

White Paper on the Road to Overcoming Overload



Developing a Clutter Free Filing System

How Can You Reduce Your Information Clutter? Studies indicate that knowledge workers spend between 15 to 35 % of their time looking for information.ⁱ Using simple methods practiced by professional librarians worldwide we will help you reduce the clutter and the stress caused by information overload.

What is your answer to the following questions?

- ✓ Do you find it difficult to access data you know is buried somewhere in your e-mail system?
- ✓ When you walk into your office, do you see stacks of binders, magazines, and files that you have not used in the last few days or weeks?
- ✓ When you look at your desk, is most of it covered with paper?
- ✓ When you open your e-mail inbox, is it full of old and new, read and unread messages?
- ✓ Are you getting frequent notices from your system administrator that your e-mail account is running out of space?
- ✓ Is your computer system running slower by the month due to the high volume of stored or unorganized data?

If you answered yes to the above questions, you are not alone. More than ever before, today's knowledge workers are suffering from information indigestion and cluttered filing systems. A Reuters News Service study of 1300 managers found that:

- 38% waste substantial amounts of time looking for information
- 43% could not make important decisions because of information overloadⁱⁱ

Note:

* This whitepaper is extracted from our book *Overloaded? From overload to balanced living*. See inside the book at www.amazon.com

* If this page was sent to you by a friend we invite you to subscribe to our e-letter "On The Road To Overcoming Overload." Please go to <http://www.nomoreoverload.com/request.asp>



[Baha & Margaret
Habashy](#)

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Regretfully, the information glut is not likely to improve. The volume of information thrust upon you is expected to increase with every passing year. The time has come for you to take control and organize your files in a manner that reduces the physical and mental burden that comes from information clutter.

Before discussing a solution we should understand the fears some of us face about filing. In filing we confront three fears:ⁱⁱⁱ

1. **Fear of making a decision:** Where should I file it? What should I call it? If you don't know what to call a piece of paper, you will call it nothing. If it doesn't have a name, it won't have a home. Such papers end up in unnamed stacks or piled on your desks, in drawers or boxes. To confront this fear you need a clear naming or indexing convention that simplifies this decision-making problem. Spend some time documenting your filing index. Keep this index handy and it will help you overcome the fear of making filing decisions.
2. **Fear of discarding anything:** What happens if I need it someday? About eighty per cent of filed papers are never referred to again.^{iv} In our fast changing world the shelf life of most information is very short. So any paper you file today will likely become obsolete in a short time. Please remember, if it is important the originator should keep a copy and will be glad to provide you with another copy. So, take a risk. When in doubt, discard it. The rewards are worth it.
3. **Fear of not finding it when it is needed:** How can I trust the filing system? Your filing system needs to be simple and easy to maintain. Such a system will reduce the risks of misfiling and will help you find what you need, when you need it.

File the Way Professional Librarians Do

Your filing system is a resource to support you in fulfilling your roles and achieving your goals. It must be tailored to your personal needs and operating preferences. We suggest a structure that, when modified to your personal needs, can be of great help. It is a structure used by most professional librarians.

Librarians are entrusted with more books, files, and records than any other profession. If you visit a local library you find that librarians have a filing system that is based on what we call "Frequency of Use Filing System." This system illustrated in diagram 12 has three simple categories plus some supporting time dependant boxes:

1. The first category holds items that are in high demand. These are placed in close proximity to the librarian's desk. We like to

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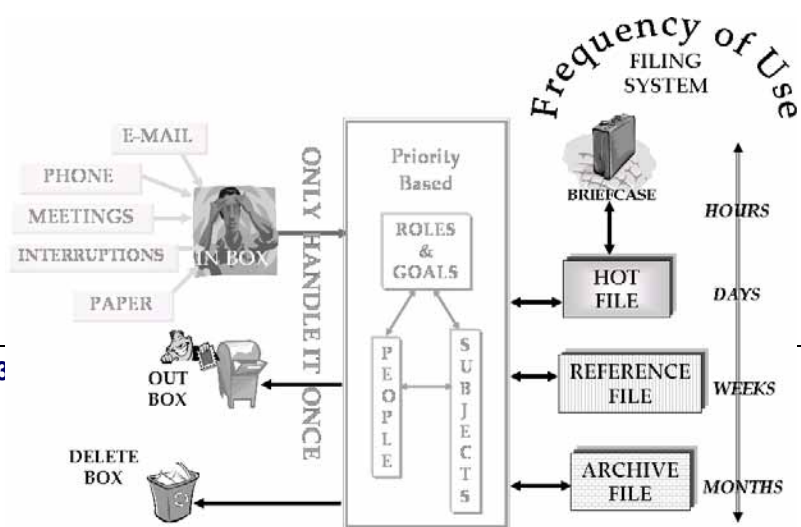


Diagram 12: Frequency Of Use Based Filing System™

call this the **HOT FILE**. This collection is usually small and kept clutter free. Often, only the librarian accesses and maintains these books or files.

2. The second category holds items that are used less frequently. These are placed in the stacks of the main library floor. We would like to call this category the **REFERENCE FILE**. Such a collection is usually much larger than the first. While still well organized, access requires a longer retrieval time.
3. The third category holds items that are seldom used. These are placed in the archives. We would like to call this the **ARCHIVE FILE**. Access to this collection is far less frequent and often requires a longer access time.

You too can file like a professional librarian. Create separate filing categories that are based on frequency of use. Let us call them the **HOT, REFERENCE and ARCHIVE**. Depending on your need, you can think of them as three different filing cabinets or filing areas. In addition, we are including three other parts of your filing system; they are your **OUTBOX, DELETE BOX** as well as your **BRIEFCASE**.

HOT FILE: This file holds items that you are presently working on, items you need to reference often, or items that require regular updates. This file needs to be crisp, small, and clutter free. Your ability to retrieve a document from such a file needs to be at short notice requiring quick access. As a matter of fact, the benchmark for retrieving a document from this file should be less than 60 seconds in the paper file and 30 seconds in the electronic file.

