Paperless Home Organization

A how-to guide to creating a digital homemaking binder

Mystie Winckler
Paperless Home Organization:
How to Create A
Digital Home Management Binder

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Mystie Winckler has been married to her husband, Matt, for 11 years; together they have 5 children. She has been a housewife, a homemaker, for their entire marriage and has always been seeking ways to improve her craft within this chosen, sanctifying vocation. With nine-year-old and seven-year-old boys wrestling and digging and reading, a five-year-old girl tagging alongside her, a hefty three-year-old son opening and emptying every drawer he can, and an infant daughter charming all, Mystie strives to maintain an orderly and harmonious home. More than homeschooling, it is the daily interaction, the relationships fostered, that are integral to the children’s identity and development. Academics provide a forge for character, just as life provides fodder for learning.

Mystie blogs at Simply Convivial, reflecting upon her desire and attempts to build more happiness, festivity, and fellowship into her home and family. She can also be found at Simple Pantry Cooking, where she blogs about her homestyle fare and offers her menu-planning, dinner-fixing answer: Simplified Dinners.
Preface: On Organization

Before you undertake a major organization overhaul, allow me to share a little insight I’ve had after numerous attempted overhauls of my own life and home and systems.

Organization is more like laundry and dishes than like a craft project: It is never complete. It is like swimming. You are either treading water or slowly sinking; progress is getting yourself back to the surface before you drown, not arriving at a destination. However, treading water at least becomes easier the longer you do it. At first it takes concentration and focus and energy simply to stay afloat, but eventually you get into better shape and can breathe evenly again. However, you never get so good at it that you can stop. Stop, and gravity and entropy will immediately begin pulling you down again.

So jump in, ready to get fit and stay fit, knowing you can make it to the surface now and repeatedly. Sinking isn't failing; it's part of life’s reality. Drowning times will always come, but so will the time to overcome.
Introduction

I have put together at least three household management binders in my 11-year career as a homemaker to date. All three times I thought it through, made it well, and used it for about 2 weeks.

Sure, the exercise of making a home management binder is a good one. Simply going through the process helps clarify and organize thoughts as well as papers. Ordered thoughts help life run more smoothly even if the system falls by the wayside. Yet, it does seem a shame for all that paper and effort to go to waste. My binders and printables and tabs would start out neat and pretty, but paper at my house never stays pretty for long. I also found I disliked giving up valuable counter space to a binder. For a couple years I had a kitchen with a space I reserved for my large planner, but then we moved. I tried a half-size binder for a time to save space (and because I also dislike carrying a binder around town with me), but it was even more hassle to set up and keep up because I had to be precise with the formatting, carefully cut and hole punch all the pages, which I had to create myself.

So, I gave up on the management binder idea for awhile. Occasionally I’d pull out my last binder, which had become merely a fancy place to stash home-related notes, but it didn’t seem worth the time and thought to make it current — again.

Then I got a computer in the kitchen, where I kept my calendar, task list, and contacts, so a household binder on paper seemed even less attractive. Paper quickly becomes clutter, at least in my house, and I’d already done enough purging over the years to know how many lists I generate when I start an organizing project. Lists then become piles, which then become clutter, which then become a task of going through and deciding keep & file (and forget) or toss (and forget) — again.
Paper and binders are still a great option for some, particularly those who have better follow-through or a more meticulous personality than I do. Also, a digital management system is only really going to work with someone who has a computer of some sort handy in or near their primary work zone (usually the kitchen), or a mobile device like an iPod Touch, smartphone, or tablet.

Currently I have a small MacBook Air and an iPod Touch. I always did like having a household binder, and it finally dawned on me that the obvious thing to do next would be to create the digital version — no paper, no losing notes, no coffee spills (we hope!), and, best of all, search functionality. I searched and searched online and found no one talking about moving a household binder onto a computer or phone, though there are many out there with pictures of their spiffy, crafty binders. So, here goes my own take on moving the household notebook into the twenty-first century.

After all, being able to search, from my desktop, inside every document, my contacts, and my calendar all at once is the biggest boon of digital information. Flipping through a binder or file folder or pile, wondering just what you did with that list you are sure you made? A thing of the past.

My personal set-up uses Apple products exclusively. But the programs I use and recommend are web-based, so it doesn’t matter whether your set-up is PC, Apple, or a mix. Also, my family does not use smartphones or have a data plan, so my system relies exclusively on wi-fi; it would be even smoother for those with smartphones, but I’ll explain how I make it work even without a constant connection.
Benefits of Going Paperless

There are numerous lovely ladies out there with blog series about their beautiful paper binders. Certainly a paper-based binder can be prettier than digital version – for some people. None of the binders I ever put together looked half so nice as those I've seen on Pinterest. What the digital version lacks in cuteness, however, it makes up for in accessibility and versatility. Moreover, the digital version is the frugal option if you already have the tools. If you have a smartphone, a tablet, or a laptop, why not use them to their full potential? Why multiply tools with heavy, clumsy paper binders if you have the gadgets? You can keep many more lists, much more information, have it all be easier to find, all while taking up less space than if you kept those papers, much less if you made and printed more and more. Making a digital management system won’t make a crafty mess and, by the end of the project, will reduce or eliminate your paper clutter instead of merely containing it.

