



Your Monthly Money

brought to you by



7 Ways to Organize Your Finances

You don't need to be an organizing whiz to straighten up personal finance habits.

Are your finances all over the place? Maybe you pay your bills the day they're due, or even after they're overdue, because you lose track of all those due dates. Or perhaps you keep meaning to start an emergency fund, but every time you think you have the amount needed to open the account, a financial emergency derails your savings plan.

No matter what your financial struggles are, if you're disorganized with paying bills and saving, the struggle to stay afloat becomes even more difficult. Fortunately, it's not hard to whip your finances into shape with a little organization for better money management.

1. Create a budget

One of the first steps to more organized finances is knowing exactly how much money you have coming in and going out for monthly expenses. So, as boring as sitting down to do a budget sounds, it's essential to good money management.

Besides, there are all kinds of fun budgeting apps out there – Mint, PocketGuard and Honeydue (for couples), for example – to help you get started. And if you prefer to pencil in figures on paper or input to a spreadsheet, you'll find plenty of budget templates online, too.

2. Track your spending

Personal finance apps aren't just limited to helping you budget. They can also track your spending so you can see where all your money is going and point out spending categories where you might be able to cut back. Some budgeting apps can monitor subscriptions and remind you of payment due dates, too.

3. Seek credit counseling

When you meet with a counselor at a nonprofit credit counseling agency, the service is typically free or you pay only a nominal fee. And if there's anyone who can help get your finances organized, it's a credit counselor. So, what can a credit counselor do for you?

First, they can help you create a budget so you know where you stand financially. A credit counselor can also help you map out a debt repayment plan, possibly even setting up a payment plan with your creditors, and offer advice on ways to improve your credit.

4. Keep track of payment due dates

With utility bills, credit cards, loan payments, subscriptions, memberships and other recurring monthly expenses, it's nearly impossible to keep track of all those due dates in your head. So, if certain bills are always due on a certain day of the month, create a calendar online or printed out that lists all your due dates for easy reference. That way, you won't end up paying late fees or missing a payment because you lost track of the due date.

5. Automate bill paying

Speaking of due dates, why not let automation take that due-date headache off your list of things you have to do every month? Not all bill payments can be automated, but many can, such as utilities, student loan and car payments, gym and other membership fees and maybe even your mortgage payment.

6. Enroll in your employer's retirement plan

If your company has an employer-sponsored retirement plan such as a 401(k), enroll in it as soon as possible. That way, you can set up a contribution from each paycheck to painlessly begin saving for retirement. The monthly contribution is made by the payroll department, and if your employer matches a portion, that's free money added to your retirement account.

7. Make payroll contributions to savings

Just like with a retirement plan contribution, your employer may be able to automatically deposit an allocated amount from each paycheck toward your personal savings account. Sure, your paycheck will be a little smaller, but isn't it worth cutting back on takeout a few times a week or canceling a streaming subscription while you watch your emergency savings grow?

You don't have to deposit a lot, either. If you want to start small, with as little as \$100 a month, you'll have saved \$1,200 in a year. And when those deposits automatically come out of your check, you're more likely to save, since you won't be tempted to spend the money before you make it to the bank.