

A Home Office Gets Organized

A reader's home office was overwhelmed by overdue notices and lost invitations until *Real Simple* tamed it with storage and organizing know-how.



The Problem

In most ways, Tzatzil Willebeek-LeMair is a superwoman. She has completed more than 50 triathlons and runs a business that teaches hundreds of women a year how to break into running, biking, and swimming. She also finds time to teach Spanish at an elementary school near her home in Austin, Texas, and serves as den leader for the local Cub Scouts, all while looking after three sons — Max, age three; Marco, five; and Jacob, seven.

When it came to organizing her home office, however, Willebeek-LeMair, 35, could barely get out of the starting blocks. Her desk was so overloaded that she referred to it as “the abyss” and “the beast.” School reports, unpaid bills, and children’s artwork were piled in haphazard layers. And since mess has a way of inviting more mess, Willebeek-LeMair’s husband, Marc, and sons felt free to use her desk as a dumping ground for everything from junk mail to homework.

As a result, birthday-party invitations resurfaced days too late and car registrations expired without being renewed. “Anything that comes in the mail is a problem,” she says. To make matters worse, her office was set up in a former dining room, near the entrance of their home, so her disarray was on display to anyone coming or going.

What She Likes About the Office

- The office is open, with high ceilings.
- It gets afternoon light.
- From her desk, she can see her kids playing in the family room.

What She Dislikes About the Office

- No privacy.
- It doesn’t feel inviting.
- Not enough surface area for working.
- Her desk is always covered with piles.

The Revelation

A year ago, Willebeek-LeMair received an album of special class events from her son Marco’s teacher. In photos commemorating “cowboy day,” “pajama day,” and “red-clothing day,” Marco was conspicuously and consistently wearing the wrong outfit, because she had either lost the school notice or found it too late. “It was proof in print of my lack of organization,” she says. “At that point, I decided I had to do better.”

Sometimes even a coach can use some coaching. *Real Simple* volunteered to put Willebeek-LeMair’s office in order and set up a clear and simple system to ensure that no school notice goes missing and every race record has its place. Now she can focus on fitness, not on finding missing files.

The Remedy



Following four basic rules of organization helped turn Tzatzil Willebeek-LeMair's home office into a workstation as fit and flexible as its inhabitant.

Separate personal from professional. Willebeek-LeMair's single biggest problem came from not separating her paperwork: It was impossible for her to work on one kind without constantly running across the other. Now that she has her papers cleanly segregated — thanks to extra shelving, filing cabinets, and bins — she can decide what she'll work on, rather than being ambushed by an overdue bill or a renewal notice.

Clear the desktop. Formerly a catchall, with piles stowed in nooks and crannies, the desk is freed up for its intended purpose: reading and writing. Papers that once covered her desk are still within reach, stowed in her original filing cabinets (bills and other home expenses to the left, invoices and business materials to the right).

Supplementary job materials — magazines, mailers, tear sheets — are in labeled storage containers on five adjustable shelves installed above the desk.

Create a station for incoming and outgoing. A wire-mesh file mounted on the wall to the left of the desk helps her keep track of the flow to and from the office. The upper basket contains bills, bank statements, and other papers that require filing. The lower basket is for items to take the next time she leaves the house. "Outgoing mail, notes for school, a racing shirt that has to be delivered — anything that's urgent goes in there where I can see it," she says. A portable filing box (shown on the floor to the left of the desk) allows her to easily carry files to meetings.

Consolidate, consolidate, consolidate. Because she lacked shelves in her home office, Willebeek-LeMair used to store fitness books and magazines in the nearby family room. Since it was a pain to carry them back and forth, more often than not she simply dumped them on her desk. Now that they are within easy reach, she's more inclined to put them back where they belong.

The Ideas

Corkboards: Three bulletin boards mounted to the left of the desk help keep track of events in the three areas of Willebeek-LeMair's daily life: home (housekeeper's phone number), children (party invitations), and business (race schedules).

Closed Storage: Labeled boxes on shelves contain rarely used items, such as the report cards and artwork of her three sons, plus stationery, waivers, and other business paperwork.

Open Storage: Frequently accessed supplies, such as copier paper, are kept in open trays. A pink basket contains materials for special projects, such as medals for her son's swim team.

Task Lighting: A desk lamp helps her focus on the tasks at hand.

Timekeeper: An office clock adds a businesslike touch to remind her that, even at home, there are deadlines and duties that cannot be put off.

Seating: She opted for a desk stool called the Swopper (\$599, www.swopper.com), which is designed to soothe the tight hamstrings and lower-back problems common among athletes.

For six more products that helped put things right Tzatzil Willebeek-Lemair's home office, see [6 Home Office Organizing Tools](#).

The Update

Organizing is like a New Year's resolution: It's hard to sustain. Shortly after Willebeek-LeMair's home office was overhauled, she says, her husband, Marc, voiced skepticism. It looked good, he told her, but he wondered if she could keep it that way.

She did. She used to spend up to an hour clearing her desk before she got to work, so "I used to have a dread of sitting at my desk," she says. "It's so much more appealing now."

The awkward piling of bills and school notices has been replaced by a clear-cut system: Everything that lands on her desk has a specific place to go. "When you put things together from different areas of your life, it requires different systems of organization," she says, "and I didn't know how to do that."

5 Home-Office Organizing Tools

Putting a home office in order doesn't happen by itself – it takes the right tools to put things in their proper place



Notepad Covers

Garnet Hill, \$12 to \$14

These fabric covers help dress up and coordinate notebooks and to-do lists (pads not included). Available in limited quantities in orange, turquoise, and fuchsia.

To Buy: www.garnethill.com.



Paper Trays

Garnet Hill, \$8 each

Stackable fiberboard trays can be used as in-out boxes or to store paper near a fax or a printer. Available in kiwi, white, turquoise, orange, and bordeaux.

To Buy: www.garnethill.com.



Document Boxes

Container Store, \$10 to \$15

Library boxes of fabric- or paper-covered fiberboard serve as storage for memorabilia (family photos, children's artwork) or paperwork (tax receipts).

To Buy: www.containerstore.com.



Desk Lamp

Luxo, \$230

The Luxo L1 swing-arm desk lamp, a classic designed in 1937, has a 41-inch reach from a circular weighted base. Available in black, white, and metallic gray.

To Buy: 800-222-5896.



In-Out Basket

Container Store, \$15

Installed on the wall, Elfa wire-mesh baskets keep incoming and outgoing items, such as mail and periodicals, organized and handy.

To Buy: www.containerstore.com.