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Which is Best for Keeping Files -- Alphabetical by Client or by Case File Number?

Getting ready to open my own office with one other lawyer. Which way do you find best for keeping files on the shelf -- alphabetical by client or by case file number?

-Steve Terrell

Alphabetical...but don't keep them on the shelf...keep them on the server as pdf files...

Michael D. Day, Meriden, Connecticut

Alphabetically. Will you be working on the same files? Will you have more than one staff person? If so, invest in a set of buff/orange "Out To" cards that will sit in place of removed files. I keep open files alphanumerically (alpha by name, then by file no.) When I close the files, I assign a Closed File Number and box the files in the sequence closed.

Barry Lippitt

That is exactly how I do it and it works like a charm.

Randal A. Harvey, Troy, Ohio

On the shelf, it's alphabetical. I don't think of them numerically, it's always "gotta work on Terrell today." However, after having to rearrange alphabetically stored inactive files, I use numbers now. Each case has always had both a name and number. The conflict list goes by either, so I can cross check. So I can easily look up a file I want out of storage, first by name to discover its number, and then to the box that contains that number file. Storing by alpha means at some time, you'll need to store a file between Terrell and Thompson, and invariably that means to have to shift everything behind Thompson. 'Course you could just shred Terrell and pretend he never existed . . .

Carolyn J. Stevens, Lolo, Montana

I expect you'll get as many opinions as there are letters in the alphabet. I



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store my "working" paper files in numeric sequence. Most of my files are small in size and remain close to my desk. With a numeric system I get a sense of what are the old files and what are newer files. With the numeric system I can see that I've got some old stuff that really needs to be closed out or addressed. With an alpha system you don't have any visual clues. I have a separate storage area for my corporate and LLC clients since they "touch base" from time to time, but are not truly files requiring ongoing attention on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. When we close files we use a closed-numbering-system. They get a new number so they can be stored sequentially on a shelf (or digitized) and then cross-indexed with the original file number.

Bruce Dorner, Londonderry, New Hampshire

I keep my files alphabetical. So if a client calls, I know how to get the file in a hurry.

Jennifer N. Sawday, Long Beach, California

Why number? Make your system case driven. Depending on what you do, You may rarely serve the same client twice. If you adopt the practice of referring to your cases in a form where your client's name is first, [Smith v. Jones OR Smith adv. Jones]. You will never have to remember more than your client's name to find computer or hard folder. SMIJON is a unique filename for Smith v. Jones --that will fit on the spine of the ring binder --- that you store alphabetically ---on the shelf and --which contains the few papers you find it necessary to maintain in hard copy [the rest are in PaperPort folders by case name.] If you do something that creates a high volume of cases, you'll need something else. Until then, don't be a slave to some needlessly complex system.

John Page, Tampa, Florida

I have been in offices with both systems, and I can unequivocally declare that I much prefer alphabetical. w/ Numeric I find myself always looking for a number, trying to find a file that is mis filed, etc. I thought it was a problem with alpha, but much more with numeric. I thought a numeric filing system would minimize mis filings, but there seem to be just as many problems and they seem to be worse. Years later when you are gone from the numeric system, it is almost impossible to find anything in the numeric, it is almost impossible to reconstruct accounting should that be come necessary, because you do not remember or have access to the numeric listing. I suggest that you name and file them alpha, but give them a # as secondary - only for purposes of tracking long distance, etc. assuming you bill those types of charges to your client. Another thing I HIGHLY recommend is that you use different color labels or file folders for each letter of the alphabet. Greatly decreases misfilings, "lost" folders, etc.

Randy Birch, Salt Lake City, Utah

When I opened my office in 1977, I asked that question of every lawyer I met. No one could give me a reason to use numbers. I had co-oped in a large firm that used numbers, and I was mystified as to why one would want to have to go through the extra step of looking up a client's name in order to find the number. Since then, I have have come to understand some reasons for using numbers - e.g. if one has more than one case with a particular client; identifying closed cases; avoiding confusion between clients with the same names. Nevertheless, none of these reasons have been persuasive to me. I close out cases once a year. In my client card file (with so-called "new matter" cards), I indicate the year that the case was filed. Then, when I want to retrieve a file, I look in the alphabetically arranged closed cases for that year.

Jo Fray, Massachusetts

Our file folders are filed in the files or storage boxes by year and matter "02-0034" - they are databased in alphabetical order in both Timematters and Q&A database. Both are covered that way.

Art Mouton, Louisiana

Besides sorting alphabetically, we color code entire files by types of cases. When you handle several different types of cases, a quick glance can rule out several files and then the search begins for the alphabetical file. For very large cases, smaller folders are color coded by contents. There are also color coded pages for different types of documents we've copied. I'm a big fan of being able to quickly locate what I need and color coding is a big part of that process. New hires are quickly educated as to what a specific color means with a silly rhyme we made up years ago. The system has worked well for us for many years.

Vicki Levy Eskin

Alphabetical until closed, then by a sequential file number, such as 2006-1234. On the computer (and I scan everything I don't create as PDF files, and some things I do) I have a directory for "Documents" (or "My Documents" if you let Bill Gates tell you how to run your office), then map it as a network drive (I use "z"). I then create subdirectories AA through ZZ (because WordStar(!) used to think a subdirectory named A or F, or whatever, was a physical drive). I then create a subdirectory under "xx" for the client's name. Under that is a subdirectory for each matter. For example, if I did the above for this question I might have "z:/TT/Terrell, Stephen/Office Management/Terrell 20060223 EMT Steve.txt" for this message. "EMT" means "e-mail to." I usually insert a four digit time after the date. It works like a charm. I don't lose ANYTHING (much) anymore.

Each subdirectory sorts pretty much chronologically. You can't sort alphabetically for closed files. You just put them in banker's boxes in the order you close them. I use an old database called PC-File to keep a record of each file, what it's about and whether open or closed. I add keywords to help find files by subject. You can use any database. I'm sure some case management software would do pretty much the same thing. I've been using this same basic system since about 1984, and love it. Scanning is much more recent, of course. Having electronic files saves HUGE amounts of time. I haven't the nerve, as yet, to go totally paperless.

Dan Ringer

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