Let us help you see the picture. Suppose you prepared and sent an important management report. Shortly after sending it, you received a concerned call from a senior executive who had some questions regarding your report. You have an immediate need to engage your eyes and fingers in this dialogue. You need to have the report in your hand for this important discussion. If you are not able to have a printed copy of this report very quickly you can be assured that your stress level will increase, your effectiveness in the discussion will deteriorate, and the patience of the caller will be challenged. We hope you see the need for this file to be easily accessed so you can retrieve what you need very quickly. An additional benefit is that keeping this file small will reduce the maintenance time and effort it requires.



In the past I considered myself a very organized person. I had all my “work in progress” files sorted in piles on my desk. I thought that having them in sight would keep them properly prioritized. Now I know that this was distractive and counter productive. Now my hot file is placed in the left hand drawer of my desk and on the top of my desk all I see is the one file or project I am currently working on. This has removed the distraction and has allowed me to be much more focused and productive. This has been the one thing I changed that has most improved my effectiveness.

Ms. Cathy Ward, Manager, Human Resources

REFERENCE FILE: This file holds items that you have completed or need less frequently. These may include recently closed projects, annual budgets and corporate policies and bylaws. This file needs to be well-organized and available for access with limited effort. Your ability to retrieve a document from such files may require movement from your desk. Since you access this file less frequently you may choose to have it outside your office, freeing valuable office space for more useful activities.

In some cases it may be advisable to designate a common reference file for a department or a team of knowledge workers. The maintenance responsibility of the reference file, paper or electronic, may be delegated to a special person who takes ownership of it on behalf of the group. This will reduce duplication of records as well as ensure the effective use of this common resource.

Depending on the work you are doing at any given moment you may need to bring items from your reference file into your HOT FILE. An example of this may occur if you are working on the annual budget preparation, or a new policy development project.

ARCHIVE FILE: This file holds items that you are far less likely to need. This file holds items that you must keep for legal or historical reference. While such files still need to be organized their access is far less frequent than the HOT or REFERENCE files. Such files should be available in common storage and may even be delegated to an off site location or media.

Depending on the work you are doing at any given moment you may need to bring items from your ARCHIVE FILE into your HOT FILE. An example of this may occur if you should be called for a tax audit, a mortgage renewal or a court case of some kind.



A busy executive suite is a place where paper often flies in all directions. Filing important documents is often neglected in favor of more pressing matters. Due to more than five years of neglect our central executive archive library became a useless resource rather than a helpful asset. Distrust of this neglected system resulted in everyone from the CEO down keeping their own system of duplicated records.

As attempts to rely on external help failed I decided that “If it’s to be, it’s up to me.” As a senior executive assistant I was convinced of the value brought by a well organized central reference and archive library. With management support and the help of other Executive Assistants we now have a system that is efficient and effective for all members of the executive suite. Based on this and my many years of experience I strongly recommend considering the benefits of a centralized reference and archive library for most busy executive offices.

Ms. Marie Darling, Executive Assistant

DELETE FILES: Since a lot of the material you receive you never ask for or are less likely to need, we encourage you to be wisely aggressive in deleting items as they arrive. Be sure to do

this before even opening such items. Most computer and e-mail systems allow the option to retrieve deleted files within reasonable periods. You can set the parameters for such a set-up using the user or administrator options on most systems. Realizing that you can retrieve an item that you have deleted within a reasonable period will help you be more aggressive in deleting items that do not appear to be of high value at first glance.

You can adopt a similar **DELETE FILE in your paper world**. This is how it works:

- Designate a conveniently located box or drawer as your DELETE BOX.
- When you receive a document that does not fall within your HOT, REFERENCE or ARCHIVE priority, stamp it or mark it with the date received and place it in the DELETE BOX. Do this without opening it.
- If, for any rational reason, you need to recover that deleted paper document you still have the option to easily do so within a reasonable period such as two or three months.
- Periodically, once a month, as an example, take the oldest batch in that file, possibly three or four months old, and get rid of them permanently. Granted, there may be a slim chance that you may need what you have discarded. In this case, the originator should be willing to provide you with another copy. Let me assure you, the benefits of reduced clutter and stress will far outweigh the risks.

BRIEFCASE: The briefcase represents the information you are likely to need in fulfilling your role when you are away from your office or workstation. Your briefcase should hold information you have taken from your HOT FILE. Most of us tend to take more papers to a meeting than we need. Mistakenly, we fear saying, “I do not know” or our motto is “always be prepared for the unexpected”. This in fact, can cause you more stress and reduce your effectiveness.

Before a meeting, take time to review the meeting objectives and meeting agenda. Examine your file and take out only the most important documents you need from your paper, electronic or e-mail system. Organize your briefcase in the order of your meetings and related agendas. This will help you to reduce clutter, distraction and frustration. In addition, you will appear to others to be more organized and in control. This is very valuable. Few things are more damaging to your credibility than frantically thumbing through a stack of paper looking for information while all those around stare at you.

As you consider your filing methodology, it is important to apply the same principles to your paper files, your e-mail files as well as the electronic files (hard drive or shared drives). Very often we see clients using three different filing systems. Recalling and maintaining three filing systems leads to confusion and increases the mental burden associated with your information management.



I am no longer afraid to file. Before I organized my filing, I used to spend a lot of time debating what I should do with the flood of paper and electronic documents I receive. Now I have one simple filing system that reflects my leadership roles, my project roles and my operational roles. I no longer debate. I have researched my records retention requirements, organized a department db that houses project information and reduced the need to personally file documents. I also have a simple process that allows me to review what I need and discard what I do not need to retain. My files are cleaner and neater. I believe this has improved my effectiveness by at least thirty percent.

Ms. Joelle Perez, Finance Projects, Leading Manager

The following chapters are structured to lead you in designing, building, and maintaining a clutter free filing system.

Summary

- ✓ Knowledge workers spend too much time looking for information.
- ✓ Information clutter can reduce your effectiveness and hold you back from making important decisions.
- ✓ Many of us avoid filing because we fear making filing decisions, fear discarding an item that may be needed later, and/or fear misplacing items and being unable to find them when needed.
- ✓ Improve effectiveness using a “Frequency Of Use Filing System” including:
 - HOT FILE for items most frequently used
 - REFERENCE file for items needed less often
 - ARCHIVE FILE for items seldom required
- ✓ Be aggressive in deleting paper and electronic documents. Setting a recovery timeline will help you feel more secure in doing so.
- ✓ Reduce the clutter in your briefcase by organizing it in accordance with your meeting objectives and agenda. This will help you feel and appear more in control.
- ✓ Apply the same filing structure to your paper, electronic and e-mail files. You cannot afford to remember three filing systems.

