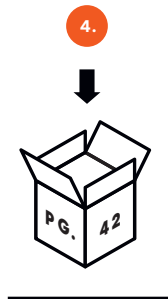
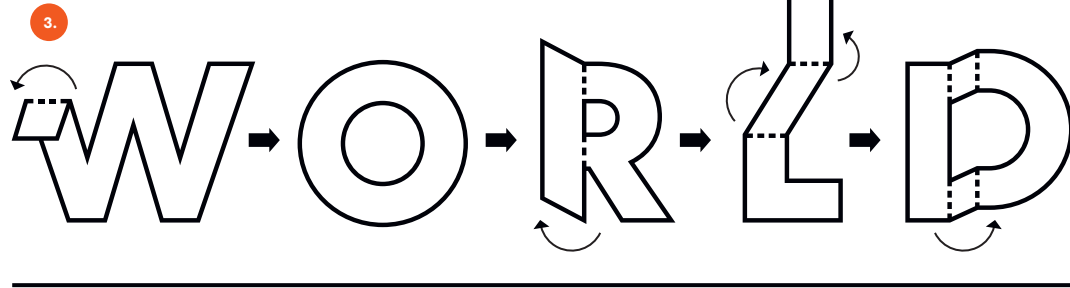
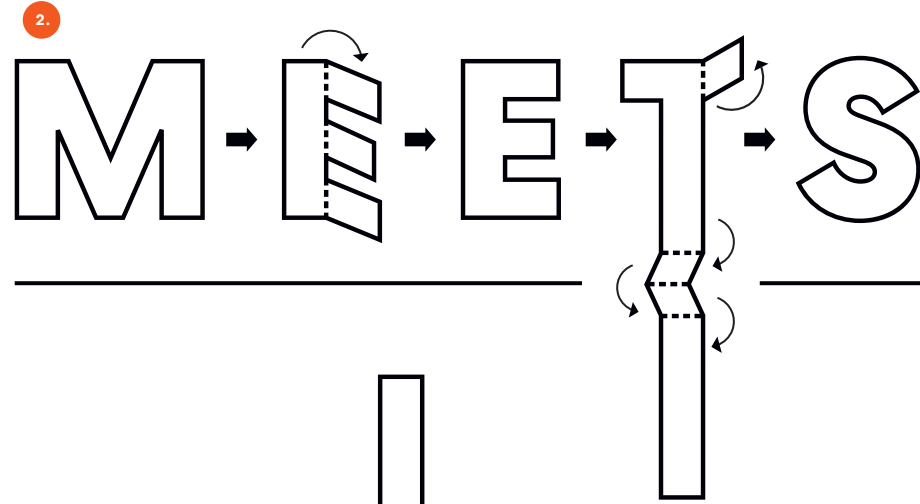


