

"I focus my skills on people's professional lives from helping people manage their emails to helping them organize their work space."

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People who have been in an unemployment office know it's a place full of sadness. That's where I was in July 2008, feeling down because I'd just been laid off from my job in medical-device sales. Thank goodness I had some savings put aside, because I had a mortgage to pay and, as a single woman, no husband's income as a safety net.

While waiting for my appointment, I was perusing the career guides and found a page on professional organizing. I thought, Oh my God, that's me! I'm always trying to create more efficient ways of doing things. I address any little dilemma—like when I had piles of clean laundry lying around that wrinkled and created more work—with a system and a place for everything. Organizing is second nature, but I had no idea there was an industry or people who make a career out of it. Once I did, I knew it was for me.

But I wasn't sure I was up to working on my own, especially in a tanking economy. So I pursued sales jobs, but the more I interviewed, the less I wanted those positions. I started reading up on what organizing entails and seeking out some local organizers. Amazingly, the first one I called asked, "Are you available now?" and hired me to spend five days packing up someone's house. I thought, Well, I've moved, so I know how to pack!

That week I learned so much. Organizers work on all kinds of projects, including estate organizing, creating efficient closets, and managing time and workplaces. I also learned that I never wanted to pack up a house again! Instead I intended to focus my skills on people's professional lives—from implementing the best filing systems and e-mail strategies to straightening out a client's desk and work space.

Then I headed back to the unemployment office, this time to take a class on how to start a business. For four months I worked with other students learning about the tools you need to get under way, such as a business plan, financing and marketing. Blueprinting it all was fun, but I still didn't know how it would come together.



What Lorena learned

✓ Don't let money angst win. "If I stress too much about money, I panic—and if new clients pick up on that desperation, they won't work with me. Instead I tighten my belt and focus on what I can do to bring in more cash, like going to a chamber of commerce mixer to meet prospective clients."

✓ Love what you do. "You're going to have to work really hard, so you'd better enjoy it. I read an e-book called *Be Yourself and Get the Job (and Life) of Your Dreams!*, which helped me take stock of what I love, what I don't like and what I excel at. That helped me design my business to suit myself, which makes it easier to put in the long hours."

✓ Create a plan. "Most people are intimidated at the thought of a business plan. But without it, how do you know where you're going or how to get there? Developing one helped me nail down a clear vision of my business and gave me a course of action, too."

After hanging out my shingle, there were several tough weeks. I invested in business cards and a Web site, e-mailed everyone I knew and went to every networking and community event I could find. When I had crossed all the things I should be doing off my list and had only a couple of clients, I called my business teacher and said, "Maybe I'm not cut out for this." She told me I was working too hard, and to take a week off. Of course I didn't want to hear that; I had bills to pay! But then I got a call that my mother was coughing up blood. I dropped everything to go stay with her until a week later, when we learned she was OK.

When I came home, I saw my teacher was right. The tide had shifted, and the networking I'd done was starting to pay off—people were calling to hire me! More important, I felt a shift within myself. Confronting such a scary situation with my mom had given me confidence. Starting my own business suddenly felt like not such a big deal in comparison.

I've been in business for 11 months now. I'm working hard, but I love that I control my own schedule and am watching my income grow every month. In a couple of years I expect to make what I did at my old job. Oh, and you'd better believe I copied my first check and hung it on the wall!