Please note: This section will be of particular value to those who had a high score in the Statements 15 to 20 of the Overload Gauge in Chapter 1.13 – Designing a Clutter Free Filing System

Thoughts and Steps are provided to help design an information management system that supports your roles and helps you achieve your goals.

Developing a frequency of use filing methodology can reduce information clutter and give you access to what you need, when you need it. This methodology is similar to the way that professional librarians maintain vast collections of material and serve diverse demands for information.

In this chapter we wish to help you design a filing system that can support you in fulfilling your roles and help you in achieving your goals. In this design process we encourage you to think and to describe your needs in response to your roles, goals, and the people with whom you interact.

Before you jump into the filing system, it is important to look at your whole office environment, contents and layout. Are you comfortable in the present layout or are there more suitable arrangements? What can you do to enhance your concentration, reduce distractions or interruptions? What seating arrangements can you alter to enhance your communication with your visitors? Are you comfortable with your present furniture and equipment or should you change anything?



Interruptions had a negative impact on my effectiveness. On the physical side, my office is located in the crossroads of two main corridors and facing the main entry to our work area. Our office building houses over four thousand people. My desk faced the door of my office so I was in full view of all traffic. Greeting socially conscious colleagues was a ritual that repeated itself several times a day. Such interruptions had a negative impact on my effectiveness. Minor adjustments to my seating arrangements and the blinds on my glass wall helped reduce the eye contact with every passerby. This reduced my interruptions and helped me focus on the tasks at hand as well as the guests in my office.

On the mental side, I found it helpful to compartmentalize my activities. This has helped me focus on one type of work at a time, for example, batch processing e-mail and voice mail has helped me a lot. Allowing a transition between my roles at work and home life helps me focus on my responsibilities as a father and husband. This has had a great impact on my life.

Mr. Paul Kim, Manager of Finance

Design Your Work Space Paper Files:

Diagram 13 illustrates a simple filing layout. Further, to help you think of your needs we provided a table where we have listed a set of questions and a space for you to note your answers or desired needs or changes.



By virtue of my role, I receive and collect a lot of material and media products. At one time my office furniture was hidden under the burden of paper and clutter I collected as a communications director. Organizing my office and reducing the clutter has had a most significant impact on my productivity. Now my daily commitment is to always have nothing that is not filed on any of my desks. It is rewarding to hear visitors' comments about the tidiness of my office. This is not only encouraging but also motivating to enhanced communication and productivity.

In our personal and business lives we each have more than we can handle. Unless you get organized you will always feel forgetful, overwhelmed, and frustrated. My advice to any overloaded person is to develop a simple system to categorize and file what you need, based on your various roles and the priorities you have established. Be committed to maintain your system and that will bring a feeling of control and you will not feel overwhelmed as you otherwise could.

Ms. Shelley Fletcher, Communications Director

Consider first **your tangible world such as your desk and paper file**. Being tangible the paper file will help you experience this process in a more concrete way. Later we will relate the same experience to your e-mail and electronic files.

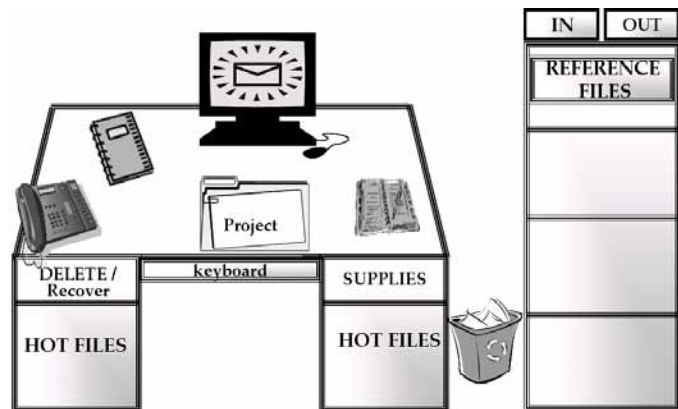


Diagram 13: Example, Clutter Free Office Layout

WORKING SPACE:	Yes / No & Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Do you need to change your office layout to enhance your concentration and reduce distractions? <input type="checkbox"/> Can you eliminate any clutter that reduces your effectiveness? <input type="checkbox"/> Do you have adequate desk and filing space? <input type="checkbox"/> Do you have adequate lighting to reduce eyestrain as you read and use your equipment? <input type="checkbox"/> Are you comfortable with your present access to equipment such as phone, computer, garbage cans and supplies? <p>Note: Diagram 12 provides a simple layout of clutter free office space.</p>	

INBOX	Yes / No & Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Where can you place your inbox to ensure the least distraction and frequent access by others? <input type="checkbox"/> What is the best structure for easy processing of your inbox? Do you need the material pre-sorted in multiple folders, for example, Important People, Projects, Literature 	
HOT FILES	Yes / No & Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Where should you place these files so they can be within very easy and quick reach? <input type="checkbox"/> Do you need a group heading based on your roles (e.g. Leadership, Projects, and Operation)? <input type="checkbox"/> Do you need a waiting, pending, or tickler folder? (1 to 31 days and/or 1 to 12 months) <input type="checkbox"/> Do you need a reading folder? <input type="checkbox"/> What subjects and folder headings will you need? <p>Note: Examine your present files and begin making your common index list of the various subject headings you need.</p>	
REFERENCE FILES	Yes / No & Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Where should you place these files to keep them within reasonable reach? <input type="checkbox"/> Where will you place reference books, magazines and periodicals? <input type="checkbox"/> What groups, subjects, and folders will you need? <input type="checkbox"/> Should your reference material be placed in a departmental or corporate file? <p>Note: It is very likely that you may find some groups and subjects repeated from your HOT FILE. This is fine. These files will hold similar but older material.</p>	
ARCHIVE FILES	Yes / No & Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> How can you reduce the clutter created by these files and keep them out of sight? <input type="checkbox"/> Should your archive material be placed in a departmental or corporate archive? <input type="checkbox"/> What groups, subjects, and folders will you need? <p>Note: It is very likely that the same groups and subjects will be repeated from your REFERENCE FILE. This is fine. These files will hold similar but much older material.</p>	

OUTBOX	Yes / No & Notes
<input type="checkbox"/> Where can you place your outbox to allow you to quickly place material in it and to provide others with easy access without distracting you? <input type="checkbox"/> What is its best structure? Do you need special persons, department, or special function folders?	
DELETE BOX	Yes / No & Notes
<input type="checkbox"/> Where will you place your delete files or box?	
BRIEFCASE	Yes / No & Notes
<input type="checkbox"/> Is your present briefcase adequate for your role and professional image? <input type="checkbox"/> How can you keep it simple and clutter free so it communicates confidence and control to others? <input type="checkbox"/> How can you maintain consistency with your HOT FILE?	



