



ORGANIZING
YOUR
PROFESSIONAL
LIFE



Joy at Work

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Introduction

Is your desk always buried under piles of documents? *Yikes! Where's the report I have to submit tomorrow?*

Do you have a never-ending backlog of emails no matter how often you check them? *"About the email I sent you yesterday..." What email?*

Is your schedule packed with appointments with people you don't even want to see?

Are you carrying on like this every day because you've forgotten what you really wanted to do?

Do you find it hard to make decisions?

Are you asking yourself, *Is this all life's about? Just checking things off a to-do list? Isn't there some way to restore order to my job, my career, my life?*

If any of these apply to you, there's one solution: tidy up.

This book is not just about how to tidy up your workspace. It's about how to put in order both the physical and nonphysical aspects of your job, including your digital data, time, decision-making, and networks, and how to spark joy in your career.

Many people feel defeated at the mere suggestion of tidying up. "I can't possibly make time for that! I'm far too busy already," they protest. "There are too many decisions I need to make to even think of tidying," some say, while others claim, "I've already tried it. I sorted all my documents, and now they're just a mess again."

Quite a few people don't believe they *can* find joy in their job. "I'm stuck in useless meetings all day long. Tidying's never going to change that," they insist. "Besides, too many things are out of my hands. There's no way work can be joyful." In fact, however, it's tidying up properly that makes it possible to spark joy at work.

Since the age of five, I've been fascinated by tidying. I pursued this subject right through my school years and went on to take my first steps as a tidying consultant at the age of nineteen while still at university. The KonMari Method arose from my experiences of teaching people how to tidy up.

My approach has two distinct features: it's simple but effective, ensuring you'll never revert to clutter, and it uses a unique selection criterion—choosing what sparks joy. When we ask ourselves, *Does this spark joy?* we reconnect with our inner self

and discover what's really important to us. The result is a lasting change in behavior that sets life on a positive track.

I introduced this method in *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. Translated into forty languages, it has sold a combined total of more than twelve million copies. For the past few years I've been busy sharing my method worldwide. During this process, one question has come up repeatedly: How can we tidy up the workspace and spark joy at work?

Most people see me as a specialist in tidying homes, not as someone with expertise in tidying workspaces, let alone in career development. While working for a Japanese company, however, I spent most of my spare time teaching company executives how to tidy their offices. Even people at the firm where I worked began asking me for advice. It was because I became so busy with these lessons that I finally decided to quit my job and launch my career as an independent consultant.

My trained consultants continue to offer lessons and lectures on tidying the workplace using the KonMari Method. They share with each other the knowledge and experience they gain and fine-tune the content accordingly. Through this process, it has become clear how much tidying the workplace improves performance and enhances the joy we get from our work.

For example, clients have told us that it has boosted their sales performance by as much as 20 percent, increased efficiency to the point where they were able to leave work two

hours earlier, and helped them to reassess the meaning of their job, rekindling their passion for it. We've seen countless examples of how tidying up can improve one's work life, both materially and psychologically. Just as tidying the home sparks joy in our lives, tidying the workplace sparks joy in our work, helping us to become more organized and achieve better results. This book introduces the secrets of that process.

Of course, not everything at work can be evaluated on the basis of whether it sparks joy. There are company rules to follow, superiors who make decisions that affect our work, and coworkers with whom we collaborate. Nor is tidying our physical workspace enough to make our jobs go smoothly. We can truly spark joy in our work life only when we have put every aspect of it in order, including emails, digital data, work-related tasks, and meetings.

That's where my coauthor Scott comes in. As an organizational psychologist and a chaired business-school professor at Rice University, Scott has been at the forefront of research to create more rewarding and joyful careers. His work covers a broad range of subjects, including how to achieve a more positive and meaningful work life, become more effective and productive at work, and problem-solve in business. Based on the results of this research, his bestselling book *Stretch* shows how we can find success and satisfaction at work by making better use of what we already have, whether skills, knowledge, or items. All this makes him a leading expert on how to spark joy

at work. Throughout this book, Scott provides cutting-edge scientific research and data on tidying and provides practical lessons on tidying up the nonphysical aspects of work.

In chapter 1, we share data related to tidying that we're sure will get you motivated. Chapters 2 and 3 cover how to tidy your workspace. Chapters 4 through 9 look at tidying digital data, time, decisions, networks, meetings, and teams. Chapter 10 covers how to multiply the impact of tidying at your company. The final chapter transcends the framework of tidying, suggesting actions you can take to spark even more joy in your daily work and the type of mindset and approach that lead to a joyful career. This chapter includes stories from my own experience that are intended to get you thinking about how you can spark joy in your work life.

We hope you'll use this book as the master key to a joyful career.

Why Tidy?

What's the first thing that greets you when you get to the office on Monday morning?

