Getting Organized

You can save hours a month, perhaps hours every week, just by taking a few basic steps to organize your life. Organizing your possessions and your activities relieves you of the mind-numbing task of trying to remember where to find things, and you will know what to do next. This simple effort will free up a lot of brainpower you can use to think, enjoy, speculate, and just have fun.

You have two realms to organize, your activities and your things. Here is how you can organize your activities:

- Create to-do lists, grouping your day's activities by the priority you assign to them. Do the things first that you identify as most important.
- If you have a complex errand or activity, make a detailed checklist of the things you need to do. A grocery list is a prime example. If you are making a run to the shopping district, do not forget to note the dry-cleaning receipt, the library book that needs to be returned and the video tape that is due. At work, jot down the main points you need to cover at a specific meeting.
- Create reminders to remind you of things you have to check on or do something about in the future, including birthdays, anniversaries and follow-ups.

Before you put these ideas into practice, it is a good idea to take a step back and consider the activities that you feel you must do. Is there a way to whittle down your to-do list? Especially if you feel overloaded, eliminate chores and obligations that are not important, given your overall values and goals.

Here is how you can organize your things:

- One useful place you will discover when organizing is the trash. Use it often.
- Make places for things, even if they are only piles in the corner. Use labels to keep track of items.
- Never put something down until and unless you can put it where it “belongs”. It can be the single most important difference between a life of organization and one of chaos.
- Devote an hour per day at first (later this will require much less time) to putting things where they belong. That's right. Become your own mom. It's worth it.

**Key Tip 1:**
Put certain things where you need them. Do not leave your keys on the bedroom dresser. They are easy to forget and you might lock yourself out of your house. Instead, as soon as you let yourself in put your keys right back in your pocket or purse, where you can always look when you need them. Similarly, keep your shopping list handy in the kitchen, where you can add a new item the very second you recognize the need for it.

**Key Tip 2:**
Continually refine your filing methods. If you discover that you cannot find a recipe because you misfiled it, make changes to eliminate this problem. Perhaps you will want to make a copy
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and file the recipe in both places. Perhaps you will find that you think of recipes in terms of main ingredients, not the author.

Key Tip 3:
Create and use to-do lists to group and prioritize your day's activities. Do the most important things first and constantly update your list and reset priorities as you complete activities. Be realistic about what can be accomplished in one day. Consider past experience and make an honest calculation about how much time you have. Some activities are nonnegotiable, such as sleeping, showering, eating and travel time. You will end the day feeling satisfied if you accurately estimate the time you have to schedule tasks.

Organizing Activities:
Two of the best ways to keep organized are the daily to-do list and reminders. Here is how they work:

✓ **Daily to-do list:** This is a complete list of everything you have to do today. Divide the list of activities into four categories: things you must do, things you would like to do, things you might do, and things you are thinking about but not yet ready to do. As you accomplish the must-do activities, adjust the priorities of the remaining activities on your list.

Do not forget checklists, which are more detailed than your to-do list, to remind you what to accomplish on a specific errand, trip to the store, telephone call or meeting. Because to-do lists change so much, it can be helpful to keep them on a computer. But 3x5 cards, which can be color-coded and shuffled by priority, also work well.

Do only what is on your list. If you find yourself wanting to do something not on your list, put it on your list. This way you will be organizing yourself more as you go.

As soon as you have completed a task, cross it off your list or tear up the card. The satisfaction you get is immense – more than enough to help keep you organized despite all the pressures to backslide into disorganization.

✓ **Reminders:** This is a file or multi-pocket envelope with 43 distinct places to put paperwork, notes to yourself, and other small items. The 43 folders or pockets should be labeled with the names of the 12 months, and with the numbers 1 through 31. This gives you one and only place to put a reminder, and be sure you will find it again when you need it during the coming year. You could also use an appointment calendar that allows for daily entries or the calendar on a personal computer.

Suppose you want to send Christmas cards to the family. Put a note in the "December" folder, telling you to buy and write the Christmas cards. On the first of December look through that month's folder and distribute the items into the folders marked 1 through
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31, depending on when you want the reminder. The Christmas card reminder might go into the 10th folder, so you will have time to buy the cards, fill them out, and still mail them before the 25th.

One trick is to forget the notes and put the task itself right into your Reminder. This way, you remind yourself to pay your phone bill by putting the whole phone bill into the appropriate folder in your Reminder file. When the day comes to pay it, the phone bill falls into your hand and you can go right to the checkbook and pay the bill without fuss.

Organizing Things:
Once you have enough extra places like filing cabinets, bookshelves, and storage boxes in which to put things, you will want to arrange the things you put there to make finding them again easier. If you have extra cash and the time, get containers for some of the things you want to be able to find again. To provide even more storage space, put up extra shelves near the ceiling, place boxes under the bed, add hooks to your closet walls, and add new bookshelves or furniture with cabinets.

You can organize things conventionally, putting them in alphabetical or chronological order or even by size. You can organize things more personally, according to how you naturally think of them. Under this strategy, you would group albums by type of music, or perhaps by the year they were recorded. Because it reflects your natural way of thinking, using this second strategy is far more pleasing.

FAQs

What if I fail to organize myself one day?
Organizing your life should be a positive experience. Do not make it a chore. During the first few weeks or months, you might enjoy a day or two off from keeping yourself organized. But you will come back to it. After a few months of getting used to finding things on the first or second try, remembering appointments, and not straining to keep track of everything in all those piles around your house, you will feel uncomfortable throwing your keys on the sofa and leaving the mail on the coffee table. You will want to put things where they belong.

How can I be sure that organizing me will take less time than being as disorganized as I am now?
Take it on faith for now. You can logically consider the obvious advantages of searching for things or going right to where they should be. Or you can perform one or two simple experiments. The simplest experiment is just to carry a pencil around with you and put a dot on everything you touch while you are looking for something else. After a while, you will realize how much time and energy you are wasting through disorganization.

A more elaborate experiment requires a stopwatch. Just start the watch every time you cannot find what you are looking for on the first try, and keep it running until you locate the item or
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give up. Write down how much time you waste in this manner each day. Add in the time (plus the mileage, plus the money) you have wasted by forgetting to bring your receipt to the dry cleaners, throwing out all the now-rotten food you bought but did not eat, and so forth.

My mind just is not disciplined enough to organize. What should I do?
Start very small. Organize just one aspect of your life, such as your night table, or your underwear drawer. After a while, you will enjoy this organized haven amidst all the chaos so much that you will want to organize your sock drawer, too. You will never be over-organized, but you will gain the benefits of organizing your life.

Resources

Books
Moskowitz, Robert, How to Organize Your Work and Your Life - Proven Techniques for Business, Professional, and Other Busy People. Doubleday, 1993

Web Sites
Tips and links to resources on managing time, paperwork, reducing stress, eliminating chaos and being more productive are offered at:
www.get-organized.com

Strategies for getting organized, as well as computer software tips and techniques, are available at:
www.duncanresource.com

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