

Practice Management

A file management system for lawyers

By James W. Martin

Now that you have a fancy scanner, you can't resist digitizing every scrap of paper that arrives or departs your office daily. Your mounds of paper are quickly turning into mounds of computer files. So, you're faced with the same problem you always had: how to organize it.

Well, I've looked at a lot of software solutions: Amicus, TimeMatters, Worldox, Summation. Some simple, some complex. Some expensive, some very expensive. They all had one thing in common: they take control of your documents.

That's fine if you're in a big firm, but if you're a sole practitioner or small firm lawyer, then it makes sense to keep using Windows Explorer as your document file manager for as long as you can. It comes free as part of Windows; it's simple to use; and you get to control where your documents go.

So, here's a simple, hierarchical computer file management system for lawyers that just use Windows Explorer:

- **Create a Work Folder.** Create a folder (directory) on your hard drive named Work to hold all current client work. In Windows Explorer, click File/New/Folder then hit F2 and rename it Work. The path to this folder looks like this: c:\Work.

- **Create Client Folders.** Within the Work folder, create folders for every active client using just their last name or corporate name. Then your Work folder will be filled with subfolders named Adams, Jones, Smith, etc. The path to each folder looks like this: c:\Work\Adams.

- **Create Specific Subfolders for Each Client.** Within each active client's folder, create subfolders for each type of paper folder you maintain for that client. In my office, litigation files have the following types of files so each client's computer folder has the following subfolders: Pleadings, Evidence, Research, Correspondence, General. The path to each folder looks like this: c:\Work\Adams\Pleadings.

- **File Document Files in Specific Subfolders.** When you draft a new pleading using Microsoft Word or Corel WordPerfect, place the computer file in the Pleadings subfolder. Letters are created in the Correspondence subfolder. Research is downloaded from Westlaw or LexisNexis as Word documents and filed in the Research subfolder.

- **File Image Files in Specific Subfolders.** When documents are scanned, we save the digital image as a single multi-page TIFF file or a single multi-page PDF file. It gets filed in the specific subfolder. If the document is evidence, it gets filed in the Evidence subfolder; if a pleading, in the Pleadings subfolder; if a letter to or from me, in the Correspondence subfolder.

- **Name Files with Title and Date.** To help find the file later, it is best to give it a long file name that includes significant words from its title as well as its date and other information. The following is our naming protocol:

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| A. Pleadings: | 23 Motion Dismiss 6.13.03.doc
23 Motion Dismiss 6.13.03.tif
(pleading #, pleading, date, file type extension) |
| B. Correspondence: | Letter frm client 6.1.03.pdf
(letter, to/frm, person, date, file type extension) |
| C. Research: | Res juris Jones 223 So.2d 33.doc
(research, issue, case, cite, file type extension) |

- **Use Allowed Characters in File Names.** Many Windows users do not know that they can use the following characters in file names, which makes the file contents more recognizable: # & . ; \$ % - _ @ ~ ' ! () [] { } ^ . But it is important that the file name not use the following: / \ | : * ? " < > . (The period at the end of the preceding sentence was for proper grammar: you may use a period within file names.)

This system works fine for most legal matters that sole practitioners and small law firms handle, but for complex litigation and transactional work that have hundreds of each type of document, you may need to upgrade to a relational database system that one of the fine legal software purveyors provide.

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This system works fine for most legal matters that sole practitioners and small law firms handle, but for complex litigation and transactional work that have hundreds of each type of document, you may need to upgrade to a relational database system that one of the fine legal software purveyors provide. Until then, maximize your existing technology using these simple file management techniques with Windows Explorer.

James W. Martin is a contracts, probate and real estate lawyer in St. Petersburg, author of forms book for Thomson/West Publishing, past chair of The Florida Bar Coordinating Committee on Technology, and present chair of the St. Petersburg Bar Technology Section. Additional publications appear on his Web site at www.jamesmartinpa.com.