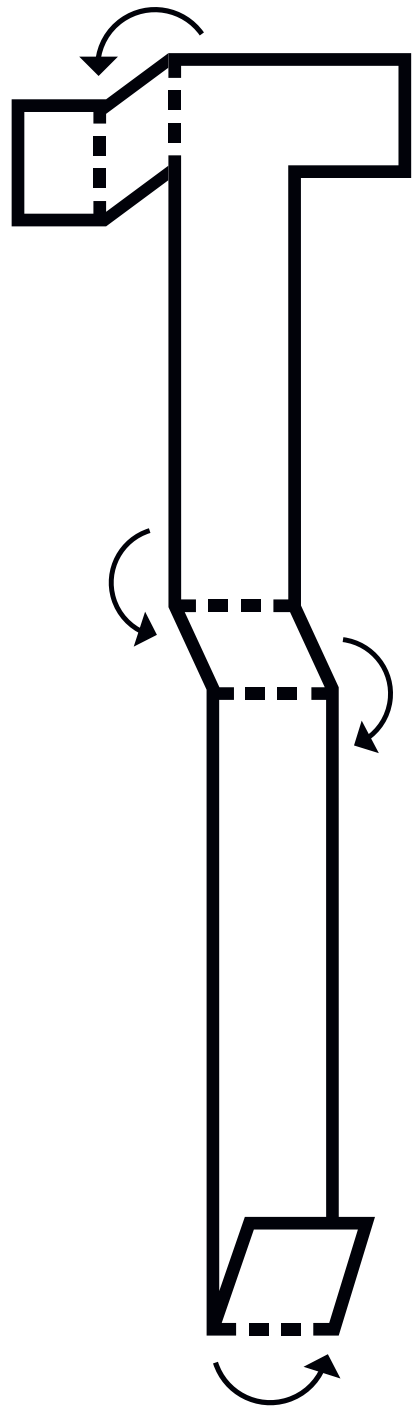
FAST COMPANY may/June 2020

photographs by CARA ROBBINS



Decluttering doyenne
MARIE KONDO is poised to build
 the next lifestyle
 empire, but will it spark joy?





↓
Takumi Kawahara is watching his wife, Marie Kondo, massage her face with a brush.

She's wearing a white bathrobe and standing next to a bouquet of pink cherry blossoms. She has asked for soft instrumental music to be piped into the room. It appears to calm her on this February morning in Los Angeles as a dozen production workers mill about, capturing footage that will show Kondo's 2.5 million Instagram followers how to dry brush their faces. Kondo closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and starts making small circular motions on her forehead. When she opens her eyes, she has conjured up a euphoric expression for the camera.

Kawahara isn't buying it. He taps me on the shoulder to show me his phone, on which he has pulled up the word *ticklish* in large letters on Google Translate. "Doesn't that brush look ticklish to you?" he whispers to me, saying the word in English for the first time. He proceeds to wiggle as if someone is tickling him, giggling so much that his dapper gray fedora threatens to tip over onto his glasses. "There's no way I would put that thing on my face."

Kawahara, CEO of KonMari Media, which he cofounded with his wife in 2015 and which is headquartered in Hollywood, California, is a fixture at Kondo's photo and video shoots, like the one today showcasing products sold on the KonMari website. The production crew often turns to him expectantly, waiting for him to exclaim, "Beautiful!" or "Excellent!," a signal that they have nailed the shot and can move on to the next one.

He's also the life of the set. His goofiness is a foil for Kondo's quiet spirituality, which is central to her mission, something she describes to me as "helping others to choose what sparks joy." Kawahara pun-

tures any seriousness, making funny faces, telling jokes, and putting everyone at ease. It's partly his personality, but it's also a strategic effort to relax his wife. Kondo has been in the public eye since 2011, when she published *The Life-Changing, Pulsing Magic of Tidying Up* in Japan, but she's still happiest at home, with her daughters, ages 3 and 4.

"The time that I spend with my family sparks joy for me," she says, in a voice so quiet that only her interpreter seems able to hear it. (She speaks English but is less comfortable doing so than Kawahara.) "I have to be a public figure so I can spread this message. But it's much harder for me than for people who naturally excel at being in front of a lot of people. Takumi has really helped me."

Over the past year, Kondo has been forced to negotiate the tension between her introverted personality and her desire to introduce her philosophy to larger audiences. *Tidying Up With Marie Kondo*, her Netflix series that launched in January 2019, went on to become the global streaming service's most-watched nonfiction show of the year. Suddenly, Kondo was vaulted into a new

▲
TWOFER
"We're two people, but working as one," Kawahara says of himself and Kondo.

