

## **Time-Based Organization: the Key to Conquering Chaos**

**Is the paper onslaught in your office costing profits? Here's how to stop the madness.**

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The real downside of poor organization isn't just a temporary inconvenience or occasional frustration. It's the terrible waste of time – and money. Time spent looking for the information or file you need means less time spent on more important things like meeting customer needs or generating billable hours. And if you don't think that your crammed-to-capacity filing drawer isn't costing you, consider that in 1997 the *Wall Street Journal* estimated that executives waste six weeks per year looking for misplaced information from messy desks and files. Better organization means that you can apply your skills to the most productive and financially rewarding tasks.

### **Finding, not filing**

The problem stems from the way most people approach their filing: they focus on filing, not on finding. As a result, the documents that they work with most often at any given time – the high value documents – are buried in an undifferentiated mass with all the other, low-value documents.

The key to resolving this problem is to separate your paper files into three distinct categories: the "working files" (that is, the files that you use 3 times per week or more); the "reference files" (those used 1-2 times per month); and the "archive files" (those with no predictable time for retrieval, but you don't want to throw them out).

### **Working files – at your fingertips**

Setting up the structure is easy. The file drawer in your desk should hold your working files. This drawer only contains the files that you use on a regular basis – for example, drafts of a speech you're preparing, a meeting agenda, or a preliminary budget. When these projects are completed, you'll move them into the "reference" file cabinet.

### **Reference files – there when you need them**

Reference files mirror your working files – you'll use *the same* categories/hanging folders that you have in your working file drawer. However, these files are kept in a separate filing cabinet away from your desk, so they don't get in the way of your daily activity. In addition to obvious reference items like research reports, you might place the annual budget, HR forms, marketing plans, etc. in this file. The key is that these files contain items you don't need to look at everyday, but might look at intermittently – perhaps every other week or monthly. When you do

need these files regularly to complete a project – say, preparing a new direct mail campaign – then you move the files into the working file drawer.

### **Archive files – out of the way**

Archive files also contain the same categories/hanging folders as the other two sections. They can be kept in another drawer in the file cabinet, in a central storage location in the office, or at an off-site location. They're accessible to you when you need them, but they're out of your way for the 99% of the time that you don't. As with the reference files, when you do need these files for a project, it's a simple task to move them into the working file drawer.

Finally, your inbox and outbox. The inbox, whether for paper or for email, contains only those items you haven't yet read. Once you read something in the inbox, deal with it *immediately*—forward to the appropriate person, file in the appropriate folder, or trash it. Don't just let it sit there, because the next day's paper will quickly bury it, and you won't see it again – until it's too late. Similarly, the outbox is not a long-term storage device. Items placed in the outbox should be distributed or filed by the end of the day.

For electronic files (and email) the system is the same: create “working,” “reference,” and “archive” folders, and within each folder, create identical sub-folders so that you can transfer files easily from one category to the other.

The 80/20 rule in life applies to your files, too: you do 80% of your daily work with only 20% of your files. This filing structure cleans up the paper and electronic clutter, ensures rapid access to the files that you use most often, and helps keep the low-value files out of your way. Set up this system, use it daily, and you'll save you and your company time and money.

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