17 Filing and Indexing

17.1 Filing

Filing is a commonplace feature of clerical work and is given little consideration until a document is urgently needed and cannot be produced: then its importance is recognised. It has been termed 'the memory of the business' which is a very apt description.

Filing has two main functions (a) to preserve documents; (b) to provide quick and easy reference to documents.

In order to provide these conditions any system of filing must be properly planned and must have regard to various factors, some of which are conditioned by the actual matter to be filed and some by the circumstances surrounding the need for retention. The factors which require attention when designing a filing system may be put as questions along the following lines:

1. What kinds of documents are to be filed? Are they simple flat pieces of paper of standard sizes, such as letters, or are they bulky, such as contract documents? Whatever their physical characteristics, the method used must be suitable for them and, relative to this, must be as quick and simple to use as possible.

2. How important is physical protection of the documents to be filed? Is simple fire protection enough, or is security against other risks such as burglary necessary? The nature of the document itself and the ease with which its contents can be reconstructed have to be considered here. Loss in any way of the monthly lists of outstanding debtors would be inconvenient but not catastrophic because the information is easily obtainable again from the sales ledgers, but the loss of the title deeds to a factory could entail considerable expense and inconvenience.

3. What is the acceptable delay between the demand for a document and its production? This will determine where and how the document is filed. Information on a customer is normally required very quickly, but if share certificates in respect of outside investments are called for a day's delay would not be untoward. Thus, filing in the sales department must be readily accessible, but valuable documents should be stored with a view to security first – with the bank or in the strongroom – even though access will be delayed.

E. C. Eyre, Office Administration
© E. C. Eyre 1989
4. **What length of time is it required to retain the documents?** Some may be required to be kept permanently and some only for a few weeks. How they are filed will be determined by this factor to some extent.

5. **Who is going to use the files? How are they going to be identified?** The answers will have a definite bearing on how the files will be stored. Files handled by the sales manager will frequently be differently kept from those handled by the accounts department.

To the basic factors mentioned above must be added other considerations such as the volume of filing to be expected and the manner in which it will flow in, the need for economy in the system, the need for the method to be easily expandable to meet future demands and expansion and, most necessary, the need for the filing in any particular section to be consistent so that there is never any doubt as to where a particular document is located.

### 17.2 Classifications

An important aspect of efficient filing is the use of suitable classifications appropriate to the filing problem in hand. Any form of classification should be as simple as possible in any particular circumstances, with its first aim being the rapid location of documents and its second the possibility of misfiling being reduced to the very minimum.

The common classifications are:

1. **Alphabetical.** This is probably the most common classification used: it is extremely simple to understand and is completely self-contained – that is, it needs no auxiliary index.

   The chief advantage of alphabetical classification is its simplicity: anyone who knows the alphabet can do the filing. Its chief disadvantage is that the amount of filing space needed for each section has to be forecast so that enough room is available throughout the period when the filing is current. This is not an easy thing to do and when alphabetical filing is used it is frequently found that parts of the system are left under-employed whilst others overcrowd the space allocated, necessitating frequent reorganisation of the filing space.

2. **Numerical** This is another popular classification under which all files are numbered consecutively as they are raised and are stored in strict numerical order. This has the advantage that no forecasting of space requirements is necessary except for the overall volume of filing, and filing is quite positive and easy – everyone can count. Its disadvantage lies in the fact that a separate index has to be maintained – normally on an alphabetical basis – in order that the number of any particular file may be known. This slows down the location of files to some