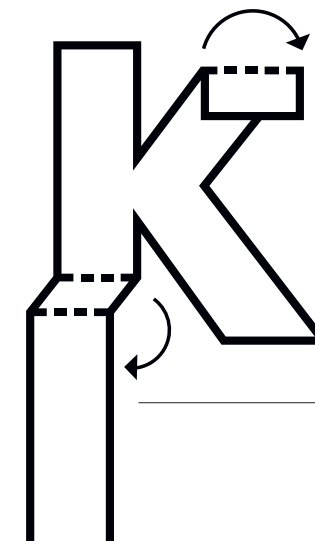
constellation of stardom, alongside other goddesses of wellness and domesticity such as Martha Stewart, Oprah Winfrey, and Gwyneth Paltrow. By the end of 2019, she had established an e-commerce site, a blog, and a newsletter. She had also increased the size of her consultant network—people whom Kondo personally instructs in her decluttering method—to 40 countries.

Now, Kondo is bringing her method to the workplace, backed by the \$12 billion Japanese e-commerce conglomerate Rakuten, which acquired a majority stake in KonMari Media in August. In April 2020, Kondo released a new book, coauthored with Rice University business school professor Scott Sonenshein, called *Joy at Work: Organizing Your Professional Life*, which opens the door to selling organizing products and services to business types. "Tidying your

workplace gives you an opportunity to reflect on how you are working and what you like about the job," she says.

As she goes after the corporate world, Kondo appears to be wrestling with the question of what kind of work makes her happy. For several years, it seemed like she was following the playbook of other celebrity entrepreneurs. But now she has clearly decided to throw that strategy out the window. Apparently, it no longer sparked joy. Perhaps it never did.

KONDO WAS A 21-YEAR-OLD COLLEGE student when she first met Kawahara, who was also 21. They were in Tokyo, waiting for an elevator. Kondo re-



Prop stylist: Meghan Czerwinski; hair and makeup: Megumi Asai using Glossier and Leonor Greyl

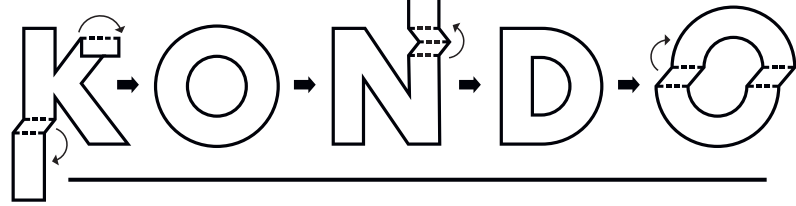
members that Kawahara was wearing a suit with a little badge on it featuring the Japanese symbol for the word *dream*. “When I saw that, I thought, What a passionate person!” she says. “Even though Takumi’s more extroverted and I’m much more introspective, we’re the same on the inside.”

Kondo had dreams of her own. She had already decided to turn her lifelong passion for tidying into a career. At the elevator, she gave Kawahara a newly minted business card with a small butterfly on it. (Kawahara didn’t need her help: “Fortunately, I’m already an organized person,” he says.) They decided to stay in touch.

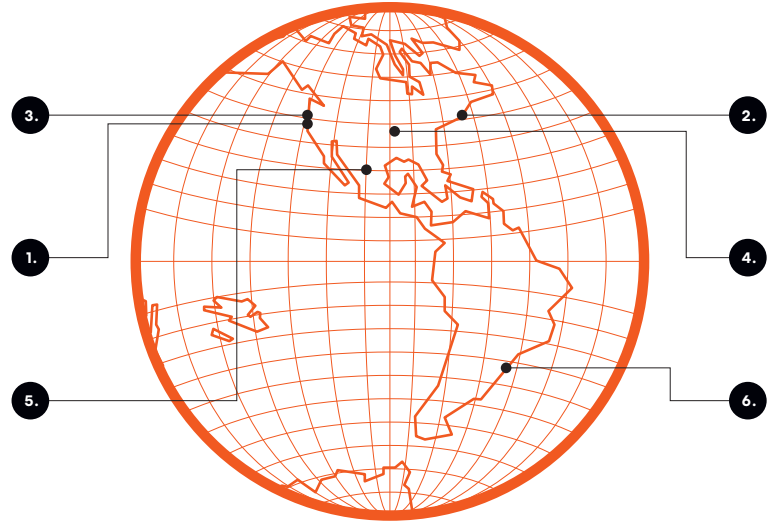
Kondo had become fascinated with home organization as a 5-year-old, flipping through her mother’s home decor magazines. As she got older, she began to see tidying as a manifestation of something deeper. She felt a spiritual connection to certain objects that spurred *tokimeku*, a Japanese word that refers to the flutter you feel in your body when something delights you. This idea became the foundation of her tidying approach, now known as the KonMari method: keeping belongings that inspire that feeling and shedding ones that do not.

