Weatherspoon & Voltz LLP
ATTORNEYS AT LAW

"Everything in its Place:
Office Equipment and File Management"
By Elizabeth Voltz
May 20, 2010

Law Office Basic Equipment

- *Furniture*: desk, chair, file cabinet, worktable, client seating. desk lamps
- *Computer Hardware*: desktop computer (keyboard/mouse/monitor), printer, UPS/surge protector, scanner, wireless connection
    - (Note: do you want to invest up front in a computer server? What about a laptop?)
- *Computer Software*: word processing, spreadsheet, Adobe, virus protection/firewall, billing/timekeeping, accounting, hard drive backup
    - (Note: does your practice required specialized software like SoftPro closing software?)
- *Communications*: phone service, internet service, answering machine/service, telephone, speakerphone or phone headset, cell phone
    - (Note: do you want to use VOIP phones?)
- *Basic Office Supplies*: coffee pot, calculator, cross cut shredder, trash cans, fire extinguisher, first aid kit, printer toner/ink, CD-RW or DVD-RW, pens, printer and copier paper, legal pads, file folders, file pockets, stapler, scissors, post-it notes, tape flags, etc.
- *Large Office Equipment:* photocopier, postage meter
- *Personalized Items*: business cards, envelopes, stationary, fax cover sheets
- *Other*: Web page, advertising materials, off site file storage provider (for closed files)

File Management

A.   **Electronic**. Most small law offices do not need to invest in document management software. Depending on whether you have a stand-alone computer that acts as a server, or an actual computer server, you can set up your own electronic file management system. In our firm, we have a server, and each attorney and paralegal have their own "folder" on the hard drive. Under my "folder", I have subfolders for "Clients", "Documents" (note: these are forms and other documents I've accumulated over the years but are not client specific), "Fax Cover Sheets," "Firm", etc. Then, each client has its own folder under the "Clients" designation. And each matter for a particular client has a subsequent folder. It ends up being a big tree! In order to locate documents on the system without a document management system, I've written a macro that inserts the file path into the document, and every document created on our system has a file path on it.

B.   **Hard Files**.

1. You should establish a checklist for new client/matter intake. This should include client name/address/description of the matter/telephone and email contact info and adverse party information (if any). The checklist should be used to enter information into your billing software.
2. An engagement letter or fee agreement should be sent to every new client, and a client signed copy should be placed in the file.
3. Think about your type of practice – how do you need to organize each file so you can quickly find what you need? In my real estate and corporate practice, we have established a color-coded file system: each client file has the following file folders: "correspondence/notes" (orange) and documents (blue). Then, we add additional colored folders as the deal progresses, such as "purchase or sale agreement" (green), lease (beige), "survey or zoning letter" (gray), "corporate or LLC" (purple), and "title" (dark green and sectioned). Other practice areas (e.g. litigation) have different file organization needs. If you are starting a new practice, I would suggest asking an experienced attorney if you could see how they've organized their files and then adopt their system – if they're successful, it must be working!

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B.   **Hard Files continued**
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4. There should be 2 main areas in your office for storing files – break these up into active and inactive. Active files should be easily accessible, since these are the files that are the most current. Move files to the "inactive" area when they've been dormant a couple of months or the matter is completed. We typically hold "inactive" files for 6-9 months on site before sending them to off site storage.

5. Store files in each of the active and inactive areas in alphabetical order first, then sort each client by matter number (e.g. .001 first, then .003). This will help you quickly find a file when you are searching for it. Make sure to clearly label files that have more than one "bucket," so that the entire file stays together. DO NOT EVER remove one folder from the file – always take the entire file and when you're finished, put it back. Removing single file folders is a guaranteed way to misplace the file folder or have it placed back in the wrong file.

6. Keep an accurate list (by date, box # and client/matter number) of all files you send to off site storage so you can easily recall them when they are needed again.