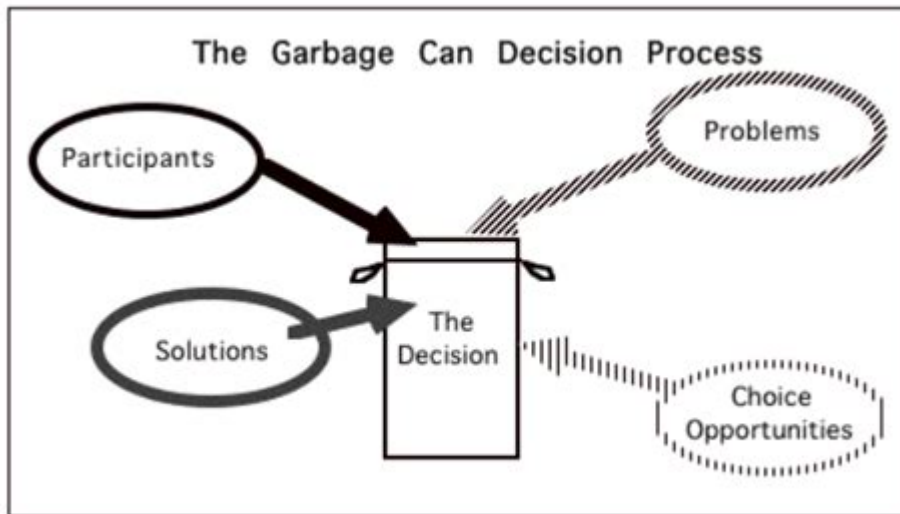


# Garbage Can Model Of Decision Making



**Garbage can model of decision making** is a theoretical framework that describes how organizations make decisions in a chaotic environment. This model, developed by Michael D. Cohen, James G. March, and Johan P. Olsen in 1972, suggests that decision-making in organizations is often not a linear process, but rather a complex interplay of various elements that may not always align logically. The garbage can model highlights the randomness, ambiguity, and unpredictability of decision-making, making it a significant concept in organizational theory and management studies.

## Understanding the Garbage Can Model

The garbage can model presents a unique perspective on decision-making, contrasting sharply with traditional models that emphasize rationality and structured processes. In this model, decision-making is viewed as an organized anarchy where problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities all intersect in unpredictable ways. Here are the key components of the garbage can model:

### 1. Problems

In the garbage can model, problems exist as independent entities, and they may not always be clearly defined. Organizations often face multiple issues at once, and the urgency of these problems can vary significantly. Some problems may be urgent and require immediate attention, while others linger without resolution.

### 2. Solutions

Solutions in this model are also somewhat random and may not necessarily align with the problems at hand. Organizations may possess various solutions that are not directly tied to specific problems. This can lead to a situation where solutions are proposed without a clear understanding of the issue they

are meant to address.

### **3. Participants**

Participants in the decision-making process include individuals or groups within the organization who bring their own preferences, values, and experiences to the table. The involvement of these participants can significantly influence the outcomes of the decision-making process. Importantly, the level of engagement can vary, and not all participants may be equally invested in every decision.

### **4. Choice Opportunities**

Choice opportunities represent the moments when decisions need to be made. In the garbage can model, these moments can arise spontaneously, often without clear triggers. As a result, decisions may be made when problems and solutions come together, regardless of whether the timing is optimal or the participants involved are the most qualified.

## **The Dynamics of the Garbage Can Model**

Understanding how the garbage can model functions requires a look at its dynamics. The interplay between problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities creates a fluid decision-making environment.

### **1. Ambiguity and Uncertainty**

One of the hallmark features of the garbage can model is the presence of ambiguity and uncertainty. Decision-makers often operate without complete information, leading to a reliance on intuition and experience. This can result in decisions that are not necessarily optimal but are satisfactory given the circumstances.

### **2. Timing and Serendipity**

In the garbage can model, timing plays a critical role. Decisions are often made when the right mix of problems, solutions, and participants coincides, which can be entirely serendipitous. This unpredictability means that organizations must be adaptable and ready to respond to opportunities as they arise.