At 18, Kondo felt drawn to the Shinto tradition, and she applied to become a shrine maiden, performing sacred rituals at Shinto altars. “I think the shrine was a natural match for me because the foundation of Shinto expresses gratitude toward inanimate objects,” she says. In college, Kondo studied sociology and then went to work for a Tokyo staffing agency, but she hustled every night and weekend to build a business helping people clean their homes of accumulated goods. As demand for her services grew, one client suggested that she write a book so that people could do it on their own. It was during a six-month writing course that she wrote a draft of *The Life-Changing, Pulsing Magic of Tidying Up*. At the end of the program, she pitched it to publishers, and when it hit shelves in 2011, Kondo’s book was an immediate hit in Japan. She was bombarded with even more requests for her consulting services.

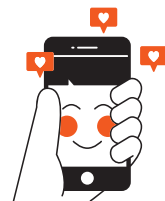
As Kondo adapted to fame, she reconnected with Kawahara, who was working as a human resources strategist in Osaka. He didn’t fully grasp how famous she had become. “I had organized my home so much that I didn’t own a TV set, so I had no idea,” he says. He remembers Kondo sharing her plans with him over dinner. “The first vision was simply to finish tidying all of Japan,” he says.



The life-changing influence of a humble Japanese



1. San Jose
In 2015, Kondo partners with eBay on a back-to-school decluttering guide—including downloadable flash cards—for parents and kids.



3. Menlo Park, California
On December 31, 2018, 710 people follow Kondo on Instagram. Her Netflix show debuts the next day, and by January 14, 2019, she has 1.3 million followers.



7. Tokyo
The Life-Changing, Pulsing Magic of Tidying Up is published in January 2011, selling 1.25 million copies in just over a year.



8. Stockholm
Margareta Magnusson is dubbed “the next Kondo” with her 2018 book, *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning*, designed to “spark joy” in recipients of passed-down items.

2. Brooklyn
Lindsay Knaak-Stuart, a veteran cosmetics executive, launches Meant in 2017, a bath-goods line explicitly designed to be “the Marie Kondo of your shower.”



4. Chicago
A DePaul University psychology professor publishes a study, *The Dark Side of the Home*, concluding that the messier the home, the lower the family’s satisfaction.



5. Dallas
The Container Store sees an almost 9% increase in quarterly sales ending in March 2019 in the wake of the release of *Tidying Up With Marie Kondo* on Netflix.



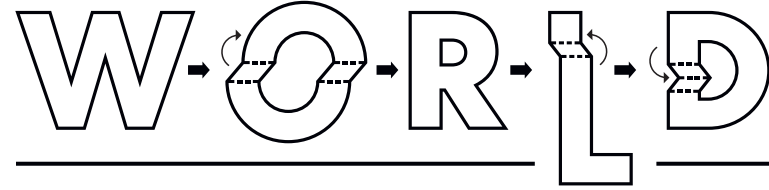
10. London
After “pulsing” is dropped from the title of Kondo’s book in its U.K. translation, a minor kerfuffle ensues, leading one waggish writer to lament: “I’m now forced to acknowledge there’s a tremulous, near-orgasmic pleasure in clearing up decades of mess.”



