
Implementing Information Retrieval Systems

by LAURA LEIST

Do you pile instead of file? Is your desk overflowing with mounds of paperwork? If it is, you're not alone. Many claim that if they file it, it is out of sight and out of mind — perhaps never to be found again. Today, U.S. workers generate 2.7 billion pieces of new paper a day — that is 45 sheets per person a day! What is happening to it and how do you find it when you need it?

Smart Business Magazine reported U.S. workers waste on average at least two hours per week because they are not able to retrieve, share and determine

how to store and organize documents and other information. The costs to businesses can be astounding. A company that employs 50 is most likely spending more than \$125,000 a year on wasted productivity.

It is no longer enough to create and maintain efficient filing systems for paper and electronic information. One must also consider how that information can be quickly accessed and

retrieved when needed. After all, what good is the information if you cannot locate it?

One of the main reasons people accumulate so much paper is they don't know what to keep and what to get rid of. Eighty-two percent of the information we keep, whether it be paper-based or electronic will never be referenced again. There are two questions you should be asking yourself about each

piece of information you have — whether electronic or paper based:

- Do I need this?
- Will I refer to it someday?

If you can answer yes to these questions, you then need either *act* on the information or *store* it for later use. If you answered no to these questions, it's time to *eliminate* it.

Here are proven strategies to get an office organized, increase productivity and help with information retrieval.

- **The “delete” key is your friend**

When processing your e-mail, quickly decide if you need to respond, file or delete. If the information is not useful, delete it before you move on to the next e-mail. Leaving information in your inbox that is not needed and is not deleted immediately creates unnecessary clutter. Your inbox should only contain e-mail that is waiting for a response or is waiting to be filed.

- **Create “filing cabinets” in your inbox**

Creating sub-files for your inbox is like creating “filing cabinets” for your electronic information. An organized system for filing e-mail is essential if you want to find and use the information again. It is important that the names you give your files are descriptive and have some consistency — making it easy to quickly locate information when needed. You could create files based on projects, people, associations, volunteer work, clients, prospects or a combination of several.

- **“My Documents” should not be used as a “one-size-store-all” location**

Storing all of your documents in the “My Docu-

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ments” file can make it very difficult to find a document when you need it. Instead, create multiple files and sub-files to store documents.

When setting up these files, you will want to go from the very general, to the specific. See the following example and naming conventions as an example of how you may wish to set up your files:

- Eliminate Chaos (Folder that contains all work files)
- Administration (Sub-file of Eliminate Chaos)
- Advertising (Sub-file of Eliminate Chaos)
- Brochures (Sub-file of Advertising)
- Internet (Sub-file of Advertising)
- Google PPC (Sub-file of Internet)

• **Use consistent “naming conventions” for computer files**

In addition to a well-organized filing structure for your computer files, you also need to use consistent naming conventions for the files stored in each folder so that as you have more and more documents, you can quickly locate the one you need. Go from the very general to the specific:

- Administrative Assistant May 2005.doc
- Bookkeeper January 2001.doc
- Client Services Manager December 2000.doc
- Consultant March 2001.doc
- Consultant — Senior March 2001.doc
- Executive Assistant June 2003.doc

In this example, the name of the position begins the file name and then to be certain when the job description was last written or updated, a date has been included. Notice how there are two “Consultant” job descriptions. By naming them both with the word “Consultant” they stay together in the file folder, rather than one being further down the list, if it were named Senior Consultant March 2001.doc.

• **The recycling bin and shredder are also your friends**

Are you hanging on to documents, articles, magazines or other information because you are going to read it “someday?” Be realistic — if the information has been sitting in piles on your desk or the surrounding floor for six years, or even a year, there is a high probability that you will never get around to reading this information. Even with the best intentions, the bottom line is that if you do not make the time it will continue to pile up and you may never get to it.

To Save or Not to Save

If you do make the time for those items in the reading pile, save only the information that you will use or refer to in the future. This information can be

stored in a variety of ways. Here are some examples of what you may find and how to store them:

- A web site you want to check out. Add it to your “to do” list. If you like the information on the web site — add it to your “Favorites” in your Internet Browser.
- A tip could be stored in a file called tips or more specifically, the type of tip. This way, you are not saving the entire magazine or article for the one tip.
- A product you wish to buy — if it is not an “immediate” purchase you will make, create a file folder or envelope for potential purchases.

Action Items

Let’s face it; we all have a long to-do list. Things like calls to make, errands to run, things to purchase, projects to complete and other little nagging items that must get done are all candidates for this list. Have only one location where you keep the majority of these items.

If you are a paper person, get yourself a small journal book to keep this information in — all in one compact place. Items such as sticky notes that you’ve written a number on so you can call someone, can be easily put in the book, or a business card can be paper clipped or stapled in your “call” section.

By implementing these strategies, your office will be well on its way to being a fine-tuned operation. Papers will be filed away, desks will be clear and employees will be organized and productive. □

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