

Making “Admin” Visible

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Elizabeth F. Emens, [Admin](#), 103 **Geo. L.J.** 1409 (2015).

Who prepares your taxes? Pays your bills? Handles disputes with insurance companies? Orders toner for your home printer? Creates shopping lists? Schedules playdates?

If you do any of these tasks, you are doing what [Elizabeth Emens](#) would call “admin.” Not to be confused with “chores,” such as taking out the garbage or doing the dishes, admin involves tasks that we generally associate with office work. Unlike activities that would be considered hobbies, admin isn’t usually done for its own sake, but to get something else done. As Emens succinctly puts it, “admin seems to many people like wasting time, even killing it.” If you’ve ever complained about “wasting time” on the phone or sitting around waiting for a repairperson to arrive, you were complaining about time spent doing admin.

Why analyze a subject as seemingly trivial as admin? Two reasons emerge from Emens’ article. First, a particularly insidious feature of admin is its invisibility. Because it involves a set of undervalued, often-irritating tasks, it’s not something people are generally proud of doing. Making admin salient is important, because doing so reveals just how much time it is stealing from other pursuits—work, sleep, leisure, and education—that most people would agree are more fulfilling or valuable. Currently, there are few legal imperatives to reduce the admin burden on consumers. To the contrary, admin burdens continue to expand despite easy technological fixes. If the reality of admin goes unrecognized, it is difficult to reverse course.

The second reason Emens advances for focusing on admin is its unequal distribution within relationships. The feminist movement has made considerable headway in exposing the “second shift” that women often shoulder in addition to their paid work, which often includes childcare, cooking, cleaning, and other housework. Men increasingly report engaging in these activities, especially childcare. But admin represents yet another category of work that must be done to maintain a home, and the burden of this work is often overlooked. A couple can divide childcare and housework “equally,” and yet the real-time burdens of home management might still be skewed strongly toward one partner or the other, depending on how the admin is divided. Much of the work of admin is work that requires planning rather than reacting: making a shopping list and planning meals, for example, requires a different kind of mental energy than preparing a meal from ingredients already on hand. And much admin is not delegable—it requires knowledge of passwords, access to bank accounts and financial data, or the authority that comes with legal parentage or guardianship—so, unlike childcare or housework, it often must be done by an adult member of the family. There is no place or time set forth in the day to do “admin,” and it never really goes away, for it goes hand in hand with planning the events of one’s life, and, often, of one’s family members.

One of the most important features of admin that Emens identifies is its “stickiness.” Critics of gendered parenting roles have noted that when parental leave is given only to women, the result in families headed by opposite-sex couples is often that women “specialize” in infant care, to the detriment of men’s involvement. By the time the child is a few months old, its mother has become an expert on its care and feeding, and her skills appear to be “naturally” superior to those of the father. The same

phenomenon can occur with admin. Because the knowledge required to perform admin effectively is lodged in the mind of the person who performs it, passing this knowledge on to another involves transaction costs. The other person will have to be taught to do it (and might choose to do it differently). The results can be messy and inconvenient—twice-paid bills, conflicting playdates, duplicate cartons of milk in the fridge or no milk at all. The work of creating systems for sharing admin is in itself an “admin” task, and it may seem more efficient—and less detrimental to the relationship—to ignore the inequity of admin rather than create the upheaval required for change.

The article makes an important contribution by exposing admin as a major category of work. But Emens does more than define admin and show how it pervades our lives. She also shows why businesses sometimes have a financial incentive to increase admin and how the law is complicit in admin’s proliferation. She notes, for example, that bills have been introduced in Congress that would have allowed taxpayers to file pre-filled returns for free. The maker of the tax-preparation service TurboTax has spent over \$11.5 million lobbying against these bills. The proliferation of admin is a big business.

Admin burdens also flow from state and local governments, which require people to fill out forms for every conceivable type of transaction, often with little or no thought to the burden these forms place on individuals. Emens lauds governmental efforts to create incentives to decrease admin burdens on individuals, offering as an example the Affordable Care Act’s Meaningful Use Program. The program provides monetary bonuses to medical entities that transfer their files to an Electronic Health Record System, thus preventing the need for patients to fill out new forms every time they see a new healthcare provider.

Admin shows us the many ways in which the law’s refusal to “see” admin leads to unfortunate results, and it offers suggestions for how the law might better recognize the effects of admin on people’s lives. For example, under our current system, consumers are expected to read lengthy contracts for small-scale consumer transactions, even though almost no one actually does. Emens suggests that, instead, lawmakers should protect consumer time by holding consumers responsible only for those terms that do not take longer than a few moments to read.

Emens’s article has changed the way I think about filling out forms, scheduling appointments, and planning for life. These are not tasks that easily fit the categories of market work, housework, or childcare. They are not activities that occur at a particular time, or even in a very predictable way. But they are activities that must be done, and, despite the promise that a “paperless” society would minimize these types of transactions, the digital age seems to have only multiplied them. Admin is everywhere, and *Admin* both helps us see it and provides some creative ideas about what to do about it.

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