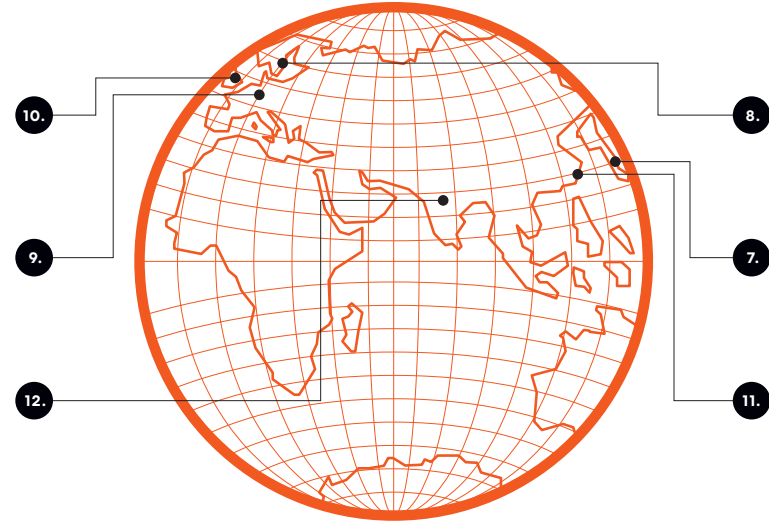
12. Gurugram, India
Gayatri Gandhi, India’s first certified KonMari consultant (and the only one when Kondo’s Netflix show premieres), sees a 40% increase in inquiries for her services after *Tidying Up* airs.



6. Buenos Aires, Argentina
Renová Tu Vestidor, a social platform for women to recirculate old clothes, reports that sales grew 200% in the first quarter of 2019 compared with 2018, and it received 150,000 products versus 80,000 a year earlier, thanks to the popularity of *Tidying Up*.



tidying consultant and her personal philosophy

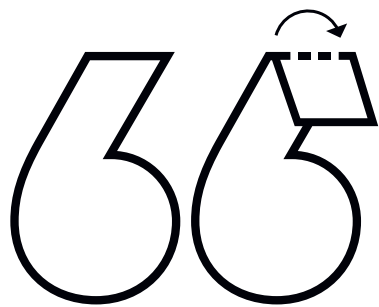


From then on, their relationship and careers were intertwined. “We both love to work,” Kawahara says. “We’re always talking about work, even in our private moments. The division of labor in their relationship was clear. “She was an author who was very good at transmitting a message to the world,” Kawahara says. “I was good at creating businesses and establishing networks.” They married in 2014, the year of her book’s U.S. debut, and in 2016 they moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. “I’ve always responded to a call to action,” says Kondo. “I came to the United States because it had the strongest reaction to my book.”

THAT KONDO’S PHILOSOPHY caught on anywhere outside of Japan still baffles Kondo and Kawahara. “In Japan, everybody lives in small houses, so you can understand that people were having difficulties tidying,” says Kawahara. “But our image of the U.S. is that everybody lives in such big houses.” Within a year of its U.S. release, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* sold 2 million copies. (The word *pulsing* was dropped in the English translation.) “The sheer volume of readers was just shocking,” Kawahara says.

There was also an inevitable backlash. Some critics lumped her philosophy into a broader critique of minimalism, deeming her approach classist because poor people don’t have the luxury of only owning things that “spark joy.” Others accused her of pushing an anti-capitalist agenda that could cripple the economy. Then there were the bibliophiles who were downright livid that she seemed to encourage people to get rid of books. “When it comes to the criticism that I’ve received, I think, I haven’t expressed myself well enough,” Kondo says.

Along with the attention came a spate of new business opportunities. The couple launched a premium mobile experience in Japan in 2015 allowing subscribers (paying about \$3 a month) to ask Kondo tidying questions. The following year, they released a free iPhone app, and in Australia KonMari trademarked the term “spark joy” for computer software related to organizing and guidance about personal lifestyle—a TurboTax for tidying, if you will. “It was an explosion,” Kawahara recalls, his hands bursting open like little fireworks. “Neither of us spoke or understood English, so Google Translate was my best friend. We were trying to figure out what was even being offered.”



