Your Very Own

Law Firm Organization Checklist

Helpful Information for Law Firms to Organize Their Filing Systems

Uptime
LEGAL SYSTEMS

INTRODUCTION: Organizing documents and files is hard.

That's probably even more true for law firms. When you start as a solo law practice, files and documents typically start very organized. You create folders per client or per matter and maybe create subfolders to organize by type (contracts, motions, etc.) Nice and simple.

But as your client list and your team grow, inevitably, your perfect file structure starts to show cracks. People don't always follow your structure. Special cases have special circumstances. Over time, your simple, tidy legal file organizational structure turns into a giant mess of files and folders.

This checklist will help you take back control of your legal files, by implementing a simple, scalable process to organize old and future legal files.

WHY YOU SHOULD UPGRADE YOUR LEGAL FILING SYSTEM

Files aren't going away. Every contract, client intake form, NDA, police report (you get the picture) is critical to your work. A simplified and organized legal filing system can ensure you have easy access to these files at all times. As a result, you and your team can:

- Save time: Every minute you spend trying to track down a legal document is a minute stolen from more important work. A simplified filing system enables you to locate the files you need quickly.

- Improve the client experience: Have you ever had to ask a client to resend a document you couldn't locate? Maybe you've been late to a client meeting because you had to track down a file. These issues create unnecessary friction for your client who may already be going through an emotional and stressful situation. An improved filing system can eliminate these issues.

- Reduce in-office frustration: Legal teams are often frustrated by how difficult it is to track down the information required to do their jobs. And these seemingly small issues can have a direct impact on team morale. An updated filing system can help.

- Prep your law firm for growth: Even if you feel your file storage method is doable for now, it might not be in the future. Growing firms will always see an increase in files. And without proper storage, it's inevitable that things will get out of hand. Prepare for growth now by implementing a simple storage system.

Organizing your legal files is an important part of an overarching framework of process & procedure for your law firm.

STEP 1 – GOING PAPERLESS OR PAPER-LITE

Going paperless (or paper-lite) will help you streamline file organization process, as well as make documents more accessible and searchable.

1	☐	**DEVELOP A WORKFLOW** You must determine how documents enter your firm and how they'll be processed. For example, when you receive a document, what is the process that follows? Typically, this means scanning and saving the file to a document management system.
2	☐	**SETUP YOUR HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE** Some hardware is required to go paperless, including scanners, mobile scanners, and electronic signature tools. We recommend also selecting a document management system that keeps your documents organized and searchable.
3	☐	**KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING WITH HARD COPIES** Define your retention policy for hard copies. For example, this could be 30 days after a matter is closed.
4	☐	**MIGRATE YOUR EXISTING DOCUMENTS TO THE CLOUD** You'll need to "back-fill" your legal documents and matters by scanning and filing them into your new software. Start by scanning the documents you need quick access to first and refrain from creating new paper documents.

STEP 2 – SELECT YOUR FILE STORAGE PLATFORM

Next, you'll need to decide what kind of file storage / document storage system you're going to use for your firm. This is a critical decision and will affect your long-term file organization system. In general you have two categories of options to choose from.

☐	☐
BASIC CLOUD STORAGE	**DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE**
Basic cloud storage platforms like Dropbox, OneDrive and Google drive provide rudimentary online storage. Basic cloud storage allows you to create folders and organize documents within folders. Advantages • Low-Cost • Easy to Implement	Document Management Software like LexWorkplace provides client/matter-centric storage and organization of documents (and email), along with tools to manage documents. Features include full-text search, version management, document tagging and more. Advantages • Matter-Centric Organization • Full-Text Search • Version Management • Document Metadata / Profiling • Document Check-Out / In • Integrated Email Management

STEP 3 – PUTTING TOGETHER YOUR NEW LEGAL FILING SYSTEM

Once you've defined your processes and selected your document management platform, it's time to officially implement your new legal file organization system.

1	☐	**CLEANUP YOUR PAPER FILES** Regardless of the storage method you've decided upon, the first step is to take stock of and clean up your paper files. This step may be time-consuming and that's okay.
2	☐	**SET YOUR HARD COPY RETENTION POLICY** Now is the time to decide how long you'll keep any hard copies you receive from here on out. For example, you may choose to keep client hard copies for 30 days after a matter is closed.
3	☐	**OUTLINE & DOCUMENT YOUR FILE INTAKE & STORAGE PROCESS** Next, outline and document your new file intake and storage process. This includes the entire process from the receipt of a document to the filing of the document.
4	☐	**TRAIN YOUR LEGAL TEAM** With your new system documented and everything in place, it's time to train your legal team. Make sure everyone on your team is aware of which physical documents are staying and which ones can go.

STEP 4 – DEFINING YOUR DOCUMENT NAMING/PROFILING CONVENTION

Finally, you're ready to adopt document naming conventions (if you went the route of basic cloud storage), or document profiling policies (if you're implementing a Document Management System).

A	☐	**DEFINE DOCUMENT NAMING CONVENTIONS (BASIC STORAGE)** EG: DocumentDesc_MatterNo_DocumentNo.docx
B	☐	DEFINE DOCUMENT PROFILING POLICY EG: • Document Name: Required • Document Type: Required • Document Status: Optional / If Relevant • Document Tags: Optional / If Relevant

Profiling a document, or giving key documents specific metadata, is a powerful way to categorize different documents within a matter. Adopting a simple profiling policy help keeps documents identifiable at-a-glance, as well as search-able later.

CONCLUSION

With this checklist complete, you're well on your way to a flexible yet robust process for organizing your legal files. Check out our related articles on how to Organize Legal Files, and Law Firm Process & Procedure.