



Fact Sheet

Getting Organized



Business people, employees, retirees, stay-at-home parents who volunteer their time, find that the day-to-day running of their household, something that seemed so simple before they took on that extra task, has become a major problem. Scheduling of many activities, inventory management, purchasing, and keeping track of tasks are not only a crucial part of household management, but may make the difference in allowing the extra time that it takes to volunteer for outside activities. Balancing the demands of many high priority goals requires good organizational skills.

The Management Process

All management processes involve designing a method or strategy for reaching your goals. These processes involve:

- Identifying the problem to be solved.
- Obtaining information.
- Examining possible courses of action.
- Considering the consequences of each alternative.
- Selecting the best alternative.

Successful managers are well organized. They know that to get necessary tasks completed, they must set priorities and develop plans. They develop systems that help them in managing not only their home and work environments, but other activities as well.

You may want to volunteer your spare time to worthwhile community activities, but nothing works unless the workers themselves can keep their lives in order; everything needs to be in its proper place, systems must be established for getting out of the house on time, important dates need to be kept track of, and housework, shopping, paperwork, and bills must all be organized.

Getting Out of the House on Time

A common reason people run late is that they do not consider what they will need until they are ready to leave. If you take a few minutes in the evening to plan your next day's activities, it will ease your departure. Organize items you are responsible for and they won't be forgotten the next morning. Write out a check list, and then put the check list where it pops out at you when you open your eyes.

Establish a routine. Establishing a routine will help you do things more quickly. Spend some time thinking about all the things that need to be done the next day.

Can some of the activities be done the night before, such as making a lunch, choosing what to wear, or reviewing the day's agenda? Once you have planned a routine, write it down and try it for a few days. Following a trial period, make any necessary adjustments.

Other suggestions, you might also:

- Pack your purse and/or briefcase in the evening and leave it by the front door.
- Establish a place where your keys are always kept.
- Stay with the task you start. Do not hop from room to room as you get ready in the morning. Stopping to fix a brown bag lunch, while in the middle of getting dressed, wastes time. Consider getting up early enough to get that sandwich made, or make it the night before.

Important Dates and Times

Calendar. A large calendar can help you keep track of the dates and times of upcoming events. It is important to write down this information as it arises, so you don't come up short and forget a crucial date. Always remember to transfer notations from your pocket calendar to the large calendar, and vice versa.

When choosing a calendar, get one with spaces that are large enough to write information and record appointments. There should be ample space for notes, and possibly a list of telephone numbers.

Cards and correspondence. To help get cards and correspondence out on time, you could:

- Establish a regular time each month to review anniversary dates so you don't miss birthdays, etc., shop for cards or gifts, if necessary. Answer correspondence as necessary. If you have committed to writing letters for your volunteer organizations, keep those dates in mind as well.
- Purchase a variety of cards ahead of time, or get blank cards and write your own message. Routine committee correspondence, such as meeting reminders, can often be sent on postcards.
- Address and sign cards when they are ready to go. Write the date they are to be mailed in the corner where the stamp should go.
- Stack the cards, postcards and correspondence in a basket by the door and mail them when appropriate.

Housework

If you are involved in a political campaign, planning a conference, or even running a meeting, clutter seems to take over your life. The kitchen table is stacked with papers, the couch holds a dozen books, pencils are everywhere. While in some cases housework may have to take a back seat for a while, improved organizational skills can be beneficial in simplifying this aspect of your life. Planning is the key to a low maintenance home, which is what we are all hoping for.

In this case, as in others, you have to stand back and look at your situation with new eyes. Most of us get so used to our home environment and our usual way of doing things, that we do not notice what could be improved.

Unnecessary items. One of the first things that can be done to minimize housework and alleviate much of the clutter factor is to get rid of unnecessary items.

- Eliminate all unused equipment and clothing, impractical furniture, and temperamental houseplants.
- Have a garage sale or donate items to your local thrift shop or emergency shelter.

Storage. Once you have disposed of excess baggage, make sure you have the best storage you can create.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are the right items stored here?
- How can this space be made more useful?
- Would dividers, bins or half-shelves be useful?
- Do I need to increase the actual storage space by adding a new shelf, etc?
- What can I do right now to eliminate obvious clutter and messiness?

