

Organizational psychologist | *Pate's business is making clients more productive*

BY DAVID GOLL

They come from a variety of businesses and have many different reasons why they call her, but organizational expert Mary Ann Pate said she has one goal in mind for her clients: Make them more productive in their professional and personal lives.

"Some people are struggling with (Attention Deficit Disorder) or other kinds of disorders that cause them to be easily distracted," she said. "Some people have gone through tragedies and difficult times in their lives, whether it's a divorce, losing a job or the death of a loved one. And some people have simply never learned good organizational skills."

Mary Ann Pate

Title: Organizing and productivity specialist

Company name: A Timely Solution

Business: Organization and productivity consulting

Address: 9000 Crow Canyon Road, Suite S127, Danville 94506

Phone: 925-736-4826

Web: atimelysolution.com

Education: B.S., business administration, University of Iowa

Residence: Danville

All of these things can contribute to paper piling up on desks or thousands of e-mails collecting on computers. Resulting workplace clutter can lead to toiling too many hours spinning professional wheels, time that could be better spent cultivating personal lives with friends and family members.

And about half of her clients are very organized individuals who have just hit the wall.

"They have too much on their plate and have become overwhelmed with work and responsibilities," she said. "That can be a good thing, since it could be because their business has grown so successful, but it's easy to lose control."

Pate, a Danville resident who established her business four years ago, wasn't always a model of organization herself. She learned it the hard way, juggling the demands of two growing children while working in the fast-paced world of software sales for many years.

She also had a fairly typical Bay Area existence, commuting from her home in the East Bay to high-tech employers on the Peninsula or in San Jose. Frazzled by job demands, crazy traffic and crowded supermarkets, most people take on that glazed look by the time they reach home.

"That kind of situation forces you to become organized," Pate said.

Though she started working mostly with what



STEPHANIE SECREST/EAST BAY BUSINESS TIMES

Mary Ann Pate helps her clients balance work and personal life.

she calls "residential" customers, about three-quarters of Pate's clients today are businesses. And though she does work with CEOs and other senior managers, as well as conducting seminars on time and information management for work groups within companies, most of her clients are entrepreneurs or professionals with small offices, including doctors and attorneys.

Pate said her first meeting with a client is a visit to his/her home or office to conduct an assessment.

"I want to see their environment and find out what they want to accomplish," she said. "It's funny because people have the urge to clean things up, but that would sort of defeat the purpose."

Some may just need a more efficient filing system, whether it be in a good old-fashioned filing cabinet or in evaluating and categorizing the daily deluge of e-mails.

Whatever the solution, Pate said she is looking for ways to make her clients stick with the practice long after she is gone.

"Self-sufficiency is what we want to achieve," she said.

Some clients' issues can be dealt with in a matter of two or three visits, others require periodic brush-ups. Or even long-term organizational therapy.

"There are some clients I have seen for years," she said.

Lesson learned

'I'm an outside person, an objective observer who can point things out people closer to them may miss.'

To build up a client base, Pate said she spent the first 1-1/2 years of her business as a "nonstop networking machine," attending the meetings of multiple organizations, meeting with clients during the day, and spending evenings answering and sending out e-mails.

"It began to pay off and turn around at that point," she said. "Now, most of my business comes through word-of-mouth referrals."

After years spent in the corporate world, working in sales and product development at Oracle Corp., Ceridian Corp. and Hyperion Solutions Corp., Pate was ready for a change. While taking time off after her last corporate position, she got job offers through a headhunter.

"But I found myself not returning the calls," she said. "I just realized I wasn't all that interested."

Taking risks isn't a foreign concept to Pate. Not long after graduating from college in her native Iowa, she chose about as different an environment as she could — Hawaii — to spend the next five years. Returning to the mainland, she took corporate jobs in Houston and Oklahoma City before moving to the Bay Area in 1987.

Fifteen years later, with plenty of corporate experience, Pate conducted extensive research into several potential industries. She settled on organization and productivity, viewing it as an important, yet underserved societal need.

"When I survey my clients, almost everyone talks about how they feel anxious, stressed out and frustrated," she said. "They talk about how they don't see enough of their families. I want to help them reduce that stress and frustration and regain control of their lives."

When she begins working with a client, she spends a lot of time listening and observing. She remains quiet, with the exception of asking questions, until she feels she knows the client as a person.

"It's funny, because people tend to tell me things they probably don't say to people close to them," she said. "But they feel safe in doing so. I'm an outside person, an objective observer who can point things out people closer to them may miss."

Her clients often start out "embarrassed" by their piles of unfiled or un-recycled clutter, but once she gets to know them and their lives, Pate feels comfortable to make recommendations.

"A solution is usually not very far away," she said.

dgoll@bizjournals.com | 925-598-1436