For many, it's a desk covered in things, things, and more things! Piles of documents, random paper clips, unopened letters delivered who-knows-when, unread books, and a laptop plastered with sticky-note reminders. And beneath their desk are often bags of promotional giveaways from customers. I'm sure most people heave a deep sigh at the sight and wonder how they'll ever get anything done when their desk is such a mess.

Aki, an office worker at a real-estate agency, was one of those who suffered from a messy desk. Even though it wasn't that big (the top was only about as wide as her arm span, and it had only three drawers), she could never find anything in it.

Before a meeting, she was always frantically searching for her glasses, her pen, or a folder, and she often had to reprint her documents and materials when she failed to unearth them. Many times she became fed up and resolved to organize her desk, but come evening she would be too tired and put it off until “tomorrow,” piling all the documents she had used that day on one side before heading home. Of course, the next day she would end up searching through that pile for the materials she needed before she could even begin tackling her work. By the time she finally got started, she was exhausted. “Sitting at that messy desk was totally depressing,” she told me. Unfortunately, she had good reason to feel this way.

Various studies show that messy conditions cost us far more than we could ever imagine, and in multiple ways. In a survey of one thousand working American adults, 90 percent felt that clutter had a negative impact on their lives. The top reasons they gave were lowered productivity, a negative mindset, reduced motivation, and diminished happiness.

Clutter also adversely affects health. According to a study by scientists at UCLA, being surrounded by too many things increases cortisol levels, a primary stress hormone. Chronically high levels of cortisol can make us more susceptible to depression, insomnia, and other mental disorders, as well as such stress-related physical disorders as heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes.

In addition, recent psychology research shows that a messy

environment taxes the brain. When surrounded by clutter, our brains are so busy registering all the things around us that we can't focus on what we should be doing in the moment, such as tackling the work on our desk or communicating with others. We feel distracted, stressed, and anxious, and our decision-making ability is impaired. Clutter, it seems, is a magnet for misery. In fact, the data show that people like me, who get excited by the sight of a messy room and can't wait to tidy up, are the exception.

But it's not just individuals who are affected. Clutter is bad for business, too. Have you ever spent hours looking for something at the office? Or even lost it completely? Almost half of office workers report mislaying one important work-related item a year. It might be a file folder, a calculator, a memory drive, a briefcase, a laptop, or a cell phone. Not only does replacing lost items cost money, but losing them in the first place causes emotional stress and creates unnecessary waste that damages the environment. But the greatest loss is the time spent looking for them. Data show that the search for lost things adds up to an average of one workweek per year per employee. In a span of four years, that comes to a whole month. In the United States alone, this loss in productivity when converted to cash amounts to an estimated US\$89 billion annually. This is more than double the combined profit of the world's five largest corporations.

These figures are staggering, but this is the reality. The

effects of clutter can be devastating. Still, there's no need to worry. All these problems can be solved by tidying up.

How Tidying My Workspace Changed My Life

After graduating from university, I got a job at a staffing agency in the corporate sales department. My euphoria at joining the workforce, however, was short-lived. Although it's only natural for new hires to experience difficulties when they first start, my sales performance never seemed to improve. Of the fifteen people newly employed that year, I was always in the bottom three.

I arrived at the office early, spent hours on the phone trying to make appointments with prospective clients, kept those appointments I did manage to make, and made lists of more potential customers in between. In the evening I grabbed a quick bowl of noodles at a shop in our building, then returned to my desk to prepare materials. I seemed to be working all the time, yet I never got results.

One day, after another discouraging round of sales calls, I put down the receiver with a deep sigh and bowed my head. Staring dejectedly at the top of my desk, I realized with a start that it was a complete mess. Scattered around my keyboard were a pile of outdated sales lists, a half-written contract, a paper cup with some tea I hadn't finished, a shriveled-up tea bag, a week-old bottle of water, scraps of paper on which I had

scrawled random sales tips from my coworkers, an unread business book someone had recommended, a pen missing its cap, a stapler with which I planned to staple together some papers but had forgotten...

I could not believe my eyes. How could this have happened? I had been working as a tidying consultant since I was in university, yet despite my confidence in my tidying skills, I had been so swamped with my new job that I no longer had time to do any consulting and had even become lax in my tidying habits at home. Somehow I had lost touch with my inner tidying geek. No wonder I wasn't having any success at work.

Shocked, I came into the office at seven the next morning to tidy my desk. Marshaling all the knowledge and skills I had honed over the years, I finished within an hour. Soon my workspace was clean and clutter-free. All that was left on my desk was the phone and my computer.

Although I'd like to say that my sales performance shot up immediately, things didn't change quite that fast. I did, however, feel a lot happier being at my desk. I could find the documents I needed right away. There was no mad search for things just before I dashed off to a meeting, and when I came back, I could launch right into the next task. Gradually, I began to experience more joy in my work.

Tidying had been my passion for years, and I already had a strong hunch that tidying up one's home could change one's life. But now it hit me that tidying the workplace was important,

too. As I sat at my desk, which felt brand-new, I sensed that keeping it tidy would make my job more fun and help me love my work.

