# Episode Book

EPISODE #5753

# Unpacking as a Warehouse Problem: Sorting vs. Tagging

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## SYNOPSIS

Daniel moved into his modular Euro-box shelving system, Dremel-engraved the box purposes into the plastic — and still can't find anything, because the asset-to-box mapping got destroyed in the move. His proposed fix (one IKEA bag at a time, sorting and tagging as he goes) is the slowest workflow available for the problem. This episode treats his half-day window as what it actually is: a warehouse putaway problem at apartment scale, where sorting and tagging are two different jobs wearing one coat, the IKEA bag is a pure waste touch, and the misc box is either a pressure valve or a machine for recreating the mess you started with.

# TRANSCRIPT



**Corn**

The shelves are up, the boxes are labeled, and the whole thing is useless.



**Herman**

Right, because the boxes are full of the wrong things. He's got the hardware and none of the index.



**Corn**

Daniel wrote in with this one. He and Hannah moved a couple of months ago, into the modular system he's been building toward, Euro boxes, industrial shelving. The move was miserable, but the payoff is supposed to be that the system survives the next move. Except it doesn't survive this one, because the boxes got packed by whoever was nearest, and the asset-to-box mapping, which he calls the fundamental property of the inventory system, no longer exists. Everything is in the apartment. Nothing is findable.



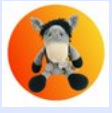
**Herman**

And he's already done the satisfying part. He spent a couple of hours with a Dremel engraving the box purposes directly into the plastic. Electrical cable. Computer accessories. Electronics components. He did that instead of stickers because stickers go brittle, and he wants to read the label from across the room.



**Corn**

Which tells you he's serious. You don't Dremel a box you might throw away.



**Herman**

You do not. So what's left is the grind. Empty every box, because the contents are random, put the items somewhere temporary, then sort them into the matching engraved box. He's left two boxes unlabeled for the stuff that falls between the cracks. And he has half a day, while Ezra is at daycare. After that it gets substantially harder.



**Corn**

And here's the part he actually wants help with. His proposed method is to carry one IKEA bag's worth of stuff at a time, sort it into the bins, and tag each item in the app as he goes. Tagging takes a few seconds per item and involves typing the asset number and assigning it to the bin number.



**Herman**

So he wants the fastest possible workflow. And the honest answer starts with telling him his plan is the slowest version of this that exists.



**Corn**

That's a strong opening.



**Herman**

It's a strong claim. Let me earn it.



**Corn**

Go ahead.



**Herman**

What Daniel is describing is a warehouse putaway problem at apartment scale. He's not asking how to unpack. He's asking how to restore a database index after the physical storage layer got randomized. The items are all there. The mapping is gone. Warehouse operations people have been studying exactly this for decades.



**Corn**

And the first thing they'd tell him is that sorting and tagging are two different jobs wearing one coat.



**Herman**

Two different cognitive tasks. The physical sort is spatial, tactile, you're making judgments with your hands full. The tagging is data entry, reading a number off an item and typing it into a phone. Interleave them and you're context-switching on every single object. And the moving guides converge on the same warning: half-done work multiplies. You open a box, you don't find the thing you wanted, that's a tiny defeat, and if you stack enough of them you stop wanting to unpack at all.



**Corn**

So the recommendation is: do the whole physical job first, then the whole digital job. Two passes.



**Herman**

That's the spine of it. Pass one, physical sort only. Phone stays in your pocket. Pass two, digital tagging, against finished, closed, labeled boxes.



**Corn**

Okay, but I want to go back to the IKEA bag, because that's the thing he specifically asked about and I think we owe him a real answer on why it's wrong.



**Herman**

We do, and it's the most interesting part of the whole question. His instinct, one bag at a time, sort it, tag it, go get another bag, that's single-piece flow. One unit of work, completed, before the next unit starts. It feels tidy. It feels like progress because every bag produces a fully finished result.



**Corn**

It sounds like the responsible way to do it.



**Herman**

It's the most travel-expensive way to do it. There's a body of work in warehouse picking on this, and the finding is consistent. Single-order picking is the simplest method and it's the worst on travel. If a picker walks the whole building for a two-item order, then walks it again for the next order, you are paying for the most expensive part of picking over and over. The walking is the cost. You want to amortize the walking across as many items as possible.



**Corn**

So Daniel carries a bag from the random boxes to wherever he's sorting, sorts it, then walks back and does it again. How many times?



