Directing Band *WITH* Technology
OR: How I learned to be organized and so can you!

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(This article is the second installment in a multi-part series designed to help music directors utilize technology and automation to the fullest potential; both in how they organize their programs and in how they educate their students)

The Joys and Challenges of Band Directing

The life of a band director comes with several unique advantages. #1: We actually get to make music … every day … for a living! #2: Teaching someone a skill is one of the most effective ways to master that skill ourselves, which means we also get paid to learn! #3: Most importantly, we get to spend each and every day working with, guiding, and inspiring the next generation of musicians!

Indeed, over the course of our careers, we connect with thousands of students as we work to help them discover their potential. We even sometimes get the opportunity to help our students become music teachers themselves, thus ensuring the longevity of our profession and doing our part to connect those who taught us to all the future generations yet to come. What could possibly compare to that?

Teaching music for a living also comes with unique challenges. Consider in what other career field would one person be expected to, at the same time, do all of this:
• Lead a group of sixty (or more) teens and pre-teens through a 50-minute class period that includes a guided group warmup, skill-building exercises, and an intense rehearsal of repertoire for the next performance,
• monitor for consistent focus from each of the sixty (or more) teens and pre-teens, correcting and redirecting any off-task behavior,

• pull a stuck trumpet mouthpiece,
• loosen a frozen tuba slide,
• restring a French Horn,
• replace a bassoon whisper key pad,
• give a new reed to the clarinet player who just broke their last one,
• sign for a delivery of new equipment being dropped off in the middle of your biggest class (the day before contest),
• take attendance on the computer (within the first 5 minutes of class),
• keep track of individual grades for each of the sixty (or more) teens and pre-teens,
• all while fully engaging in the rehearsal yourself so you can properly evaluate the class's ability to accomplish the goals of the day. (You do have goals in mind for every rehearsal, right?)

And that is just during one class period with one group. When the next class comes in we do it all again but with a completely different set of music, lesson plans, and goals, all while balancing the twin demands of advancing individual student instrument skills and preparing the group for a stellar performance.

When looked at in this context any outside observer would agree that what we do is challenging. But we haven't gotten to the stressful part yet; the part that only happens when you are not in front of kids. I'm talking about managing the millions of little administrative tasks that keep your program running:
• fundraising and finances,

• inventory management and repair,
• buses and trip planning,
• ordering music and passing out the correct number of copies, with extras available for the kids who lose their music,
• reserving dates on the school calendar and dealing with conflicts,
• making contest entries and percussion packing lists,
• planning your concert setup and then physically setting up (and breaking down) the chairs, stands, and equipment for each and every performance.

In case you haven't thought about it before, it should be plainly obvious now that as band directors, we definitely wear a lot of hats. In fact, we wear so many hats that it can be difficult balancing them all. Sometimes, we forget our administrative responsibilities exist until a big deadline (or our campus bookkeeper) shows up with the not-so-gentle reminder that "Task XYZ must be completed NOW! … or else!"

So, what are we to do? How can we manage the load?

Organization: one of the (not-so-secret) secrets to success…

"Want Less Stress in your day? Be More Organized! Want your school staff to be happier every time they see you? Be More Organized! Want to NOT feel like every deadline is happening RIGHT NOW? Be More Organized!"

Easier said than done, I know, but this is where technology can really shine.

I will reiterate what I said in the last issue of this magazine: **"We have more resources to help us manage our programs and teach our students than any of us could have dreamed just 10-15 years ago!"**

Despite the challenges we each face daily, it is good to remember how lucky we are to be living and working as music teachers today. If you want to truly balance the load of your ever-expanded stack of "responsibility hats", help is easy to find.

On YouTube alone there are 110 *million* videos devoted to organization and time management while Amazon has 130 *thousand* books devoted to one or both of those topics. All you need to do is take the first step. Approach these ideas with an open mind, pick one or two organizational principles to learn, and practice them. Then, find a way to *adapt* those principles to your band program's specific needs and *your* organizational system. Only then will the weight of your *many hats* become manageable.

Caveat: I am probably the last person who should be giving advice about organization or time management. Those of you who have known me for a long time would agree that those two things have never been my strong suit. But over the last few years, when I started taking a hard look at how I used technology, I was able to (slowly and sometimes painfully) develop new systems that helped me accomplish tasks more quickly and anticipate areas of trouble. Once I found the right tools and began to fully master them (using an early version of the "Keys-to-Success" approach - described in the previous article), I could then start to adapt those technology tools to help me become a more effective **and organized** band director.

Please know though that I make no claim to have found the holy grail of band director organization. No part of my daily workflow is perfect and there are still moments when stress rises, something unexpected comes up, or a task gets forgotten, but it is comforting to know that those breakdowns happen less often now than they used to.

