



FILE MANAGEMENT TIPS FOR THE SMALL LAW FIRM

File Organization and Maintenance

The key components of a good paper-based filing system include:

- A master index or log of all files (one for open and one for closed) maintained either manually or through your billing or case management software, if you have it.
- A log of all documents within the file.
- Adequate “in file” organizational methods, such as:
 - Using a two hole punch clip on either side of the file folder and placing all documents in chronological order, correspondence on one side and court documents on the other.
 - Using files with dividers, each of which has its own two hole punch clip.
 - Using an accordion folder or other “master file folder” with smaller folders inside, labeled as to content.
 - Using a case notebook with all material three hole punched and organized chronologically behind tabs separating the material by topic.

File Opening & Closing Checklist

When opening a new file always:

- Create a new matter information sheet (filled out by the attorney or legal assistant) to place within the file.
- Enter all new client/matter information in your firm’s billing and case management system.
- If you don’t have an automated system, set up important client information on a card, cross-reference it, and place it in an “open file” box.
- NEVER open a file without in some way placing it on the calendar or in a tickler system.

When closing a file always:

- Clearly indicate that you want the file to be closed. (Use a form for this purpose, if necessary.)
- Have the bookkeeper determine whether the client has paid in full. If not, the file should be left open until full payment is made. Trust account balance should always be zero before a file is closed.
- Archive the case in billing and case management systems. Remove it from the active case list and open case card box, and place it on closed file list and in closed file card box.
- Attach a checklist to the file so that each person involved can initial his or her part of the process.
- Store the closed files separately from the open files.
- Renumber the closed files with a prefix or suffix indicating when the file was closed if you use a numerical filing system. For alphabetical filing systems, use a colored dot, new tab or other indicator that the file is a closed file.

File Location

Keep up with files by following each of these rules:

- All active files for a particular work group should be stored in a central location, regardless of which attorney is primarily responsible for them.
- Files should remain in the file storage area unless they are *currently* being worked on.
- Files that are currently being worked on should remain on the desk of the attorney, legal assistant or secretary doing the work.
- Files should be checked in and out using a check-out card, log, or entry in the case management system.
- When work is completed, the file should be returned to storage and a tickle date should be placed into the case management system showing the next date the file should be pulled.
- Strongly discourage staff from taking files home.
- Individual documents should not be separated from the file unless absolutely necessary. If a document must be removed, it should be logged out on the file's internal document log.
- When the case is over the file should be purged of all important client documents, which should be returned to the client while it's still easy to do. After the period of time specified in your file destruction master plan, the file should be microfilmed or scanned and stored on CD, and the file destroyed.