**Herman**

I don't know the exact count, but think about the shape of it. A full re-sort is a few hundred items and a bag holds, say, twenty or thirty. That's ten or fifteen round trips. The apartment is small, so a trip is cheap in absolute terms, but he's paying it fifteen times instead of twice.



**Corn**

Batch it instead.



**Herman**

Pull a whole box, or two boxes, and dump the entire contents onto a sorting surface. Then sort the whole pile in one pass into the destination boxes. That's batch picking. Group many items into one handling operation. The counterintuitive part is that this means deliberately making bigger messes. You dump everything out. You're not being careful, you're being fast.



**Corn**

There's something almost offensive about that advice. Dump the box on the floor, that's the efficient move.



**Herman**

It's the efficient move because handling is the cost. Every time your hand touches an item, that's the unit of expense. And the goal is to get each item touched as few times as possible. Random box, sorting surface, destination box. That's two touches. It's the minimum the physics allows.



**Corn**

Two touches. And what does his plan give you?



**Herman**

Three. Random box, IKEA bag, destination box. The bag is a third touch, and it's a pure waste touch. The bag adds nothing. It exists in his plan because he assumed he needed a temporary container, and he does not. The floor or a table is the temporary container. The bag is a step you can delete and lose nothing but time.



**Corn**

Every item lifted into a bag and lifted back out. Just to move it four feet.



**Herman**

And it's worse than that, because the bag also scrambles the batch. If you dump a whole box onto a surface, you can see everything at once, and you can start making category decisions across the whole pile. In a bag, you're processing serially. You reach in, you get one thing, you place it, you reach in again. The bag prevents you from ever seeing the batch.



**Corn**

You can't sort a pile you can't see.



**Herman**

Exactly that. So: no bag, dump the box, sort from the pile.



**Corn**

Now the app, because this is where I think the real problem is hiding. He says tagging takes a few seconds per item. That sounds trivial, and it is per item, which is the trap.



**Herman**

Per item is the whole problem. If he's got a few hundred items and each one is a few seconds of typing, that's on the order of ten to twenty minutes of pure app time. And if it's five seconds apiece and he's got four hundred things, that's over half an hour on its own, before any mistakes. And I'm being generous, because "a few seconds" for typing a number and assigning it to a bin usually means more like eight or ten once you've unlocked the phone and found the right screen.



**Corn**

Half day. That's the whole budget.



**Herman**

That's the whole budget, gone on data entry, if he does it inline. So: keep the phone in your pocket for pass one. And then pass two is a completely different activity. You walk the finished, labeled, closed boxes, you open one, you tag everything in it, you close it. One continuous session of data entry, same task the whole time. No switching.



**Corn**

And there's a bonus there, which is that in pass two you already know where everything is, because you just put it there. The information is still fresh.



**Herman**

That's not a bonus, that's a real advantage. If he sorts physically, the contents of each box are in his head for a short while. If he tags immediately after the sort, he can verify against memory rather than against a label. Later, that memory is gone and every item is a small investigation.



**Corn**

Okay, so I want to push on the two-pass order, because there's an obvious objection. If he doesn't tag as he goes, doesn't he lose track of where things are?



**Herman**

He knows, because the boxes are either labeled or visible. The Euro boxes are open-top, they're not sealed crates. And on the two misc boxes, he tags the box itself, not the items, or he accepts those are the last thing.



**Corn**

Which is actually a nice property. The sort produces its own index.



**Herman**

The physical arrangement is the index until the digital one catches up.



**Corn**

Let me ask you about the misc boxes. He specifically left two boxes unlabeled to catch the things that fall between the cracks. Is that good practice or is that a trap?



**Herman**

Both, and it depends entirely on how he uses them. A misc box is a legitimate pressure valve. There's a line from a moving guidance piece that says miscellaneous is the label of someone who has given up. And there's real truth in that. If you create a misc box as your default first-pass destination, you've built a machine for converting all your items into one undifferentiated pile. You've just made a worse version of the problem you started with.



**Corn**

The box becomes the random box.



**Herman**

The box becomes the new random box. But a bounded misc box is fine, and here's the rule. An item goes into misc only if it fits no existing category, and once it's in there, you look at it again later. And the box gets a hard cap. If the misc box fills up, that's not a sorting success, that's information. It's telling you your categories are incomplete. Something in your taxonomy is missing a slot.



**Corn**

And the ordering matters. Misc should be last, not first.



**Herman**

Misc last. Because if you do misc first, you're making the easy decision on every hard item, and easy decisions feel like progress, and you'll fill both boxes in the first twenty minutes with things you could have categorized if you'd thought for two seconds. If you do misc last, you've already built the full map, and you know exactly which items have no home.



