

Waste sorts are relatively easy tasks to perform, but they require some careful planning. By remembering to complete a few simple tasks, your waste sort should run smoothly. Check off each one as you go.

Pre-Sort Planning

Decide the purpose of your waste sort

What do you hope to achieve with your waste sort? Do you want to gather more information on all waste streams, or a specific part of the waste stream – such as recycling, or a particular part of the building? Are there educational goals? This will create a vision that can help gain management support and drive participation.

Assign a project lead or coordinator

Someone needs to lead the effort to help develop plans, recruit a team, and ensure accountability.

Determine sample size

Your sample size is directly related to the period of time you wish to observe. Determine if you want to look at waste generated in the building during the day, a 24-hour period, or even a week. Of course, the longer the period, the bigger the sample, and the more material there is to sort. A 24-hour time period is usually sufficient to capture a typical sample of waste.

Select the right date

Make sure that whatever date(s) are selected to sample/collect waste will not be impacted by non-routine events. For example, clean-up days, large meetings, birthday parties, and similar events may skew the waste sample because these are not typical events at most buildings – and generate a lot of trash. Unless your building hosts a lot of these events, try to avoid a date where these are scheduled.

Identify waste sorting area

Ensure that you have enough space to support sorting stations, team members, and the waste samples to be collected – preferably indoors in case of rain.

Work with hauler and facility staff

Let your waste hauler know about the sort so they can adjust their pick-up schedule. Facility staff should refrain from taking any materials to the dumpster during the collection period. Once the waste sort is finished, you will need to dispose of sorted materials plus any routine waste generated that day. Ask facility staff and the waste hauler if there is sufficient room in the dumpsters for both. If not, talk to your waste hauler about an additional pick-up, using temporary dumpsters, or leaving bagged materials next to the dumpster.

Collect and store sorting materials



Everyone involved with material collection needs to know the locations to collect materials, where to store them prior to the sort, and for how long. Ideally, materials will be stored in the same area where the actual waste sorting will occur. If multiple waste streams are to be sorted (e.g., trash, recycling, organics, etc.), make sure to keep these streams separated in the storage area. Provide signage in the storage area if necessary. Samples should be bagged and stored in carts or on a tarp to contain leakage. They should also be clearly labeled with the date, waste stream, and collection location (e.g., paper recycling, office, 5/28/14). Do not collect specialized wastes such as biomedical, sharps, electronics, chemicals, or construction materials. These are not part of the regular waste stream and may pose potential hazards.

Recruit volunteers

Volunteers will be needed the day of the sort to help pick through waste, weigh it, and record the results. Typically, waste sorts need at least one team of three (3) people: two to sort material and one to weigh and record the results. However, you can have more teams with more people, and divide up the waste sort as appropriate. It is a good idea to assign one team per waste stream (one for recycling, one for trash and one for organics) to get more people involved. Waste sorts take anywhere from a few hours to a full day depending on the size of the building, waste sample, and the number of volunteers.

Sort Day - on the day of the sort, keep everyone safe and on task by following the steps below:

Set up sorting stations

Prepare the sorting area as follows:

- Lay down plastic film or tarp to protect sorting area (if necessary)
- Set up tables or raised surfaces for sorters to use (wrap in plastic if necessary)
- Establish categorical sorting bins/bags to collect sorted materials (label as needed)
- Set up data recording station where all sorted contents will be weighed and recorded
- Weigh empty sorting containers, and affix a piece of masking tape to each noting the initial empty (tare) weight as well as the waste stream and sorting category (type of materials it will hold).



Safety review

Ensure all sorters understand how to sort effectively and safely following the sorting procedure below. Review standards and equipment established in the **Waste Sort Safety Procedure & Equipment** checklist.

Assign tasks

Waste sorts are fun, but can be hectic. Reduce confusion by assigning people specific tasks: sorters, weighers (take materials to the weigh station), data recorders (record material weights from the scale), and any other roles you deem important such as safety or sort coordinator.

Sorting procedure

Bring waste to the appropriate sorting station (one for each waste stream), one sample at a time, then do the following:

- Place full bag on sorting table

- Untie or tear open entire bag to expose contents
 - Carefully pull out materials and separate them into small containers for each relevant category
- Relevant categories include the waste streams – trash, recyclables, and organics. You can also separate specific items, such as plastic utensils and pens, into their own category. Separate into as many as you like; however, you must have at least two categories for the waste sort activity to be meaningful.

Weigh and record

When each sorting bin is full, take it to the weigh-in area and let the data recorder know which waste stream the contents came from, the location collected, and the material type or specific items inside the containers. Make sure a scale is available that can accurately read pounds/kilograms in tenths. Electronic scales work well, as do fish scales. Use a spreadsheet or table to record all data. Recorders should double check weights and entries before contents are removed from the sorting container.



Take pictures

Take lots of pictures throughout the sorting process to record and document anything interesting.

Clean up

Following the waste sort, thoroughly clean up the area and return all waste to the appropriate collection bin. If possible, have the waste hauler pick-up all materials immediately following the sort. Talk to facilities staff to determine proper procedures for cleaning, waste disposal, and equipment removal.

Post-Sort - once the sorting process is complete, make sure the data is useful by doing the following:

Input all data

If data was originally recorded on paper, make sure to load all of it into an electronic database for back-up purposes and to allow for easy analysis.

Organize data

Compile data to show total amount of materials/items, by sorting category, for each waste stream sorted. If multiple waste streams were sorted (e.g., trash, recycling, organics) then create different tables for each stream. This will allow you to better illustrate the composition of each waste stream, and identify where improvements might need to be made. In particular, you want to identify materials that were incorrectly disposed, such as trash in the recycling stream, aluminum cans in the trash stream, or plastic in the organics stream. Those materials do not belong in those streams, and may indicate a larger problem.

Report results

Make sure to share the results with everyone that was involved in the process as well as management/administrators and those involved with the waste and recycling system at your building.

Consider a future sort

The best way to track progress of existing waste and recycling programs is to complete multiple waste sorts over a set period of time. Consider planning another sort for the following year to compare results and track progress.