



Highlights: Personal Organizers

If you're like many Americans, you are overwhelmed by the amount of stuff you have. It might be time to call in a professional organizer. These specialists can help clear out and clean up garages, closets, even hard drives. But do they live up to the hype?

Putting organizers to the test

To take a look at how organizers work and who would (or wouldn't) benefit from their services, *Chicago Consumers' Checkbook* (www.checkbook.org) asked five staffers to hire personal organizers to help with very different projects, ranging from a family room wreck to a space-challenged clothes closet to a mountain of mail.

Overall findings and advice

- Take time to assess whether you really need to enlist an organizer. If you are relatively neat, you probably can save money and hassle by tackling the work yourself.
- If you suspect you need help, you probably do. If you've got a messy attic/junk-filled garage/stuffed closet you've avoided dealing with, you might get a lot out of spending a few hours with a pro.
- Overall, the most disorganized staffers saw the most benefit from calling in a pro; each said they'd hire help again. Checkbook's tidier bunch generally agreed their organizers provided some ideas and benefits, but after learning tips on how to tackle their messes, they doubted they'd shell out again.
- Checkbook's test-case staffers found it was valuable to have a stranger's unbiased opinion; some friendly, informed guidance; and another pair of hands. Downsizing seniors and persons who suffer from hoarding disorders definitely can benefit from hiring an expert.
- Shop around. Checkbook staffers were shocked by differences in fees charged by organizers they contacted. One wanted a \$3,000 retainer to straighten out a small clothes closet. If you're already relatively organized, a small kitchen organizing session might run you \$200; a full house effort for a downsizing senior might cost more than \$1,000.
- Consultants offer a wide range of work styles. Some are hands-on, while others just survey the mess and suggest improvements. Surprisingly, although Checkbook expected organizers to recommend purchasing expensive materials and furniture to stuff everything into, they barely mentioned buying bins, boxes, and hooks; most projects simply involved corralling and throwing out stuff.

When contacting prospective organizers, Checkbook recommends you ask:

- What kinds of projects do you specialize in? While many organizers are generalists, others focus on helping downsizers, scanning photos and other memorabilia, or assisting hoarders.
- Have you completed training? Some organizers have completed coursework in productivity coaching, chronic disorganization, or interior design.
- What's your approach to tackling projects? What are your typical work sessions like?
- Do you offer free initial consultations? Many organizers offer free phone consultations with potential clients, but it's better if you arrange a free drop-by to get an initial evaluation and cost estimate.
- Will I work directly with you (the business owner), or will you assign me to an employee?
- What do you charge? Some organizers charge by the hour, others by the project.
- Can you provide me with a written contract? They're not too common in this business, but it's reasonable to ask for at least an email that spells out what the consultant will and won't do, an estimate of the time to complete your project, how the company calculates charges, and a cost estimate.
- What's your cancellation policy? Some charge if you cancel within 24 to 48 hours of an appointment.
- Can you provide references? Ask for names and contact info for customers who had projects similar to yours, who live near you, etc. But keep in mind that many organizers' clients desire confidentiality.

Checkbook's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.