A paperless home management system allows you

- the ability to find the information you need by searching for it.
- to expand the amount of information you save and generate without taking up any more space.
- to shrink your paper files by digitizing and then shredding them.
- to easily share information with your husband, grandparents, or friends.

So don’t let your gadgets go to waste; use them to make your life simpler.
Initial Set-Up Instructions

The first step to creating your digital organization system is to create accounts with Google, Remember the Milk, and Evernote. These are all free accounts. I recommend using the same email address and password when creating these accounts to make it easier to log in quickly.

1. **Google Account**

   If you don't already have an account with Google (you do if you use Gmail or Google+), you'll need to create an account so you can use Google Calendar. I also highly recommend using Gmail. My email management instructions will be specific to Gmail, though probably adaptable to other programs. However, I haven't used anything else since Gmail was first rolled out, so I cannot give specifics for setting up other mail applications.

   To create a Google account, go to [Google Accounts](accounts.google.com/NewAccount).

   To set up your Google mail & calendar to sync with mobile devices, use the instructions at [Google Sync](google.com/sync/).

2. **Remember the Milk (RTM)**

   Remember the Milk is a task management program that is intuitive to use and quick to set up. It is feature-rich, but accommodates simple use as well. While you could set up a complicated system of tags, deadlines, locations, and contexts, I will show you how to create a clear and simple account, where entering your tasks won't take as long as
completing them.

First, **sign up to create a free RTM account** (rememberthemilk.com/signup/).

Remember the Milk (RTM) has apps for your desktop (so they work offline), phone, and tablet, as well. Visit [RTM's App page](rememberthemilk.com/services/) to find more information about the apps that will work best for you. You will want RTM to be available on any computer or device you use regularly, and I also recommend using the Gmail or Google Calendar widget so that you can see your tasks and add new ones on the same page as your email or calendar. You can turn on the widget on the Google labs page or at RTM.

3. **Evernote**

Evernote will be the workhorse of this organization system. It is a basic note-keeping program that not only allows you to organize and search your stored information, but also uses OCR to make words in scanned papers and documents searchable. This means that you don't need an elaborate and consistent tag and filing system to find your data, a quick search in the search bar at the top will pull up what you need, whether
you typed it in, scanned it in, or even imported a photo of written notes.

First, you will need to create an Evernote account (www.evernote.com/registration.action).

You will also want to install the desktop application and the mobile apps that work with your situation. You can go this page to find what you need, or simply search the app store on your device. You also want to install the Evernote Web Clipper on your browser (I recommend Chrome).

4. Browser Bookmarks & Widgets

Since there are several sites you'll be accessing frequently, you'll want to make the bookmark bar of your browser accessible and convenient. Under "Bookmarks" at the top bar of your browser, make sure the bookmark bar is on. Then, bookmark Gmail, Google Calendar, RTM, Evernote, and possibly Simplenote. I like to keep my bookmark bar neat and uncluttered by right-clicking on the bookmark and deleting all the text of its title so that only the logo displays on my bar. Also, install the Evernote web clipper.
(evernote.com/webclipper/) and the RTM browser quick add app
(www.rememberthemilk.com/help/answers/quickadd/).

Now that you have the accounts you need and your browser shortcuts are set up, you
are ready to start creating your digital organizational structure.
Appendix E: Further Resources

[abridged]

To follow more of my organization musings and recommendations, you can follow my blog, Simply Convivial, by receiving each post free in your inbox. For the year of 2013, I will be working on (and writing about) incorporating one organization habit per month: The Habit Project.

If you want a ready-made, truly-simple menu planning and dinner making solution that integrates seamlessly with Evernote & Google Calendar, take a look at my other eBook, Simplified Dinners or Simplified Dinners: Gluten- and Dairy-Free Edition. Use discount code paperless when you purchase it to get $3 off! Additionally, to access a formatted Evernote-ready notebook of Simplified Dinners, send me an email (mystie@simplyconvivial.com) and I will send you instructions to do so if you have also purchased Simplified Dinners.

Also, I manage an email group, “GTD at Home,” where we share tips, ideas, thoughts, and successes about organization and management of the home and family. You can subscribe for free at Google Groups, I also send a free monthly Simplified Pantry newsletter encouraging you in the good work of daily meal preparations. You can also find me on Pinterest (http://www.pinterest.com/mystiewinckler) with “Paperless Solutions” and “GTD at Home” boards, as well as many others!

Email me (mystie@simplyconvivial.com) with any feedback, questions, or comments you might have.

Happy organizing!