The team I manage is involved in a lot of projects. My files were organized alphabetically by project. Recently I was asked, “Donna, are you managing the projects or the people managing the projects?” This led me to examine my role and the impact my filing system has on how I behave. Now, I file by the name of the person managing the project. Now, every time I open my filing drawer I visualize how I should be managing my people, not the project. This has had a positive impact on the type of information I collect as well as how I manage my relationship with my staff.

Ms. Donna Johnston, People Manager

As an executive assistant I have a lot of demands placed on my time. Today there seems to be more paper in our “hoped for” paperless offices than ever before. Frankly, I find paper clutter not only confusing but also quite depressing. Some people, as part of their work plan, have the habit of shuffling bundles of paper from one side of their desks to the other. This is counter productive.



To reduce my paper clutter I have a “Pending” file, a “Probably Discard” file along with a well organized “Reference” file. This has helped me file what I need as soon as I get it and prevent paper from accumulating on my desk.

Ms. Marie Darling, Executive Assistant

Tips on Choosing Subject Headings

One of the key fears we face in filing is the fear of making filing decisions. Where can I file this? What should I call it? This fear can be relieved if you have a simple filing index that you can follow.

For librarians, choosing appropriate subject headings is a very important part of designing the library filing system. Our advice is to keep your filing system so simple that you and anyone else can find appropriate information easily. Keeping your system simple will benefit you greatly as it will require minimum maintenance and overhead.

Here are some tips to help you choose appropriate subject headings. As you read these tips, think first of your paper files. The paper files give you a tangible reference point to help you get started. Later you will find that the same principles apply to your electronic and e-mail files as well.

- The easiest way is to file in alphabetical order within a subject category.
- Use broad categories that may represent sections, drawers or cabinets. (Example: HOT FILES, REFERENCE FILES, ARCHIVE FILES). Then move to smaller categories. (Example: Leadership, Operation, and Projects). Then add sub-subjects. (Example: Project A, Project B, Project C)
- Use broad, generic headings rather than specific, hard to remember words, e.g. “Organizing” rather than “Time Management”, use “Financing” rather than “Loans, or Venture Capital”.
- Label folders with nouns whenever possible. A single noun is the ideal type of subject heading. Single nouns are simple in form and the easiest to comprehend and remember.
- Rarely use an adjective, adverb, date, or number as the first word (unless it’s a proper name or “tag” name). Example, a direct mail firm filed a set of hot mailing lists under the heading “New Lists” but a few weeks later the word “new” was forgotten. The lists remained lost in the “N” section of the file for over three years.^v A better way would be to file it under “Lists” followed by a secondary heading such as “New” or “Date”, etc.
- A correspondent’s name or company affiliation is better used as a subheading.
- Avoid using “Miscellaneous”. Using “Miscellaneous” will tempt you to avoid making a proper filing decision and your miscellaneous file will grow out of control.
- Use categories that will be easily understood by others and can give you options to provide subcategories, e.g. use “Banking” then you can add sub categories as “ABC Bank”, then “Checking Account”.
- Use comprehensive headings to include a substantial quantity of documents.
- When naming folders and subfolders, keep it simple. Attempts to make a folder name overly sophisticated will ensure that you won’t remember what you called it.
- Think of each hanging or main folder as the family name. This will help you think of subfolders as children in that family.

- Merge similar materials into relatively few “fat” folders, subdividing only when the folder becomes physically unwieldy, say approximately two to four centimeters thick.
- Cross-reference, where necessary, by adding a “SEE ALSO” note in a visible place.
- Create a subject index or a list of your filing system and keep it handy. It will simplify your decision making process, minimize duplicate files and coordinate the use of shared files. This will also enable others to retrieve files in your absence.

Take time and type the **subject or index list** of your new filing system. You will need this when we move to the next step - building your filing system.

Designing Your E-Mail and Electronic Files

Your electronic files include your e-mail, your hard drive or shared drives, as well as your favorite WEB folders. By now, we hope you have a clear picture of the structure and key subject headings in your filing system. Take time to review this index of your new paper filing system. This will help you as you move to design your electronic files.

E-mail: Your e-mail should follow the same structure as your paper files with some minor differences. For example:

- **INBOX:** Your e-mail system may enable you to develop **rules** to sort incoming mail into folders based on your roles and the important people with whom you interact. This can help you process your e-mail as it comes in, based on the priorities of your roles and goals. As you follow the **OHIO (Only Handle It Once)** principle, you move an e-mail message from these folders to your HOT FILE and then to the Reference folders as soon as you are finished with it. (For more on this, refer to chapter 8.)
- **HOT FILE:** As you follow the **OHIO (Only Handle It Once)** principle, your HOT FILE should be relatively small for the majority of material should be filed as a reference. You should still have a “Reading” folder to hold all the e-mails that you have scheduled for reading as well as low priority e-mail. You may also want to have the “Waiting” or “Pending” folder for items that are pending for input from a third party.
- **REFERENCE FILE:** Your e-mail REFERENCE file could be the main folder that you have to maintain. Be sure its structure supports your roles, goals and/or important relationships.
- **ARCHIVE FILE:** Your e-mail system may enable you to set automatic archiving rules. If established properly, this may reduce your need for setting up an ARCHIVE folder. If your e-mail system does not offer such an archiving tool, set your own folder and periodically move older items from your REFERENCE FILES to the archive folders.