### **3. Organizational Culture**

The culture of an organization can significantly influence how decisions are made within the garbage can model. A culture that encourages open communication and collaboration may lead to more effective decision-making, while a more hierarchical or closed culture may stifle the intersection of problems and solutions.

# Applications of the Garbage Can Model

The garbage can model is particularly relevant in environments characterized by high levels of uncertainty and complexity. Here are some areas where this model can be effectively applied:

## 1. Non-Profit Organizations

In non-profit organizations, decision-making often involves multiple stakeholders with varying priorities. The garbage can model helps to understand how these organizations navigate complex issues, aligning diverse interests to make impactful decisions.

## 2. Policy-Making

In the realm of public policy, decision-making frequently involves a mix of problems, proposed solutions, and political actors. The garbage can model provides insights into how policies can emerge from the chaotic interplay of these elements, often leading to unexpected outcomes.

## 3. Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Startups and innovative ventures often operate in highly uncertain environments. The garbage can model can explain how new ideas are developed and implemented, as entrepreneurs navigate a landscape filled with challenges and opportunities that may not fit traditional decision-making frameworks.

# Critiques of the Garbage Can Model

Despite its usefulness, the garbage can model has faced criticisms. Some of the notable critiques include:

## 1. Lack of Predictability

Critics argue that the model's inherent randomness can make it challenging to predict outcomes. Organizations often strive for predictable decision-making processes, and the garbage can model's chaotic nature may be seen as a drawback.

## 2. Oversimplification

Some scholars believe that the garbage can model oversimplifies the complexities of decision-making by grouping disparate elements together. They argue that a more nuanced understanding of how organizations operate is necessary for effective management.

## 3. Limited Applicability

The garbage can model may not be applicable in all organizational contexts.

In highly structured environments where decision-making is governed by strict protocols, the model's principles may not resonate as strongly.

## **Conclusion**

The **garbage can model of decision making** offers a compelling framework for understanding how decisions are made within organizations characterized by uncertainty and complexity. By highlighting the chaotic interplay of problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities, the model challenges traditional notions of rational decision-making. While it has its critiques, the garbage can model remains a valuable perspective for examining organizational behavior and can provide insights for leaders seeking to navigate the complexities of decision-making in today's fast-paced environment. Whether in non-profit organizations, policy-making, or innovative ventures, understanding this model can equip decision-makers with the tools necessary to respond effectively to the unpredictable nature of their environments.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What is the garbage can model of decision making?**

The garbage can model of decision making is a theory that describes how decisions are made in organizations where problems, solutions, and participants are mixed together in a 'garbage can,' leading to outcomes that may seem random or chaotic.

### **Who developed the garbage can model?**

The garbage can model was developed by Michael D. Cohen, James G. March, and Johan P. Olsen in their 1972 paper titled 'A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice.'

### **In what types of organizations is the garbage can model most applicable?**

The garbage can model is most applicable in organizations that are complex, ambiguous, and characterized by a lack of clear goals, such as universities, research institutions, and other loosely structured entities.

### **What are the key elements of the garbage can model?**

The key elements of the garbage can model include problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities, all of which interact in a non-linear and often unpredictable manner.

### **How does the garbage can model differ from traditional decision-making models?**

Unlike traditional decision-making models that assume a rational and systematic approach to decision making, the garbage can model recognizes the role of chance, timing, and the chaotic interplay of various factors.

## What are the implications of the garbage can model on organizational behavior?

The implications of the garbage can model on organizational behavior include highlighting the importance of understanding the context and dynamics of decision making, as well as acknowledging the role of informal processes and serendipity in achieving outcomes.

## Can the garbage can model be applied to individual decision making?

Yes, while primarily focused on organizational decision making, the garbage can model can also be applied to individual decision making by recognizing how various competing priorities and solutions can converge in an individual's mind, leading to seemingly arbitrary choices.

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