressed by organization alone. Ruth works at the United Nations. Her home office is very cluttered. No wonder we don't have world peace. Frankly, Ruth and I made only modest success and it was difficult and painstakingly slow. I tried everything I knew to help her discard. It was very puzzling to me that a person as bright as Ruth could not possibly "see" that throwing stuff away could be liberating. After a long, exhausting organizing session that yielded only one small bag of trash, I received a call from Ruth at about 9 o'clock that night. "Do you remember where you might have put the forty cents off coupon for printer cartridges?" she asked. "Could you have mistakenly thrown it away?" I was stunned. No client had ever called me at home. No client had ever called me at night. The outsized importance this coupon held for Ruth was an indication that something was truly amiss. Ruth was not just disorganized. Her attachment to her stuff, her incapacity to discard things, and her anxiety turned out to be a mental disorder called compulsive hoarding. I thought I could solve Ruth's problems by persevering; and by being a clever organizer. But I was wrong. I counted it as a failure. However, years later I ran into Ruth. She said our work together encouraged her to seek therapy and that she had moved to a new place and was doing better with her excessive saving and difficulty throwing stuff away.

Don't Be Afraid Of The Brain

Therapy. Psychiatric conditions. Hoarding. I'm just an organizer and sometimes I wonder if these clients aren't best served by other professionals. Well, yes and no. Yes, there are limitations to what an organizer can do alone without the client seeking other kinds of support. But no, we organizers *are professionals* on par with other helping professionals. There are all sorts of One Size Does Not Fit All approaches we can bring to improve the organizing situation for people with special organizing needs. **Don't be afraid of the brain.** Even if you choose not to work with these individuals, a basic understanding of these issues will make you a better organizer. Kate Varness, the editor of the *ICD Guide to Challenging Disorganization* puts it this way, "We are working with people with brain-based challenges whether we know it or not. Brain-based challenges refer to conditions that occur due to neurological or neurochemical factors such as AD/HD, depression, learning disabilities, traumatic brain injury, and many others...Education about these conditions can make you a better organizer..."

How? Often the innovative methods we develop with these clients work well with all our chronically disorganized clients and even our plain old disorganized clients. And everybody likes variety and innovation. It makes getting organized more fun. Working with a wide variety of clients gives you the opportunity, if you want to take it, of collaborating with other helping professionals. And, it is another revenue-making opportunity. I think about

Ine Lamers in the Netherlands who works on a team with medical professionals to bring organizing and other services to AD/HD patients.

Even Disorders Are Not “One Size Fits All”

We'll talk about AD/HD in more details in the upcoming workshops, but symptoms of inattention/distractibility, impulsivity, and hyperactivity so perfectly undermine organizational efforts that diagnostic professionals routinely ask about disorganization as a predictor of AD/HD. We know that the AD/HD brain seems to function differently than the non-AD/HD brain. Clearly, we cannot say to our client, “Hello, Jane. It is nice to meet you. Before we get started can you tell me more about your pre-frontal cortex?” I am very excited to hear Dr. Kato speak on the brain later in the conference.

But even brain-based disorders with their well-defined symptoms are not a “One Size Fits All” deal. Disorders present themselves inconsistently in adults. Nobody has all symptoms all the time in every area of life for all their lives. AD/HD can be downright paradoxical. On the one hand Marsha, an ADD client was so disorganized she would be late constantly and often scheduled two appointments on top of each other. On the other hand, Marsha puts huge amount of time into developing extremely elaborate calendars in various colors with stars and arrows, beautiful calendars that she routinely forgets to look at. *One Size Does Not Fit All is another way of saying we are always working with a unique individual and can't reduce them to a set of symptoms.*

Technology And Organizational Diversity

Another driver of organizational diversity is technology. Ask any digital immigrant, somebody not native to the computer, and they'll tell you one size does not fit all when it comes to using technology as an organizing tool. “I like getting bank statements digitally,” a client tells me. It reduces paper clutter and is more ‘green.’ But you know what? I tend to look at them less because they come to me via email instead of hard copy through the mail. And I can't balance my bank account on the screen. I have to print them out so...bam! There's the paper again!” Another client says, “I have hundreds of photos. I just don't have any pictures!” I was at a business networking event recently and people were exchanging hard copy business cards. But some people were swiping the cards with their smartphones and digitally saving them. Other people were bumping their phones using an app that transfers them to the other person's phone. It's a jungle out there!

Lots of people are trying to navigate two worlds, trying on the tangible size and trying on the digital size. Like most things organizational, there is no right way or wrong way, only the way that consistently get the best results for the individual. Professional organizers and productivity specialists will be called upon to help people caught with one foot in the tangible world and one foot in the digital world to help resolve how best to access and organize their information, music, videos, movies, and all sorts of digital stuff.

When it comes to technology, one size does not fit all even in the same family! You remember I told you about how fundamental categorizing is and that people do it in a variety of different ways? Well, we live in the era of endless information and younger

people in the family don't organize their information like their parents. They are unfamiliar with a hierarchical system of category headings and subheadings that were the basis of filing systems. Instead, they just search by keyword to find their stuff. High school kids use laptops, their younger siblings use tablets. My grand nephew is three. He toddles over to the television and tries to swipe the screen!

Though one size does not fit all families, it is safe to say that every family has more and more devices—tablets and laptops, iPad and iPods, and the ever present smartphone. My clients complain the devices are robbing them of family time, time for live interaction, and time for non-screen relaxation. In 2014, I'll be launching a new service, helping my clients formulate a "Family Technology Policy." There is more information about that in my book called *Getting Organized in the Era of Endless*.