Be sure to update your common subject or index list. Mark the subjects you need to include in the REFERENCE and ARCHIVE Folders. This will be helpful in the coming chapter as we attempt to build your filing system.

Please note that what we described above is highly dependent on the e-mail system you use and the software version you have installed on your computer. So, consult your application vendor for the best way to implement rules based e-mail management in your application.



Today, there are many new forms of business communication that did not exist in the past, for example, e-mail. This communication tool, while helpful because you can quickly and easily send messages to a number of people at once, has also established an expectation that we provide an equally rapid response. The sheer volume of e-mails to process can make you feel as if you are an air traffic controller! To me, it is important to have in my inbox only the items that I need to action. The rest, after scanning, are immediately moved to an appropriate file in my reference filing folders. Less clutter = less distraction.

Ms. Cathy Ward, Manager, Human Resources



As communication director in a geographically diverse organization, e-mail is a very important resource for my roles. E-mail has become the primary method of communication in most organizations like ours. Allowing e-mail to build up in your inbox makes it an unmanageable communication gateway. To harness the power of this tool, I have a simple filing system. Everything I get is filed either by an “action required” file or as a reference item into my reference file. Now I seldom have more than five items in my inbox. E-mail is not a problem for me anymore.

Ms. Shelley Fletcher, Communications Director

Electronic File (Hard Drive): Your electronic file should follow the same structure as your paper file with some differences. For example:

- **HOT FILE:** If you think of the folder “MY DOCUMENT” as your main entry point in your document filing system then you can establish a HOT FILE below that. Using Microsoft Windows Explorer, you can build a filing system that mimics the same structure in your paper file. If you wish, call this folder “1-HOT”. By so doing, your computer will establish the “HOT” File alphabetically before “REFERENCE” and “ARCHIVE”.
- **REFERENCE FILE:** Establish another folder calling it “2-REFERENCE” using the same approach. This is to be populated with sub folders as needed and or as listed in the file index that you typed. Note that by calling it “2-REFERENCE” Windows Explorer will place this folder alphabetically ahead of the ARCHIVE folder.

- **ARCHIVE FILE:** Similarly create a new folder calling it “3-ARCHIVE” to be populated with sub folders as needed and as listed in the file index that you typed.
- **DELETE FILE:** Windows will normally place deleted records and documents in a **recycle bin**. While in the recycle bin, items can be restored to their original location. Items in the recycle bin are erased based on user or system defined rules and frequency. Examine these rules and parameters to make sure they support your expectations.
- **OUTBOX:** You can consider the “Sent Folder” in your e-mail system as the outbox of your hard disk data. Remember, as a general rule, for legal and business reasons the originators of a document is responsible for keeping a copy of all items they create. Be sure that you can archive your outgoing documents and retain them long enough in accordance with your business needs.
- **BRIEFCASE:** Some may consider an electronic organizer or a small notebook computer as helps to take material while traveling. If so, most operating systems provide ways to synchronize such files for compatibility and ease of use. Sometimes these features are oversold. Be sure to understand how these systems interplay and support file sharing and updates; otherwise, you are likely to be disappointed.

Please Note: Mac users as well as users of other operating systems may note that their computers follow similar concepts of file management but use different names and labels.

Web Folders: The World Wide Web (WWW) has a wealth of electronic files that you can use. Most often you can consider this a REFERENCE file. If you keep an extensive list of “Favorites” in your web browser we recommend that you develop a structure similar to the one you established in the REFERENCE file.

Summary:

- ✓ Ensure that your workspace is organized to reduce distractions and interruptions.
- ✓ Reduce clutter by designing your filing system based on a frequency of use filing methodology. This includes HOT, REFERENCE, ARCHIVE, DELETE, BRIEFCASE, INBOX, and OUTBOX.
- ✓ Design your sub categories to support your roles. These may include Leadership, Operation and Projects.
- ✓ Keep your structure logical and easy to use; this will further reduce the maintenance overhead required.
- ✓ Follow the same structure for all your paper files, e-mail files, electronic files and web favorites.

Building a Clutter Free Filing System

Thoughts and Steps are provided to help build a filing system that supports your roles and helps you achieve your goals.

The frequency of use filing methodology can reduce information clutter and give you access to what you need when you need it. As you think of what you need and as you develop a filing structure that supports your roles and, be sure to type a clear subject index and keep it handy for you and others to refer to. In this chapter we will show you an example of a step-by-step **action plan** to help you build your filing system.

Building Your Work Space and Paper Files:

Again- first, think of or consider your **desk and paper files**. Being tangible, the paper file will help you experience the file building process in a concrete way. Later, we will relate the same experience to your e-mail and electronic files.

A common question we are often asked is, what kinds of files should I have? The key to rapid document retrieval is proper labeling of folders and files. If you are not used to doing a great deal of filing you may find the following tips helpful.

- Set up files logically so anyone can find them. If anyone else can find them easily, you surely will.
- Use boxed, hanging files. This allows you to place smaller sub-files inside each hanging folder. Use only one standard size of folders; do not mix them.
- Place labeled tabs in the front of the file. This gives quick fingertip access to the file as you add new material.
- Label files and drawers with big, bold, and easy to read lettering.
- Avoid the use of elaborate filing color schemes. It makes your filing system complex, and may be more confusing and a deterrent to quick filing.
- When holding paper together use the stapler instead of paper clips. Paper clips can catch other unrelated papers.
- As you add new files, update your subject list or index for ongoing reference

In the following table we provided a task list to help you. Plan adequate time for what could be a very enjoyable experience. We recommend two to four hours for each session, depending on

the condition of your system. Read the following task list and indicate your target completion date and any appropriate notes.