What's at the heart of KonMari is that there are no wrong answers," says Kawahara.

By far, the most effective conduit for spreading the KonMari method has been TV. Kondo's book was made into a Japanese drama in 2013. (NBC commissioned an American sitcom based on it in 2015, but the show wasn't picked up.) In 2016, Kondo starred in a two-part English-language documentary special called *Tidy Up With KonMari*, for the Japanese network NHK, in which she helped New Yorkers tidy up their homes.

In some ways, that was a dry run. Gail Berman, the veteran TV and movie producer who had acquired rights to the book and sold the sitcom idea to NBC, and even fielded offers for a *Tidying Up* movie, put together a presentation for "how this unscripted reality show might work with her at the center of it dealing with families in the U.S. We pitched that, and ultimately there was an interest from Amazon and from Netflix," she says, with Netflix winning

the deal by doing a straight-to-series order.

The key difference in this project was casting Kondo herself, not just her concept. "She is the real thing. She is delicate and beautiful and committed," Berman says. "Showing that was very, very important for succeeding with the show."

When the eight-episode series *Tidying Up With Marie Kondo* debuted on Netflix on New Year's Day in 2019, the response was staggering. Google searches for "Marie Kondo" were 100 times what they were when the book went on sale in the U.S. The Container Store, which had been struggling (and is unaffiliated with the show), saw a nearly 9% sales increase. Circular-economy apparel company ThredUp saw an 80% year-over-year increase in people ordering "closet clean-out kits" in the show's first three weeks. Netflix ordered a second season immediately, as it had done with the reality hits *Nailed It!* and *Queer Eye*.

Then, Kondo did something unusual for someone with aspirations to expand her business: She sat on the offer. In fact, she has still not signed on for a second season of her Netflix show. When asked about the status of season 2, Brandon Riegg, Netflix's VP of unscripted originals, who was involved with the acquisition and creation of the show, says, "We're excited to continue working with Marie, and we're still discussing what the next steps would be."

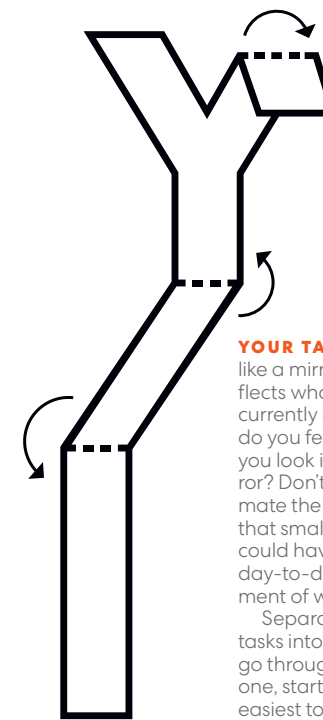
By all accounts, the rigors of TV-making took their toll on Kondo. "This opportunity became a source of enormous stress to her," says Kawahara. "We struggled to maintain a balance between our private life and business." Netflix was aware of this, Riegg says, and worked to accommodate her needs. "What she does takes a ton of focus and energy, and when you add a layer of TV production, it becomes a different demand on her," he says. Multiple sources indicate that the production schedule was modified to give Kondo more time off set.

"I wasn't used to the process at all, so I became really physically exhausted," Kondo says. "But I think at those points in life, it's very important to take a moment to sit down and ask yourself, 'What do I need to change here? How can I prioritize better?'" When I ask Berman about the show's plans for a second season, she says, "No, Marie is not ready for (Continued on page 84)

Excerpted from *Joy at Work* © 2020 by KonMari Media Inc. and Scott Sonenshein. Used with permission of Little, Brown and Company, New York. All rights reserved.

Tidy Your Tasks

In Kondo's new book, *Joy at Work*, she applies her method to your job description.



YOUR TASK PILE IS like a mirror—it reflects what you're currently doing. How do you feel when you look in the mirror? Don't underestimate the power that small changes could have on your day-to-day enjoyment of work.