One Professional Organizer Does Not Fit All

Just as there is no one system or approach that fits all, one organizer does not fit all either. You cannot be all things to every client. You can be a well-rounded organizer, one who becomes familiar with organizational challenges of all kinds even if these are not your target clients. Learn the people skills that equip you to communicate with any kind of client in a professional and compassionate manner. For some clients, you will be the project manager of a large organizing project. Others will need a more intimate one-to-one relationship. Still others will want aggressive skill development. *But you serve your clients best when you are an active member of the organizing community* whether that's a local chapter, virtual participation via Skype, teleconferences, and via the web, or as a member of a professional association of organizers. All the expertise and experience you will ever need is among your colleagues. You need not be an expert in every area. Among our ranks are organizers who are also coaches, bringing another skill set to your clients. Some are specially trained to work with special needs clients.

Keep These In Your Toolkit

You have a lot more tools in your toolkit than you might think and I would encourage you to use all of them. Yes, there is your organizing skill, your powers of observation, and your system-building ability. As a member of the organizing community you also have these tools:

- Educational materials - you can mention books to read, websites to visit, online forums your clients can join, and YouTube videos to watch.
- Research results - I keep my clients informed about the science behind our art, and ask them if they'd like to be a part of our research and surveys.
- Recommend products and technology tools.
- Refer to de-acquisition and other organizing specialists

We Are In The Quality Of Life Business

Ultimately, I believe, professional organizers and productivity specialists are not just in the organizing business. We are in the quality of life business. Whether you are a life organizer in Japan, a productivity expert, or a professional organizer in the US, Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, or anywhere else in the world, chances are you intuitively know in your head (and in your heart) that there is a connection between organization and quality of life. It is what brings us all here. It is why we work so hard to overcome “One Size Fits All” thinking. Nearly every measure of quality of life has an organizing component to it. These three measures of quality of life are among the most common. Look how much they include an organizational component.

Productive in daily life means that each day we can feel good that we set out to do something and got it done. Accomplished. Checked off. This sense of productivity is a quality of life factor because if our lives were just ‘open loops’ as David Allen, the time management guru calls them, if we start things but never finish them we would continually feel dissatisfying and stressed. Never underestimate the power of progress. Even small steps count. The gratification of making progress is a very powerful thing. Teresa Amabile and Steve Kramer wrote *The Progress Principle*. The book describes the findings of a multi-year research project. Every day for several years 238 people sent the researchers a confidential electronic “diary” at the end of each work day rating their mood, their productivity, and other factors. In the end, the 12,000 daily entries revealed that when people have even small wins they experience big gains, when they progress even a little towards their goals, they feel good about themselves and their work.

A good quality of life includes not just checking off daily tasks but also making progress towards bigger goals in life. That’s why **goal-setting** is another foundational organizing principle. In their upcoming book tentatively titled, *The Ten Commandments of Organizing: What Turns Successful Executives into the Chief Organizing Officers of their Companies*, Leslie Walden and Barbara Skutch Mays note that goals—written, always front and center, and of a high standard—are a common practice of successful executives. When we are well-organized, we can strive for life goals. Maybe that’s pursuing a better career, setting higher strategic business goals, or planning for retirement. Goals vary, but the *activity* of setting goals, of striving, shows optimism for the future, a true marker of a good quality of life.

Here’s another quality of life indicator we practice everyday: **control over our personal environment**. To even *have* a personal space that one can call their own is essential. In war-torn countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, a tent for a displaced family changes everything. It keeps the family together, provides privacy, a sense of security, and a feeling of home. And to control your environment? To make it your own? To have it meet your personal needs? That is real freedom. The Institute for Challenging Disorganization (ICD) is conducting a study right now of the effects of clutter on the perception of home.

A professional organizer cannot guarantee someone a great quality of life. There are other variables that enter the picture besides levels of organization—like health and safety. But, in the words of JALO’s president, Mayumi Takahara, “Professional organizers are uniquely able to influence a client on reaching goals, managing stress, and getting things done.” We

are ***uniquely positioned*** to improve quality of life by lowering the disorganization that undermines it.

There is also a compound effect to improving an individual's quality of life. Betty did not stay lost in her closet. She now lives more relaxed and more comfortably (hmmm... where have I heard that motto before?) which is better for her entire family. Quality of life bubbles up and filters down as we enable people to be better at what they do and who they are.

We share this universal view of the connection between organization and quality of life even though in practice one size does not fit all. Certainly different cultures have different organizing principles and practices. In Australia where fires raged for weeks, resilience and independence and a 'she'll be right mate' ethic empowers people to use every organizing skill they have in order to recover. During a college entrance exam in China the proctor for the exam was to ring the bell exactly when the students were to stop the exam. But he rang the bell five minutes early. He was jailed for one year. Time management is taken very seriously in China. Our countries have different histories and philosophies as you will learn from our international panels, but it is amazing how universal the link between quality of life and organizing principles is.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would say that we need to continue to expand our view of what it means to be organized so everybody can enjoy the organization/quality of life connection. This requires a climate of innovation. NAPO's rapidly diversifying educational offerings reflect sensitivity to evolving organizational needs. The ICD has always been a center of innovation. But my hat is off to JALO for leading the way in Japan for those who have organizational special needs due to mental disorders and learning differences and disabilities. Through radio, magazines and other media presence, and JALO's booming membership, they are breaking down barriers to how this is understood in schools, at work, and in the home. Life organizers are true change agents in Japanese society. Thank you for letting me be a part of your great work. I am proud and humbled.

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