**Corn**

He's asked for a workflow, so let's give him one. Walk me through the half day as you'd actually run it.



**Herman**

I would set it up in tiers, the way warehouses do with priority. Before he touches anything, he writes down which boxes matter. The electrical cable box, the computer accessories box, the electronics components box. Those are high-value, high-frequency, the ones he actually opens. Those get sorted properly in the half day. The rest get triaged. If he's smart, he accepts that maybe half the boxes stay unsorted after Ezra gets home, and that's a win, not a failure, because the boxes he uses are correct.



**Corn**

So it's a P1 to P4 system applied to his own apartment. Sort the ones that hurt first.



**Herman**

Sort the ones you open first. And once you have that list: set up a sorting surface, and it needs to be somewhere you can leave a mess. If the only surface is the kitchen table, he's going to be cleaning up every hour, which is a processing step with no output. Pick a floor area or a bench you can abandon.



**Corn**

The countertop is the enemy of the batch method.



**Herman**

The countertop forces single-piece flow, because you have to clear it. So: pick the messy surface. Then, work box by box. Pull two or three random boxes into your working area at once, so you're amortizing the walk, dump the first box onto the surface, and sort the entire pile in one pass. Destination boxes should be arranged around the surface in a semicircle, so your arm reach covers them. If a destination box is across the room, you'll walk, and you've reintroduced the travel cost.



**Corn**

Semicircle. Physically close.



**Herman**

Physically close, within arm's reach if possible. Then when the pile is gone and every item has a home, pull the next box. The one exception is the misc box, which sits closed, off to the side, until the very end.



**Corn**

And the phone stays in his pocket the whole time.



**Herman**

The phone stays in the pocket for the whole sort. Then when the boxes are done, he sits down with the phone and goes box by box tagging contents. And he tags the box that he's currently got open, so the tag-and-confirm cycle is fast and continuous.



**Corn**

How do the time estimates look?



**Herman**

The unpacking side has some rough numbers. Kitchen is four to six hours for a full unpack, a bedroom runs two to four, a bathroom is thirty to sixty minutes. So a full apartment re-sort plus tagging, in a small apartment, is at least a full day of work compressed. He's got half.



**Corn**

So the half-day is honest-but-wrong. It's enough for a triage, not the whole job.



**Herman**

It's enough for the high-priority boxes done properly, which is the right use of it. And if Hannah can help, two people unpacking together is often three times as fast, because one person sorts and the other places. Three times, not twice. If Daniel can get Hannah in for even two hours, that's the highest-leverage thing in the whole plan.



**Corn**

What are the actual research numbers on the app side, since that's the bottleneck?



**Herman**

There's nothing published. No item-per-hour benchmarks for home asset tagging exist that I could find. So the only figure is Daniel's own: a few seconds per item. Which means we can't compute exactly, but we can reason about it. It's nonzero per item times hundreds of items, and it's typed, so it's variable, so it's the worst-case bottleneck.



**Corn**

And that brings me to the biggest lever in the whole episode, which is: why is he typing at all?



**Herman**

That's the question I'd want to ask before he spends the half-day.



**Corn**

Because the app has the bin number, and the box is engraved, and he's sitting there typing numbers. That's not a workflow problem, that's a software problem.



**Herman**

It's a tool problem, and the tool market has moved a long way past this. The current crop of home inventory apps is built around QR labels and NFC tags. You put a QR code on the physical box, you scan it with your phone, and the app opens that box's record. You don't type an asset number for the box, and you don't type which box it goes to. Binned is one of the more established ones, and it uses a five-level hierarchy, building, room, subroom, location, bin, then items, and it supports QR labels and NFC tags. StowQR and BoxQR are both built around the same scan-to-bin model. Go Stash It does QR bin labels.



**Corn**

So the several-seconds-per-item cost basically evaporates.



### Herman

For the box association, yes. You can still spend time on the item itself, but you're not doing the expensive part manually. And there's a self-hosted option, HomeBox, which runs on SQLite with an embedded web UI, if he wants to keep everything on his own hardware. Given Daniel's inclination, that's probably the one he'd actually want.



### Corn

But there's a sequencing problem. Switching apps is not a thing you do during the half-day.



### Herman

No. App migration is its own project. Don't switch apps on the same day you're trying to sort four hundred items. The half-day is for the physical re-sort. The app question is a separate evening, and it should happen BEFORE the half-day, if it happens at all, because if he's going to change tools, he should change them before he populates the new tool, not after.