Separate your tasks into piles, then go through each one, starting with the easiest to tidy (typically your core tasks), followed by project work, and concluding with developmental tasks.

▶ Is this task required for me to keep—and excel—at my job?

▶ Will this task help create a more joyful future, for example, by helping earn a raise, get a promotion, or learn a new skill?

▶ Does this task contribute to more satisfaction at work?

Stop doing anything that doesn't meet

one of these three conditions.

Now, what if you've got too many required tasks that don't spark joy?

Here's a quick rule I follow. Apply the beneficiary test: Does the work change anyone's decision-making?

If you're still convinced the task isn't worth keeping, talk with your boss. It's another way to learn if there's a hidden impact to your work. After applying the beneficiary test, have an open conversation over the value of the tasks and the trade-offs involved in doing them. If all of this fails, maybe your boss is just unreasonable. As much as we'd all like to sometimes, we can't toss the boss out!

—Scott Sonenshein



MY WORK SPARKS

joy, but there was a time when my schedule was so packed, I was physically and mentally exhausted. It was in 2015, just after I was named one of *Time*

magazine's 100 Most Influential People, and I was inundated with offers from all over the world. I also happened to be pregnant with my first child, and the pressure took a toll on my mind and body. Sometimes I couldn't control my emotions and would burst into tears at the end of the day. I realized that I simply couldn't go on like this. That's when I began changing the way I worked.

I can't possibly teach others how to spark joy in their lives if I'm not experiencing it in my own. Since I had that epiphany, I deliberately schedule time for things I enjoy or want to do, such as:

▶ Being with family

▶ Brightening up my home with flowers

▶ Enjoying a relaxing cup of tea

▶ Getting a massage when I'm tired

In our busy contemporary world, many of us give priority to our work at the expense of our lives, just as I once did. If that is true for you, my message is this: Make your own physical and emotional well-being top priority. —Marie Kondo



Marie Kondo

(Continued from page 49)

that yet.” Berman also reveals that she has moved on to focus on other projects.

Although there is some speculation that Kondo could do specials that would be less demanding than a season of shows, her decision not to pursue a second season has had ripple effects throughout the KonMari ecosystem. When *Tidying Up* debuted, KonMari had approximately 250 certified consultants. By the end of 2019, her network had swelled to 400 people. Interest in the Netflix show “catapulted me into this business,” says Phoebe Cusack, a consultant in Boston. Cusack expected a second season to launch at the start of 2020, leading to a stream of new clients, but when it didn’t, business began to dry up. “I was counting on it,” Cusack says. “I feel like she wasn’t thinking of her consultants.”

WHEN THE BUZZ AROUND

Kondo’s Netflix show was at its peak, Kawahara weighed his options for how to grow KonMari. In March 2019, *The Information* reported that KonMari had been shopping for investment capital, perhaps seeking up to \$40 million. (At the time, a KonMari spokesperson would only confirm that it was meeting with investors.)

Then, in August, KonMari announced that Rakuten had taken a majority stake in the company for an undisclosed sum, burying it in a press release that sounded like an endorsement deal between Kondo and the e-commerce giant. For a woman at the height of her celebrity and whose moves are intensely followed, this development—on par with Amazon acquiring Goop, for example—somehow eluded public attention.

Kawahara explains that Rakuten understands the Japanese philosophy that undergirds the KonMari method and also has global scale. “Rakuten is even bigger than Amazon in Japan,” Kawahara says, pointing out that it owns banks and mortgage brokerage services. “It touches every person’s life there. I actually wish it had made bigger news, but I think the Japanese media doesn’t pay that much attention to us anymore since we haven’t lived there for [many] years.” And most of the U.S. media doesn’t know what Rakuten is.

The Rakuten acquisition might also explain why KonMari has not yet re-signed

with Netflix. It has its own streaming service, Rakuten TV, which is currently available in many countries, although not in the United States. When I ask Kawahara if Rakuten TV is Kondo’s next stop, he says, “We’re still in discussions with Rakuten about how we will partner on entertainment content.” (Rakuten declined interview requests for this story.)

