



ORGANIZING YOUR ELECTRONIC INFORMATION

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I periodically get calls on the Pennsylvania Bar Association Hot Line from attorneys asking me how they should organize their electronic documents. These documents may include those produced by the firm, those which arrive as email attachments or electronic faxes, and emails.

If you're like most attorneys, you are overworked. Time is of the essence. Billable time must be maximized. Likewise for your staff, because at most firms there are less bodies than needed. So there is no time to waste searching for documents.

Every firm has a horror story about at least one past secretary or temporary whose electronic filing system was so bizarre that the documents he or she created still have not been found years later. If you want your office to be its most productive, your firm needs to consistently and efficiently organize all the "stuff" which lands on your firm's computers. Failing to create and enforce a firm-wide system ultimately creates chaos which wastes valuable time and resources.

Some firms are reluctant to "impose" a system. When such a system is proposed, those who must follow it often grumble that their creativity and autonomy will be stifled for no good reason. And often the firm backs off as a result. Wrong move! There's plenty of room for creativity in law firms, but the arena of electronic records organization is not an appropriate venue for it to be demonstrated.

Each firm may come up with a slightly different organizational scheme. Attorneys are famous for seeking to invent a better mouse trap. That's ok. But once your organizational scheme is established, it should be uniformly followed by all. Based on over 20 years of managing law firms, I believe I have seen and implemented best practices and seen and corrected worst practices. So for those of you open to suggestion, let me provide some food for thought.

First, your electronic files should be centrally stored. This enables everyone at the firm to go to one place to locate and retrieve documents. It also provides the firm with the reassurance that backing up one hard drive will protect the firm's documents.

If you do not have a true network with a file server, then designate one PC on your peer-to-peer network to be the location for the central storage of documents. It is ok to create your documents and save them initially locally on your PC, but when finished transfer them to the designated PC and delete the local copy.

Occasionally I encounter a firm which does not have any type of network, other than what I call the “sneaker” network. There are individual PCs, with documents stored separately on each. While I would urge such a firm to install a peer-to-peer network for a variety of reasons, the firm may want to consider as an alternative an off-site hosted document management application. (Please contact me on the hot line for recommendations.)

Now as to the actual organization of the files, let’s start first with those which do not work well. Two practices I have found to be ineffective are to organize by attorney or by area of practice.

The advantage of organizing by attorney is the assuring thought that one can always find one’s documents quickly. But the obvious disadvantage of organization by attorney is that one must know which attorney brought in the file or did the majority of work on the file in order to locate the documents. In firms with attorney or staff turnover—are there any without?— it becomes increasingly difficult to locate documents over time.

The practice-area system seems to make more sense in that if you know the legal area to which a document pertains, and you know the client name, you can find the document easily. Right? No way. As we know from completing the allocation of our revenues or hours on the professional liability insurance application, the lines of demarcation between one practice area and another can often be subjective. Consider a real estate contractor who you defend in a construction liability matter. Is that litigation or real estate? How about a corporate client who contracts for an option to buy a piece of property. Is that real estate, corporate, or contracts? The reality is that in all probability no two staff people would save the documents in the same place.

The system which I find makes sense is to organize by client. Each client should have an electronic folder. Each discrete matter would be a subfolder. Under each matter subfolder would be folders which mimic those initially created in the file, based on the area of practice. So for example, the subfolders for a litigation matter might include correspondence, pleadings, orders, motions, depositions, and other. The key to success is not to go overboard by trying to define too many “categories” of subfolders. You don’t want to go too far in the organizational scheme, such that it becomes difficult to decide where to put a document because it could apply equally to more than one type of folder. Better to have fewer subfolders covering broader areas at this level than too many covering too narrowly defined areas.

Once the general electronic organization is established, the next step is to work on file naming conventions. Even with long file names, some consistency is required to ensure you can easily find what you’re looking for. Let’s look for example at the conventions and



resulting filenames which might be employed in the correspondence folder. Common abbreviations include LTR for letter, MEMO for memorandum, FAX for faxes, DEF for defendant, and so forth. The name of the recipient should always be included, as should a few key words. Some firms may also want to include the original date in the filename. Here are some example filenames:

LTR 042304 Jim Smith re request from def for conference
MEMO 032104 to file re research on chemical additives
FAX 010404 Jim Smith re settlement proposal from def for review

Notice how easy it is to determine precisely what the documents contain. And by capitalizing the “type” of item, it stands out even more clearly. Using the Windows Explorer function would enable one to very easily search a particular client folder or matter folder for a particular item, and complete the search in a very short timeframe. Using a desktop search engine (see *Desktop Search Engines: An Exciting New Tool* in the March 7, 2005 edition of [Pennsylvania Bar News](#)) would make the search even faster and easier.

Now all of this assumes that your firm does not utilize a document management software package. That would be my first recommendation, but the price can be daunting for solo and small firm practitioners. The use of this software will enable your firm to automate this organization. (Of course, you first have to have a well thought-out system in order to automate it.) The role of document management software is to ensure that everyone follows the system. It also enables full text searching of documents, plus the ability to search on lots of additional user-defined fields, alone or in combination, such as docket number, file number, attorney, practice area, type of document, and even key words. It provides the ability to create security groups and apply them to documents. And it enables users to create searches which are done repeatedly—such as “my files” or “client XYZ files”— and save them as short-cut buttons for reuse as needed. Document management will also enable your firm to organize other types of electronic documents, such as electronic faxes, emails, spreadsheets, PDF images and others. (Please contact me on the hot line for a listing of software packages, and consultants who can assist you with implementation.)

Your email inbox should be similarly organized. Create a subfolder for each client. You probably will not feel the need to create another layer of folders by matter. It will depend on the volume of emails you receive. Create rules which automatically route inbound emails from clients directly to their folders. (After you read them, you can drag them to the appropriate matter subfolder if you’ve created them.) If there are other individuals which are associated only with particular clients, you can also create rules to route their emails directly to the appropriate client folder. Don’t think this will allow you to “forget” that the emails exist. In Outlook, each folder in the inbox displays the number of unread messages in bold, so you always know new items are waiting to be read.

Your inbox should also has a variety of folders created by subject matter. For example, you may receive emails regarding firm administration, marketing, technology, and other areas involving the management of the business side of the practice, or areas of



practice like employment or family law. Again, for things like news alerts and electronic newsletters you subscribe to, you can make a rule to route them to the appropriate subject file. Varied items, like emails from listservs, can be read and then dragged to the appropriate subject file.

The object of all this is to get and keep your main inbox lean and mean. And to organize what has been received so you can find it quickly and efficiently later. Now you may be thinking that you can't do that, because some items in your inbox require a response at a later date, and you will surely forget if you don't have the opportunity to regularly scroll through all the emails in one folder to ensure you're not missing anything. But that is a monumental waste of time. Instead, set a flag for follow-up before closing the email. Then move it to the appropriate folder. When it is time to follow up, it will automatically pop up, no matter what folder it's in.

One last thing. I created a customized button on my Outlook email toolbar which enables me, with one click, to classify a sender as "junk", meaning that I will never have additional email from that sender in my inbox again, and to immediately delete the offending email. I must admit that spam is much easier to deal with since I created this one-step shortcut button.

These are just a few ideas to help you organize your electronic information. There are more available than space permits me to provide. Just remember that the better organized you are, the less time you will waste, and the less likely errors will be made. Ultimately you will be more successful.

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