### Corn

So the answer to "is the app the right tool" is: probably not, but don't fix it in the half day. Fix it first or accept the typing.



### Herman

And there's a deeper point. If the friction is in the software, then the entire workflow discussion is downstream of the tool choice. Every extra second in the app multiplies by the item count. A one-second saving on four hundred items is nearly seven minutes. So the app is the biggest lever in the system, bigger than the sorting order, and Daniel isn't treating it as a lever at all. He's treating it as a fixed cost.



### Corn

Because he already paid for it and learned it.



**Herman**

And because changing tools feels like a step backwards. But it's the highest-return decision available to him, and the one he's least likely to make.



**Corn**

Let me take the other thread, which is the design. The whole reason the app exists is that it can answer "where is X." And that only works if the box descriptions map onto stable categories. He says they do. But the two misc boxes are exactly where that assumption gets tested.



**Herman**

The misc boxes are a test of his taxonomy. The stored items map onto the labeled boxes if and only if his categories are actually complete. If the categories are complete, misc should remain nearly empty, maybe a few items, and never fill. If they fill, then the categories aren't complete and his assumption is wrong, and the fix is not to sort harder, it's to add the missing category.



**Corn**

So don't judge him by whether he finishes. Judge him by how full the misc boxes are.



**Herman**

Judge the system, not the man. And that's a nice property to have, because it's a system that tells you when it's wrong. A storage system that never produces a misc overflow is a storage system you don't understand.



**Corn**

The other thing I want to bring up is the "one touch" idea, because I think it's the deepest thing here and it's about the future, not the re-sort. We've said each item wants to be touched as few times as possible. Two is the minimum for this re-sort. But the whole reason he's doing this re-sort is that the original system failed at that principle.



### Herman

The original system failed because the packing step was a third touch that destroyed the mapping. Items went from shelf to random box, and that random box was where the index broke. The re-sort is the cost of that extra touch, paid all at once. And that's the lesson to carry forward: the re-sort problem will recur exactly once per move unless the packing step is designed so that items go from their destination box straight into the move, without a random container in between.



### Corn

Which is exactly what the Euro boxes are for, if you label them and preserve the mapping through the move.



### Herman

If you label them and preserve the mapping. The Euro box system is already most of the fix. They're durable, they're modular, they're visible, they're reusable. The only missing piece is the digital layer sitting on top of the physical one, and that digital layer is what's broken right now. But once it's rebuilt, the next move is: keep the boxes labeled, keep the mapping intact, don't use random containers, and the re-sort problem never happens again. He's paying the debt once.



### Corn

Which, for a man who's moved several times and expects to move again, is the actual payoff. Eleven times in a lifetime, on average.



### Herman

Eleven, according to the moving statistics. So if he's moved a few times already, he's got somewhere between five and eight more in him, and the system amortizes across all of them.



### Corn

I want to flag a negative finding, because I think it's meaningful. There is no well-established home-specific playbook for this. I had someone look for discussion of home inventory apps, QR bin labeling, moving and unpacking workflows, workshop bin sorting. Four separate searches, nothing on Hacker News. And that's genuine weak evidence, not a gap. The developer audience covers tooling densely. If there were an engineer's method for "restore the asset-to-bin mapping in a small apartment," someone



**Corn (continued)**

would have written it up, and they haven't.



**Herman**

So what does that mean for the listener?



**Corn**

It means Daniel isn't missing a trick. He isn't failing to find the method everyone uses. The method doesn't exist as a home-scale thing. The closest analogues are moving-box unpacking methodology and warehouse batch-picking theory, and he has to weld them together himself. Which is what we've been doing for the last twenty minutes.



**Herman**

Which is why we're on the warehouse analogy so hard. It's the only mature body of thought that actually addresses this. Everything else is either moving advice, which stops the moment the boxes are unpacked, or warehouse advice, which assumes a building the size of a supermarket.



**Corn**

He's running a supermarket the size of an apartment. That's the actual problem.



**Herman**

That's the actual problem, and the good news is the supermarket rule actually scales down. The travel cost is smaller in absolute terms, but the ratio still holds. Batching still wins. Two touches still beats three. The app is still the bottleneck.



**Corn**

So the workflow, tight: write down your priority boxes. Pick a surface you can abandon. Arrange destination boxes within reach. Work box by box, dumping each full box onto the surface and sorting the pile in one pass. Phone in pocket. Misc boxes closed until the end. Then, when the boxes are done, sit down and tag box by box.