In the months after the Rakuten investment, KonMari began unveiling new dimensions to its business that aligned with its parent company’s strengths. In November 2019, KonMari launched an e-commerce store, where Kondo curates products that “spark joy” in her own life. The website includes a \$75 tuning fork that you’re supposed to strike against a crystal to create a sound meant to restore balance. There’s a \$180 earthenware steamer called a Donabe. And there’s that \$22 dry brush.

Then came the new book, *Joy at Work*, which Kondo sold in an auction in the spring of 2018 to a division of Little Brown, but as it happens, the initiative to bring her methods to the office melded with values cherished by her new benefactor, according to Kawahara. “We had already been working on the book, but when Mickey [Mikitani, Rakuten’s CEO] heard about it, he said, ‘This is what I’ve been telling my employees for years!’ Maybe, if they won’t listen to me, they’ll listen to Marie.” After the deal became public, Mikitani wrote on LinkedIn, “Everyone in the Rakuten family cleans his or her work space, each week. You will find all of us—myself included—one morning a week, tidying up our work areas.”

Unlike *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, *Joy at Work* features two voices. Kondo writes the first part, in which she provides tips on how to organize your desk and declutter your digital work space. “In the workplace, there are things we just need to do in the present moment or that might be beneficial for our career in the future,” she says. Sonenshein, the organizational behavior professor at Rice University’s business school, writes the other half, about how the KonMari method applies to decision-making, time management, and professional relationships. (See “Tidy Your Tasks,” page 49.) “There’s a lot of clutter, not just on the desk, but in our minds, in the conference room, and on our computers,” he says. “All these distractions get in the way of doing the job that we might otherwise love.”

This expansion into the workplace means KonMari Media can ramp up content and products related to work life. Now, in addition to \$119 aromatherapy diffusers, the


KonMari store sells a \$75 cube for storing paper clips and a \$175 leather-wrapped phone-charging station. And KonMari is poised to expand into the lucrative field of professional coaching. “KonMari consultants just work in homes right now,” Kondo says. “Introducing them into the workplace is something we’re thinking about.” Hundreds of KonMari consultants could joyfully descend upon companies to teach workers how to better manage their emails and meetings. Home decluttering tends to be a onetime opportunity for consultants, but business consulting can be ongoing—and each consultant can potentially serve thousands.

DURING MY TIME WITH KONDO

in February, when I mention that my 4-year-old struggles to keep her room tidy, she lit up. She had noticed that I’d stepped off the set for a few minutes to FaceTime with my daughter earlier in the day, and she can relate to moments like these, as a mother who also finds it hard to be away from her girls when she’s working. As much as Kondo loves helping couples and workers, she’s most passionate about children embracing her ideals. By introducing decluttering techniques early in life, Kondo hopes that children will avoid the problem in the first place.

Five years ago, just as Kondo was becoming popular in the United States, she partnered with eBay to offer flash cards to help kids declutter before returning to school, and last fall, Kondo published *Kiki and Jax: The Life-Changing Magic of Friendship*. The picture book for preschoolers tells the story of a squirrel and an owl whose friendship is put to the test because of the squirrel’s hoarding tendencies. The story is designed to show kids how to sort through their toys and organize them. Kawahara says that KonMari is also working on a game that will teach kids how to tidy that could be ready as early as this year.

After a long day of filming, Kondo and Kawahara walk to their car, which is parked in a residential neighborhood in Los Angeles. They stumble across a mother and her 3-year-old daughter heading to the playground, and the toddler instantly recognizes Kondo from her TV show. “I like to KonMari my toys,” the child tells her.

Kondo beams and gives the child a little hug, and then resumes walking, eager to get back to her two children, who have spent the day with their nanny. “She likes being at home,” Kawahara says, before they depart. “That’s why she likes to tidy.” 

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