Other suggestions. Other suggestions for managing housework with volunteer work include:

- Set up a practical maintenance schedule. One benefit of designing a maintenance schedule is that once you have established a routine, you move with greater speed. Post a reminder list of chores in each room.
- Put together a carry-along kit with the supplies you will need for most clean-up tasks. Take it with you as you work in each room.
- Give yourself five minutes to work in each room. Prioritize and do the important things first. Experiment to see what will work best for you.
- Leave an area as you found it. Get used to always putting things away when you are finished using them.

Shopping

Even when you are busy with committee work, you still have to eat. The key to organized shopping is developing a good list of everything that you need.

When doing general shopping, organize your list around your schedule for the day. If you are on one side of town to attend a meeting, make sure to pick up any supplies you need from shops on that side of town.

Master list. When going grocery shopping, it can be helpful to develop a master list of the things that you buy. Once you have a good list, photocopy it and keep copies where they can be easily found.

When making a list for grocery or other shopping, write down everything that you need to pick up. Don't trust your memory!

It is also important to routinely jot down items on the shopping list when they are low — not out.

Other suggestions. Additionally you can:

- Plan all your meals at least one week in advance. Start making a list of the ingredients you will need so that you can pick them up on your next shopping trip.

- Try to minimize the number of trips to the store. Buy supplies in multiples (three boxes of cereal, two rolls of tape) if you can store and use them in a timely way.
- Shop in bulk — buy as much as you can store. Shopping once per week or even less often will cut down on your impulse buying.

Papers and Bills

Keeping track of important papers and bills can become a troublesome area. Ultimately you want to be able to easily find any paper when you want it.

Home business center. Establishing a home business center is one of the first things you can do to help manage your paperwork. It gets tiresome having to clean paper work off your dining room table every time you want to eat.

This center can be in any room of the house, and should have adequate lighting; a waste basket; a box or letter holder for incoming mail; a desk, table or countertop for writing checks and making lists; a drawer or box for small supplies (pencils, pens, etc.); and a file drawer or file box for storage.

The center should be well enough organized that another family member or a trusted friend could locate information for you in case you need something when you are out of town or ill.

Handling day-to-day papers. After establishing work and storage space of some kind, it is very important for you to develop a system of handling your own day-to-day papers and records. One way to keep track of your own bills is to use a bill holder with pockets to separate unpaid and paid bills. Bills go into the “pay” envelope when they are received, and when they are paid they go into the “file” envelope for eventual storage. This is also good for organizing materials for your outside interests.

A loose-leaf notebook or household operating manual is another system for organizing materials. The notebook can have sections or pockets for bills to be paid, receipts to be filed, warranty information, etc. When information is needed, you can pick up the entire manual and flip to the correct section and page. Because of the manual’s bulk, remember to return it to its original location.

Remember that useful management techniques can also carry over to the work you do in the community. Set up a part of your home office for your community work.

Set up a simple system for keeping your personal papers and information separate from the paper work that refers to your volunteer and community activities.

Storing valuables and documents. Each of us has valuables which should be kept in a fire-proof, theft-proof storage space — either a home safe or a bank safe deposit box. Many documents are difficult, if not impossible, to replace. It is important to store valuables and documents in a safe place.

Other tips.

- File important papers regularly. Choose a basket or a “to file” folder to hold your papers that are waiting to be filed. Establish a set time to file—at least once per week. Do not let your personal papers pile up!
- Instead of asking yourself, “Could I possibly use this one day?” ask “What is the worst thing that could happen if I throw this out?”

If the answer is nothing serious, toss it.

Conclusion

Organizing a home requires time and energy, but pays off quickly, allowing you to put your mind to other issues. Thinking through problems which keep your home from running smoothly, looking at alternative solutions, and choosing the best methods are steps in the home management process, and many times the same techniques can be utilized in volunteer situations as well.

You can begin to organize your home and your life by establishing systems for getting out of the house in the morning, keeping track of important dates, housework, shopping, and managing papers and bills.

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