Why Tidying Up Improves Work Performance

“My desk is such a mess, I’m embarrassed,” my colleague Lisa confided one day. She worked on the same floor as I did. When she saw me putting my desk back in order, she became intrigued and began asking my advice. She had never been good at tidying even as a child, and her parents’ home was full of things. Her apartment, she told me, was a shambles, too. “Not only have I never tidied in my life, it never even occurred to me that I should,” she said. But working at an office had made her aware that her desk was far messier than anyone else’s.

Her story is not so unusual. A major difference between a home and a workspace is that at work, people can see us. At home, almost no one sees our clothes or books, even if they are strewn all over the floor. But an office is a shared space, which makes the difference between a tidy desk and a messy one obvious to all. Surprisingly, this fact has a much greater impact on our working life than most people realize.

Several studies on employee evaluations in the workplace have shown that the tidier a person’s space, the more likely others are to see them as ambitious, intelligent, warm, and calm,

while yet another study showed that such people are seen as confident, friendly, industrious, and kind. The list of adjectives makes these people sound like real winners. Moreover, studies show that tidy people tend to gain others' trust more easily and are more likely to be promoted. Beyond the importance of a good reputation for career advancement, research repeatedly finds that we work to the level of expectations that others set for us. Higher expectations boost our confidence and usually result in better performance. This theory, known as the Pygmalion effect, is based on studies showing that students' grades improve when they sense that their teachers expect them to excel. The Pygmalion effect has also been shown to be important in work settings, where employees' performance rises or declines to the level of expectations set for them.

The findings of these studies can be summarized in three simple points. A tidy desk results in a higher evaluation of our character and capacity. This raises our self-esteem and increases our motivation. As a result, we work harder and our performance improves. Looked at in this way, tidying up sounds like a pretty good deal, doesn't it?

After she applied my lessons to her workspace, Lisa's sales performance improved, her boss praised her highly, and her confidence in her job steadily increased. As for me, let's just say that I got high marks within the company for my ability to tidy up, and that made me happy.

Are Messy People Really More Creative?

A bare, tidy desk is sterile and boring. “If a cluttered desk is the sign of a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk a sign?” These words have been attributed to the creative genius and physicist Albert Einstein. Regardless of whether he actually said them or not, his desk appears to have been buried under piles of books and papers. Similarly, Pablo Picasso painted while surrounded by a jumble of paintings, and Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, reportedly kept his office cluttered on purpose. Legends of geniuses with messy offices are too numerous to mention. As if to corroborate these, a recent study conducted by researchers at the University of Minnesota concluded that a messy job setting is more likely to generate creative ideas.

Perhaps because such stories abound, people frequently ask me for confirmation. “But a cluttered desk is good, isn’t it?” they’ll say. “It stimulates creativity, right?” If you’re wondering if your cluttered desk might make you more productive, too, and whether it’s worth reading the rest of this book, here’s a little exercise for you to try. Start by mentally picturing your desk at the office, your studio, or your workplace. Or, if you are sitting there at this very moment, just take a good look around you. Next, answer these questions.

Are you honestly feeling positive about working here
right now?

JOY AT WORK

Does working at this desk every day really spark joy for you?

Are you sure that you're giving full scope to your creativity?

Do you really want to come back to this tomorrow?

These questions aren't intended to make you feel bad. They're meant to help you get in touch with how you feel about your work environment. If you answered yes without hesitation to all of them, your joy level at work is impressively high. But if your response was ambivalent, if you felt your heart sink, even a little, then tidying up is definitely worth a try.

To be honest, it doesn't really matter which is better—a clutter-free desk or one that is total chaos. The most important thing is that you yourself are aware of the kind of environment that brings you joy at work; that you know your own joy criteria. And tidying up is one of the best ways to find out. Many clients who have used this method to tidy up their homes end up with a bare and simple interior when they're done, only to realize a little later that they want more decoration. That's when they begin adding accents they love. Often, it is only after tidying up that people realize what kind of environment sparks joy for them.

Are you the type who can tap into your creativity more easily once you've tidied up, or the type who is more creative in

the midst of clutter? No matter which you are, the tidying process will help you discover the kind of joyful workspace that makes your creativity bloom.

The Vicious Cycle of Accumulating Clutter

Research shows that clutter decreases the joy we feel at work for two main reasons. First, it overwhelms the brain. The more stuff we have around us, the more overloaded the brain becomes. This makes it harder for us to recognize, experience, and savor those things that are most important to us—the things that bring us joy.

Second, when we are inundated with things, information, and tasks, we lose our sense of control and the ability to choose. No longer capable of taking the initiative or choosing our actions, we forget that work is a means for realizing our dreams and aspirations and lose our love for our job. To make matters worse, when people feel they are no longer in control, they begin to accumulate more unwanted stuff while also struggling with a sense of guilt and pressure to do something about it. The result? They put off dealing with their stuff indefinitely, generating a vicious cycle of ever-increasing clutter. **S.S.**