Tasks	Planned Activity Date / Notes
1. Examine your supplies and make sure you have all the essential supplies you need for your new filing system. See Supplies Checklist, Template G-that follows.	
2. Block an appropriate amount of time for this valuable effort. We recommend approximately two to four hours each time you work on your filing. You may need more than one session to organize your office.	
3. Place a sign, “ PLEASE DO NOT DISTURB. I AM ON A MISSION. ” Do not accept any interruptions.	
4. Place three boxes or garbage bags beside the exit door or nearby. Mark them respectively as DONATE, GARBAGE, and RECYCLE.	
5. Establish your best office layout plan for improved effectiveness. Make a sketch of this layout and make sure you have all the furniture and equipment you need. Rearrange your space, if necessary.	
6. MARK where you will place essential supplies, inbox, HOT FILES, REFERENCE FILES, ARCHIVE FILES, outbox, delete box, garbage can, chairs, etc.	
7. Remove the clutter. Totally clear the top of all your office furniture. This includes your desk, filing cabinets, and chairs. Place unwanted clutter out of sight in one of the containers you marked in step 4.	
8. EMPTY the contents of the space you allocated to be used for your HOT FILE. Place it on top of your desk. Add all other paper you had on or around your desk.	
9. Label that space as HOT FILES.	
10. Examine your subject list, label appropriate hanging folders and sub-folders and place them in the space you marked HOT FILES.	
11. Populate your HOT FILES by sorting all you have on top of your desk. Mark additional folders and files as you need to and adjust your subject list.	
12. As you go along designate two piles for REFERENCE and ARCHIVE material. Do not file these yet. Just pile them.	

<p>13. As you go along, delete, donate, and/or recycle any material that does not fit your new plan. (BE BRAVE.)</p> <p>14. Continue until you have finished filing all your HOT files.</p>	
<p>15. EMPTY all the contents of the space you allocated for the REFERENCE FILES.</p> <p>16. Label that space as REFERENCE FILES.</p>	
<p>17. Examine your subject list and ensure that you have correct hanging folders and sub-folders for your REFERENCE FILES and place them where you marked REFERENCE FILES.</p>	
<p>18. Populate your REFERENCE FILES by sorting the pile you designated as REFERENCE. Make additional files as you need to and adjust your subject list as you go along.</p> <p>19. As you work on your files designate any Archive material putting it in the pile you called ARCHIVE. Do not file this yet. Just pile them.</p> <p>20. As you go along delete, donate and/or recycle any material that does not fit your new plan. (BE BRAVE)</p> <p>21. Continue until you have finished filing all your REFERNCE files.</p>	
<p>22. EMPTY all the contents of the space you allocated for the ARCHIVE FILES.</p> <p>23. Label that space as ARCHIVE FILES.</p>	
<p>24. Examine your subject list and ensure you have correct hanging folders as well as sub-folders for all your ARCHIVE FILES and place them in the place you marked ARCHIVE FILES.</p>	
<p>25. Populate your ARCHIVE FILES by sorting the pile you marked Archive. Make additional files as you need to and adjust your subject list as you go along.</p> <p>26. As you go along delete, donate and/or recycle any material that does not fit your new plan. (BE BRAVE.)</p>	
<p>27. Examine your supplies drawer, donate, and discard what you do not need and organize for effective use.</p> <p>28. Place essential supplies, inbox, outbox, delete files, garbage can, chairs, etc. where you have planned.</p>	
<p>29. Do not take time to process your inbox now. You can do this in your normal processing cycle, provided you plan extra time for it.</p>	

30. Give your new office a proud look and congratulate yourself on a fine job.	
31. Invite your friends and teachable people to see your office. This will encourage you to keep it tidy and you will help others in the process.	

T emplate G – Supplies List

Essential Supplies List	Quantity		Quantity
<input type="checkbox"/> Binder 3 Ring		<input type="checkbox"/> Light, Desk	
<input type="checkbox"/> Binders 3 Ring - dividers		<input type="checkbox"/> Notepad	
<input type="checkbox"/> Box - business card holder		<input type="checkbox"/> Paper for computer printer	
<input type="checkbox"/> Box – IN tray		<input type="checkbox"/> Paperclips and holder	
<input type="checkbox"/> Box – OUT tray		<input type="checkbox"/> Pen, blue or black	
<input type="checkbox"/> Boxes or garbage bags		<input type="checkbox"/> Pens, Marking (Medium Tip)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Calculator		<input type="checkbox"/> Phone	
<input type="checkbox"/> Clock, Desk		<input type="checkbox"/> Planner or Diary	
<input type="checkbox"/> Computer system		<input type="checkbox"/> Power cord / Surge protector	
<input type="checkbox"/> Computer, Internet connection		<input type="checkbox"/> Puncher, paper (3 hole)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Computer, Office Software		<input type="checkbox"/> Rubber bands	
<input type="checkbox"/> Computer, printer and cartridges		<input type="checkbox"/> Ruler	
<input type="checkbox"/> Cutting blade		<input type="checkbox"/> Scissors	
<input type="checkbox"/> Date stamp and ink pad		<input type="checkbox"/> Scotch tape and dispenser	
<input type="checkbox"/> Envelopes - 9X12		<input type="checkbox"/> Staple remover	
<input type="checkbox"/> Envelopes for mailing #10		<input type="checkbox"/> Stapler	
<input type="checkbox"/> Fax Machine		<input type="checkbox"/> Staples for stapler	
<input type="checkbox"/> Folders Hanging (box-bottom)		<input type="checkbox"/> Wastebasket and Recycle Box	
<input type="checkbox"/> Folders Hanging - plastic tabs (Clear)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Folders labels (1”X2.63)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Folders, Manila			
<input type="checkbox"/> Highlighters			

Building Your E-Mail and Electronic Files

Now that you are becoming familiar with the process, in the following table try to follow the same structure as you build your e-mail files and your electronic or hard drive files.

Building Your E-mail Space and E-Mail Files

Put aside the time needed for this wonderful, freeing experience. We recommend two to four hours depending on the condition of your system.