**Herman**

And the two things that will eat the half day if he's not careful are the app typing and the travel. Batching kills the travel. A QR-based app kills the typing, or the two-pass order at least confines it.



**Corn**

Okay. I want to bring in a voice that hasn't weighed in yet.



**Hilbert**

This is all true and you're missing the most important part, which is where the boxes are on the shelves.



**Herman**

Go on.



**Hilbert**

I worked a warehouse floor for a while, back in the early nineties, a distribution place that moved to a new location and re-shelved everything in the wrong order. The system was fine. The workflow was fine. The pickers couldn't hit their numbers because the stuff they reached for all day was up at head height or down at knee height, and the stuff they touched twice a month was at waist level where the hands naturally fall. Six weeks of complaining before anyone connected it to the sorting. The fix wasn't a workflow. It was moving boxes between shelves.



**Corn**

So there's a correct place for each box that has nothing to do with what's in it.



**Hilbert**

There's a zone. We called it the golden zone. It's from about hip to shoulder height, what you can reach without bending or climbing. Anything you touch more than about once a week goes in the golden zone. Everything else goes up top or down low. It's the first rule



**Hilbert (continued)**

and it's the one nobody puts on the diagram.



**Herman**

The electrical cable box, the computer accessories box, the electronics components box, those need to be at waist height. His most-opened boxes. And they could be perfectly sorted and perfectly tagged, and if they're up on the top shelf he's going to hate the system in a month.



**Hilbert**

You'll stop using it. You'll start leaving things on the bench because reaching up is one more step. The system doesn't break because it's wrong. It breaks because it's annoying.



**Corn**

The misc boxes go top shelf.



**Hilbert**

They go top shelf. You touch them rarely, and if you're touching them often, they're not misc, they're mislabeled, and you've got a category to split.



**Corn**

Hmm.



**Hilbert**

One more thing. You want to be able to see what's in the box without moving it. If you've got to pull a box off the shelf to know what's in it, you've added a touch to the system every time you look. That's the whole reason his Dremel engraving is a good idea and the stickers were a bad one. That part he got right.



**Herman**

That's the sort of thing that doesn't live in the workflow diagram. It lives in the layout. We've been treating the shelves as the fixed thing and the sorting as the variable, and you're telling us it's the other way around.



**Hilbert**

I'm telling you the pickers hit their numbers when we moved the boxes to the right heights. The workflow didn't change at all. It was the same people, same shelves, same day. It took us about an afternoon to shuffle, and the numbers came back within a week.



**Corn**

Which means Daniel could get the biggest single improvement of the whole project for free, by re-arranging boxes he's already got, before he re-sorts a single item.



**Hilbert**

It means the re-sort itself has a destination, which he should arrange first. Lay the golden zone out first, then sort into it. If you sort into a random shelf arrangement, the sort is still wrong when you're done.



**Herman**

That changes the order of the day. He should shuffle the shelves before he dumps the first box.



**Hilbert**

I would. It's a twenty-minute job and it doesn't need the kid at daycare.



**Corn**

Because sorting into a badly arranged shelf is work you have to undo.



**Hilbert**

You're sorting into the wrong place and calling it finished.



**Herman**

I'll take that. I think the layout point overrides my ordering assumption, and I'd rather he spent the first twenty minutes of the half-day moving boxes than moving items.



**Corn**

The priority list has a new first line, which is: fix the shelf heights.



**Herman**

Fix the shelf heights before you fix anything else.



**Corn**

Daniel has half a day. The workflow is going to get him further than the bag method does, but the half day finishes the job only on the boxes that matter. The rest stays unsorted, and that's fine.



**Herman**

The misc boxes are the instrument to watch. If they fill, he should stop and ask what category he's missing, because their overflow is telling him something his app can't.



**Corn**

The other open question is which app he's using at all. If he's typing asset numbers off items and typing bin numbers, and the current tools scan a QR code on the box and open the record, then that typing is costing him a slice of every half day he ever spends on this. Not urgent, but high return.



**Herman**

The last thing, which I keep coming back to: the shelves are the system. The box labels matter less than where the boxes sit. If his most-used boxes are in the golden zone and his least-used are on the top shelf, he'll actually use the system instead of fighting it.



**Corn**

If you've got a workflow question like this one, send it in. We read every prompt, and we answer the ones about your apartment with an unreasonable level of detail. Thank you to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer.



**Herman**

This has been My Weird Prompts. Leave us a review if you've got a second, my weird prompts dot com if you don't want to open your podcast app.



**Corn**

We'll be back soon.