

Organizational Tips for Law Librarians

Guidance for maintaining an organized work space

By Kelly Lynn Anders



Stroll into any law library, and everything typically appears to be in order. Books are catalogued and shelved, desks are clear, and aisles are free of debris. However, looks can be deceiving. As a former law librarian, I well know the myriad challenges the profession faces with the management of information that comes in a variety of formats and only promises to increase over time.

Organizational Tips

The following tips can be used to develop a comfortable and professional office space.

- Determine which pieces of furniture are the most useful. Do they serve as functional pieces or merely as storage for items you have not seen in months or years?
- Consider a layout that enables you to view the entry into your work space while seated at your desk.
- Maximize storage options by using furniture with open and closed storage features, and consider options for vertical storage, such as bookshelves or an armoire.
- Spend at least one hour each week weeding and sorting materials, and spend five minutes each day straightening your desk before you leave. It may not seem like you are accomplishing much at first, but you will begin to see progress quickly if you keep at it.
- Consult with decision-makers in your library before making any drastic changes.
- Locate images of office layouts and furniture styles you like to guide you as you make changes to tailor your space to your needs and organizational type. Remember, it is possible to have a space that has a style you like and also effectively meshes with the way you live and work among your things.
- Use color coding to facilitate the management of projects for a variety of people and subjects.
- Consider the possibility of archiving materials in your office that you have not touched for several years or that have no immediate use or function.

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The legal profession can be busy and demanding—especially for law librarians. It can be very easy to become overwhelmed with all of the competing projects and responsibilities. In my book, *The Organized Lawyer*, I provide guidance and tips for attorneys who aspire to develop more organized work spaces in the office and at home. Many of these concepts can also be applied to the needs of law librarians.

More Work, Less Space

Working in the field of law requires the management of an enormous amount of information. We're tuned in, online, hooked up, and essentially accessible 24 hours a day—and challenges with information overload only promise to increase. However, unlike other professions, we cannot simply choose one method of communication or information storage over all others because the law is practiced in all forms due to tradition and necessity. As a result, records must be kept in print, electronically, and in various forms of the two.

During the past decade, the amount of space we have to work with has decreased. In many workplaces, offices are smaller and cubicles are the norm, and many law libraries are losing precious square footage to accommodate other projects. So not only is there more information to manage, but there's less space in which to do it.

Regardless of these challenges, it is possible to maintain an organized space that successfully accommodates your work, as well as projects you might be managing for others. No one expects to see a space that is entirely clutter-free, but most people feel more comfortable in an office that offers a clean chair, a small space to set down personal items, and surroundings that demonstrate control over one's workload.

Organizational Styles

I believe we all have a particular organizational style that impacts how we view our possessions, live with them, and keep them organized—or disorganized. What works for some does not work for others. In *The Organized Lawyer*, I classify the four primary organizational types as stackers, spreaders, packrats, and free spirits. An organizational questionnaire can be found in Chapter 2, which helps readers determine their type. A brief summary of organizational types is included there as well.

Stackers organize items by topic in stacks. They are visual and tactile and like to give the appearance of order. The busier these people are, the more stacks they have. Some stacks will be

haphazard, which adds to the stacker's stress. Like stackers, spreaders are visual, but they must be able to see everything they're working on. Free spirits are idea lovers who collect myriad books, reports, periodicals, and other items of intellectual appeal. Typically, they keep very few personal belongings around their work spaces. In contrast to free spirits, packrats have emotional ties to things. They like the feeling of fullness around them, and many items they use have a personal meaning.

There is no "wrong" type, and many of us will have tendencies in more than one type. Our primary type takes precedence when we're under the greatest amount of stress.

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For example, stackers frequently work best with open storage because they tend to squirrel away items in closed storage, while packrats benefit from closed storage because it hides items that others might view as unsightly. Some free spirits should consider eliminating their print subscriptions to periodicals because they can quickly pile up, while others can keep them maintained and under control. For spreaders, problems often arise when they must sift through layers of "spread" to find papers that all look the same.

These are just a few examples of how our particular organizational styles influence our surroundings and can be used to our benefit in developing and maintaining an organized work space.

Office Layouts and Obstacles

Much like the canvas of a painting, the layout of your work space is the foundation. It constitutes the size, format, and boundaries within which you must work to create a concept that inspires your own personal comfort and confidence. Furniture placement within that layout can also impact your space.

Are there potential obstacles or rules that may exist that could impact the decisions you make to alter your space? Is there any furniture affixed to the floor that cannot be moved? Are there built-in bookshelves or cabinets you must work around? Where are the jacks for your computer and telephone? If you're working in an office, does every wall have a plug? If you're working in a

cubicle, can anything be moved? How tall are the walls? Are you permitted to hang anything on the walls in your office or cubicle? What is the policy for

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bringing in items from home? What is the general feel of the décor in common areas, and how much can you realistically stray from that without a few words of opposition from the powers that be?

Organization is a Process

Like law, organization is a topic with many layers and nuances, and it impacts us all a little differently. Organization has visual and conceptual elements, and it is not enough to simply know where everything is. There are many people who use this notion as an excuse for not developing a system that looks as great as it supposedly works. It is not enough to *be* organized; you must also *appear* organized to receive the most benefits from this process.

Most importantly, remember that there will be times when you may fall off of the organizational wagon, but please keep at it. If you had the wherewithal to get through library school (and/or law school), then you have what it takes to

develop and maintain an organized work space. ■

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