Tasks	Planned Activity Date / Notes
<p>1. Remove the clutter by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Removing unused or extra folders in your e-mail system b. Unsubscribing from unnecessary news letters c. Examining your toolbars and customizing them for maximum efficiency d. Examine your contact list to make sure that it holds a list of your important people. 	
<p>2. Examine your filing index or subjects list. Identify the ones you need for your e-mail file. Remember you e-mail filing should follow the same structure as your paper file but it does not need to be identical.</p>	
<p>3. Assuming that “INBOX” is your main directory, create sub folders that support rules that you will create or filters that sort, and prioritizes your incoming e-mail as it arrives. For example, you may set up folders called:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Important people to Me (-IP to ME) b. Important People Copy to Me (-IP copy to ME) c. -Reading d. -Waiting or Pending <p>Note: By placing a (-) ahead of the folder name you instruct your system to place it first in the filing tree.</p>	
<p>4. Create rules and filters that you believe will help you sort and prioritize your incoming e-mail. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Set up a rule to place all the e-mail you receive from your important people in the folder “-IP to Me”. b. Set up a rule to place all incoming e-mail copied to you from your important people in the folder “-IP copy to ME”. 	
<p>5. Here we will assume that the working file is made up of the folders you assigned based on the e-mail rules you established above.</p> <p>6. Now, refer to your subject index and create a new sub folder called “2-REFERENCE” as well as any sub folders you will need.</p>	
<p>7. Create a new sub folder called “3-ARCHIVE” as well as any sub</p>	

folders you will need. This will act as a temporary holding place until you are sure that your Auto-archive system works properly.	
8. Populate your REFERENCE and ARCHIVE folders by dragging related mail to the appropriate locations. If need be, make additional folders and adjust your subject list.	
9. As you go along DELETE material that you no longer need. (BE BRAVE.)	
10. Give your new electronic e-mail filing system one good look and congratulate yourself on a job well done. Share your pride with supportive friends and teachable people.	

Building Your Electronic Space and Files

Here, using the following table, we will deal with your computer desktop and hard drive. Put aside the time needed for this freeing experience. We recommend one to two hours depending on the condition of your system.

Tasks	Planned Activity Date / Notes			
<p>1. Remove the clutter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Delete any unused icons from your computer screen desktop. b. Uninstall any programs that you do not use and remove them from your hard drive. c. Perform a hard drive cleanup d. Perform a disk de-fragmentation operation. (This operation may take some time) e. Perform a backup of all your critical files 				
2. Open Windows Explorer. (Users of other operating systems will find similarities but please also consider the differences.)				
3. Assuming that “ MY DOCUMENTS ” is your main directory, build 3 new folders:				
<table border="1" style="width: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td>1 - HOT</td> <td>2- REFERENCE</td> <td>3 - ARCHIVE</td> </tr> </table>	1 - HOT	2- REFERENCE	3 - ARCHIVE	
1 - HOT	2- REFERENCE	3 - ARCHIVE		
4. Examine your index or subject list. In the HOT directory build sub-directories and folders that support your subject list. Remember your electronic filing should follow the same structure as your paper file but it does not need to be identical.				

<p>5. Populate your HOT folders by dragging related files to the appropriate locations. If need be, create additional folders and adjust your subject list. As you go along move REFERENCE FILES and Archive material to the REFERENCE and ARCHIVE directories.</p> <p>6. As you go along DELETE material that you no longer need. (BE BRAVE.)</p>	
<p>7. Examine your subject list. In the REFERENCE directory build sub-directories and folders that support your subject list.</p>	
<p>8. Populate your REFERENCE folders by dragging related files that you placed earlier in that main heading to the appropriate folders and locations. If need be, make additional folders and adjust your subject list.</p> <p>9. As you go along DELETE material that you no longer need. (BE BRAVE.)</p>	
<p>10. Examine your index or subject list. In the ARCHIVE directory build sub-directories and folders that support your subject list.</p>	
<p>11. Populate your ARCHIVE folders by dragging related files you placed earlier in that category to the appropriate locations. If need be, make additional folders and adjust your subject list.</p> <p>12. As you go along DELETE material that you no longer need. (BE BRAVE.)</p>	
<p>13. Delete any unused or redundant folders.</p>	
<p>14. Re-examine your files index for consistency in naming conventions. Make the necessary changes.</p>	
<p>15. Give your new electronic filing system one good look and congratulate yourself on a job well done. Share your pride with your supportive and teachable people.</p>	

Summary

- ✓ Using the step-by-step instructions provided, start building your tangible workspace and paper file to gain a concrete perspective of the process and needed actions.
- ✓ Place your office furniture and equipment in a manner that enhances access and effectiveness. Build your HOT, REFERENCE and ARCHIVE paper files.
- ✓ Remove all clutter from your e-mail system, build rules to sort your incoming mail into HOT folders, populate your REFERENCE folders and set up your AUTO ARCHIVE system, if available.
- ✓ Remove any unused icons and programs and clean your hard drive. Using MY DOCUMENTS as your main folder, establish your HOT, REFERENCE and ARCHIVE folders. Using your subject heading list, build appropriate sub folders. Drag and drop documents and files to populate the folders you have already established.
- ✓ At all times delete and discard what you do not need. (BE BRAVE.)
- ✓ Examine your new filing system and share your success with others.

Maintaining a Clutter Free System

Thoughts and Steps are given to help maintain your filing system so that you can find what you need when you need it.

Did you know that *The Second Law of Thermodynamics (Law of Energy Decay)* indicates that that “every system left to its own devices always tends to move from order to disorder, its energy tending to be transformed into lower levels of availability, finally reaching the state of complete randomness and unavailability for further work”^{vi}

Stated differently, the best system will rapidly deteriorate if not properly maintained. If you do not pay attention to the ongoing maintenance of your system it will disintegrate into practical confusion becoming a liability rather than an asset. Having invested time and energy to bring your system to a good state, you need to maintain it so it provides you with ongoing benefits.

Maintaining your Filtering System:

You live in a changing world. Priorities, people and your needs change on a regular basis. Periodically, perhaps once every six to twelve months or as major changes occur, take time to examine your filtering system and document appropriate changes. Sit down in a quiet place by yourself. Bring your existing filter including a description of your roles, goals, people, and subjects as well as your Mission Statement. You may also find it helpful to refer to your

Information Overload Gauge, Chapter 1, as well as your information Anxiety Symptoms list. Try to identify areas of progress as well as areas of needed changes. Take time to think and to write your thoughts. Here are some questions that may guide you in this exercise:

- As you examine the filtering section of your overload gauge, how do you feel today? Can you identify areas of improvement or other areas that need some change? Document your thoughts.
- What changes have happened in your personal and professional lives that require a redefinition of your roles? What should be your response to these changes? Be sure to consider your personal health, spiritual, emotional and mental development needs.
- What changes have happened to the important and teachable people in your life that may result in changes to your relationship with them? What should be your response to such changes? Be sure to include family members in this exercise.
- What information have you been focusing on? How can you change your information focus so you can develop, grow and improve your effectiveness in the world around you? You may want to briefly examine your subject list and filing index.