The main point is: If even I can find ways to be organized, then so can you.

Specific Technology Usage Ideas

Every one of the technology tools listed below will be broken down using the **"Keys-to-Success"** approach I introduced last time. For a link to that original article as well as more detailed walkthroughs of various tech tools I use, please check out my website at: *AMBandDirector. com*. This is where I am slowly compiling all the resources I have used and the lessons I have learned with technology in hopes that it might help directors everywhere learn from my successes and failures.

A short recap on the Keys-to-Success approach:

The secret to mastering any new technology is to approach it in the same way you would when mastering a new instrument.

Keys-to-Success (for Mastering an Instrument):

1. Evaluate Your EQUIPMENT: What can it do? Is it the right equipment for the task?

2. "FINGERING CHARTS": How does it work? (Use the method book; read the manual!)

3. TRAIN with a great teacher: Find help to move your skills to the next level.

4. PRACTICE: Experiment with your new skills to gain comfort and familiarity with their use.

5. TROUBLESHOOT: Accept failure as an expected part of the learning process. Evaluate what went wrong, find the solution, and try, try again until it works.

Last time, we talked about increasing your effectiveness in Communications, both in maximizing your use of modern email systems and in the management of your band website. If this "communications hat" is the first category of responsibility we need to balance, then the "organizational hat" is the second.

So, let's take a look at the two most important elements to mastering your organizational skills: **Hardware Optimization** and **Record-Keeping** *(aka: Spreadsheet Magic)*.

Keys-to-Success for HARDWARE OPTIMIZATION

We use our computers, tablets, and phones as a core element of our workflow every day, yet many of us don't use them to their fullest potential. By tweaking a few habits with our hardware usage, I believe we can find ways to decrease our administrative stress and save time in the long run.

1. EVALUATE your Equipment: Whether you are a Mac or PC person, take the time now to learn as much as you can about your computer's Operating System (OS) and look for ways to make using your OS easier.

• First of all, clean your desktop (the electronic one AND the physical one) and adopt an organized naming system for files and folders. Most computers have an easy-to-use search function to help you find whatever file or program you are looking for quickly. A good naming system that you use consistently will streamline this search process. Search *YouTube* for the keywords: "File Naming Conventions", from the channels: "Simpletivity" or "Excel Campus-Jon".

• Consider learning Keyboard shortcuts for repetitive tasks. Go beyond Ctrl/Cmd+C (copy) and Ctrl/Cmd+V (paste). Use Ctrl/Cmd+Z to undo an action and Ctrl/Cmd+P to print. From anywhere on a Mac, use Cmd+F to find text in a document or open a Finder window, Cmd+Shift+4 to take a screenshot, or Ctrl+Cmd+Spacebar to open a list of emojis.

• There are many other Keyboard and Mouse/Trackpad settings that are worth investigating, including: automatic text completion, dictation settings, trackpad gestures, and more!

2. "FINGERING CHARTS": Read your computer's help documentation thoroughly. Every year, tech companies update their software, adding all kinds of cool new features that could revolutionize your daily workflow … if you know how to use them. There are too many things to go over in one article but a quick google search with a phrase like "Best MacBook Features" will lead you to plenty of tutorials, videos, and forum links to help you with your specific hardware.

3. TRAIN: Recommended websites/*YouTube* channels to help you maximize productivity with your hardware, learn its new features, and gain new usage ideas: *AMBandDirector. com* (my site), as well as *robbyburns.com, thomasjfrank. com, mkbhd.com* and *frankbuck.org*.

Also, I would highly recommend the following books as they helped me finally get a handle on my organizational skills both in hardware usage and other techniques:

• "Get Organized!: Time Management for School Leaders" by Frank Buck

• "Digital Organization Tips for Music Teachers" by Robby Burns

4. PRACTICE: This is always the most challenging part but TRUST ME, if you spend the time now figuring out what all the settings do and where all the little menus are on your computer and tablet and how to *optimize* the use of your technology, it will save you loads of time in the long run!

5. TROUBLESHOOT: Technology rarely works the way you expect the first time. Be patient, go back and adjust settings another way, watch another tutorial, and keep on practicing!

James Hargreaves has served as Associate Band Director at Smithson Valley Middle School in Spring Branch, TX, part of the Comal ISD, in the hill country north of San Antonio, since 2007. Through experimentation, patience, and a lot of trial and error, he taught himself to use a variety of tech tools that have helped him keep up with a growing band program that recently had nearly 380 students in grades 6-8 with only two directors.

You can follow him on his website, (AutoMagic Band Director) for more about Technology, Automation, and Band Directing at: www. AMBandDirector.com.