

# March of the dust busters

We have an unspoken rule in our house: don't open cupboards or look under beds. It could be unpleasant. Like many of my friends, I put up with stained kitchen cupboards and an oven that has never encountered a solvent because the last time I considered changing my domestic cleaner and called an agency, I was quoted a £2,000 fee just for finding somebody to clean my home.

According to Chris James, executive director of the Cleaning Industry National Training Organisation, my cleaner, like most untrained domestic cleaners, is reorganising the furniture rather than cleaning – correctly defined as the gathering of soil. In other words, she's an amateur in a booming industry now worth more than £2.5bn annually.

Cleaning is a precise science undertaken by "cleaning operatives". These are people who have successfully completed an accredited course and can perform one of 47 tasks to the satisfaction of the examiner. The supposition that anybody can clean is simply not true, says Mike Sweeney, CEO of the British Institute of Cleaning Science, who hands out the professional certificates.

Take my house, for example. Sweeney would first tackle the wet tasks (bathrooms, lavatories, kitchens) followed by the damp tasks (dusting, taking a wet cloth to skirting boards and radiators) followed by suction (vacuuming).

Intermittently, he would buff and scrub. Mopping in itself is a science. There are two methods: the figure-of-eight method, designed to clean a large area, and the back-and-forth method in which the mop itself never leaves the ground. The reason is quite scientific: the idea is to contain the soil and move it to the point of collection, says James, who explained that once dust is disturbed, it takes 90 minutes to settle, which is why suction should always be saved for last.

Cleaning operatives follow one of two specifications: "input" (written instructions such as to mop every day) or "output" (using their own judgment). Unlike this household, however, COs know their work will be checked and noted down, says James.

In the meantime, I have stumbled upon a fully trained squadron of four to five mostly male Antipodean COs. Absolutely Spotless is run by two Australians and one English woman. Within hours after arriving, they have blitzed the house including windows, carpets, curtains, upholstery, taps, walls and even the insides of cupboards.

In six hours (a two-bedroom flat clean-up costs £250, a five-bedroom £500), the house is spotless . . . and ready for another assault of cornflakes and soft drinks.

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