Once you have collected these thoughts, refer to the appropriate templates, and take time to:

- Redefine your roles using adjectives
- Relate appropriate goals to your roles. Make sure they are SMART goals
- Update your people inventory focusing on the important and teachable people
- Communicate with the important people to ensure that they agree with you and support you in your redefined roles and goals
- Examine your mission statement and make appropriate changes, if needed
- Mark a time in future when you again plan to maintain your filtering system

Your filing system is an infrastructure to support you in fulfilling your roles and achieving your goals. The frequency of its maintenance requirements depends on your roles. The following are some thoughts and tips to guide you:

Maintaining your INBOX

Your information input handling protocols define the responsiveness and inbox processing commitments you made. This will help you maintain your inboxes. If you have committed to a well-balanced communication protocol and are exercising batch processing, your inbox will automatically be maintained.

Periodically, especially if you have experienced changes in your roles and goals, you may find it necessary to adjust your communication and inbox handling protocol. This should include your e-mail, phone, meetings, and paper handling protocol.

Here are some questions to help you think through such changes:

- Examine the inbox handling section of your Overload gauge and identify areas of possible need. What changes can you make to reduce the overload factor?
- Are your important people pleased with your communication level and quality? Take time to ask them.
- What changes do you need to make to your personal inbox handling protocol?

Note: Your briefcase should be maintained daily or every time you need to use it.

Maintaining your HOT FILE:

Your HOT FILE holds the information you need most frequently. It needs to be simple, crisp, and clean. The following may help you maintain this file:

- Examine the filing section of your information overload gauge and identify areas of possible need. What changes can you make to reduce the overload factor?
- Examine the contents of the HOT FILE and move any files you no longer need to the reference or archive sections.
- Where appropriate, discard, delete or donate any unwanted material.
- What is the best frequency of maintaining this file? Mark this in your calendar as a regularly scheduled appointment with yourself. We recommend that you consider this as a **weekly maintenance plan**.

Maintaining your REFERENCE File:

Your reference file holds the information you need less frequently. The following may help you maintain this file:

- Examine the contents of the reference file and move any material that is not needed to the archive sections.
- Where appropriate, discard, delete or donate any unwanted material.
- What is the best frequency of maintaining this file? Mark this in your calendar as a regularly scheduled appointment with yourself. We recommend that you consider this as a **monthly maintenance plan**.

Maintaining your ARCHIVE File:

Your ARCHIVE FILE holds the information you may never need. The following may help maintain this file:

- Examine the contents of the ARCHIVE FILE and discard any material that is not needed.

- Where appropriate, discard, delete, or donate any unwanted material.
- What is the best frequency of maintaining this file? Mark this in your calendar as a regularly scheduled appointment with yourself. We recommend that you consider this as an **annual maintenance plan**.

Maintaining your DELETE File:

Your DELETE file holds the information you hope you will never need but are not ready to discard. The following may help maintain this file:

- How is the delete or computer recycle bin parameter set up? Can you set similar parameters for your paper delete files?
- What is a reasonable retention plan for such a file? We recommend that you consider three months as a reasonable period.



Exercise:

Using the following table, write what you believe is a reasonable maintenance schedule for your system. Commit to regular frequency and mark it in your calendar

System To Be Maintained and Commitment: I will maintain my:	Frequency (Daily, Weekly, Monthly Or Annually)	When?
<input type="checkbox"/> Filtering System (Roles, Goals, and Important People List)		
<input type="checkbox"/> Mission Statement		
<input type="checkbox"/> Personal Communication Protocol (For e-mail, phone, paper, and meetings including the e-mail filtering rules)		
<input type="checkbox"/> Inbox (Allowing enough time to batch process e-mail, phone calls, paper and the thoughts that result from meetings and other input.)		
<input type="checkbox"/> HOT FILE (e-mail, paper, and hard drive)		
<input type="checkbox"/> REFERENCE FILE (e-mail, paper, and hard drive)		
<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHIVE FILE (paper and hard drive assuming e-mail archive will be controlled by auto-archiving function)		
<input type="checkbox"/> DELETE FILE (paper and hard drive)		

assuming e-mail will be controlled by its own system)		
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Summary:

- ✓ If not maintained, all systems deteriorate into decay and become more burdensome than useful.
- ✓ Maintaining your filtering system will help you identify changes to your roles and goals in response to your changing world.
- ✓ Maintaining your INBOX based on your communication protocols will help ensure your communication commitments to your important people.
- ✓ Maintaining your HOT FILE on a weekly basis will reduce the clutter and keep this file crisp and clean. This will enable you to find what you need quickly, reducing the time wasted in searching for information when you need it.
- ✓ Maintaining your REFERENCE FILE on a monthly basis will keep it organized and accessible for you and others without too much difficulty.
- ✓ Maintaining your ARCHIVE FILE annually will keep it organized and accessible for you and others without too much difficulty. In addition, weeding this file aggressively will significantly reduce your filing requirements and save you much valuable office space.
- ✓ Maintaining your DELETE FILE monthly will help you reduce the clutter without much risk. The originator of documents should retain copies of what they create and should be willing to provide you with copies, if you do not have one.
- ✓ Your briefcase should be maintained daily or every time you need to use it.

✓

ⁱ Susan Felding, “The High Cost of Not Finding Information,” *Kmworld*, March 2004, page 9.

ⁱⁱ Paul Waddington, “Dying for Information? A Report on the Effects of Information Overload in the UK and Worldwide.” <http://www.cni.org/regconfs/1997/ukoln-content/repor~13.html> (3 October 2001).

ⁱⁱⁱ Susan Silver, *Organized to Be Your Best! Simplify and Improve How You Work* ([Los Angeles]: Adams-Hall Publishing, 2000), page 105.

^{iv} Stephanie Winston, *The Organized Executive: The Classic Program for Productivity: New Ways to Manage Time, Paper, People, and the Digital Office* (New York: Warner Books, 2001), page 103.

^v Ibid, page 92.

^{vi} Frank Steiger, “The Second Law of Thermodynamics, Evolution and Probability.” <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/thermo/probability.html> (22 June 2004).