

Taming the Digital File Monster

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(All website addresses were current as of 07/24/2024)

There are many ways to organize your digital files. The only perfect organization system, is the system that works for YOU – whatever system that might be. Presented here are a few things that I hope will help you get your digital files organized but these are, by no means, the only “right” way to organize. Your computer is basically a file cabinet – a digital file cabinet. Many of the same organization choices you make for your paper files can be applied to your digital files.

File Storage Options

- On your computer
- On an external device
 - External hard drive
 - USB stick/thumb drive
 - SD cards
 - CD/DVD
 - Network Storage
- In the cloud
 - Google Drive/Google Photos
 - DropBox
 - NordLocker
 - Box
 - iCloud
 - SugarSync
 - Microsoft OneDrive
 - iDrive
 - Proton Drive
 - Jottacloud
 - OneHub
 - Internxt
 - MEGA.io

Backup Options

- On an external device
 - External hard drive
 - USB stick/thumb drive
 - Server
- In the cloud
 - Google Drive
 - DropBox
 - Box
 - EaseUS
 - iCloud
 - Sync.com
 - Microsoft OneDrive
- Backup Service
 - Backblaze
 - Carbonite
 - iDrive
 - Acronis Cyber Protect
 - Duplicati
 - MSP360 (formerly Cloudberry)
 - Arq
 - Box

Folder Structure

- Have a planning phase and write your structure on paper.
- Create a file structure that makes sense to you.
- Don't overthink your file structure.
- Only create new folders if you find you're saving similar files in the same place and that place doesn't exist yet.
- Have a root folder at the base level of your computer's drive.
- Put your file storage on only one drive.
- For multiple computers, use the exact same structure on all of your computers.
- Keep application files and folders separate from YOUR files.
- Create a folder template for efficiency and consistency.

File Naming Conventions

- Naming conventions are the way you name your files or folders and they should help you identify what resides in the file or folder.
- Use descriptive file names but stay away from long file names.
- Use hyphens or underscores in the file name to make file names easier to read.
- Keep just one copy of a file – never have two copies of the same file. Use a shortcut instead. (Backup copies excluded.)
- Adding a special character at the beginning of a file name will move that file to the top of the list of files/folders.
- When using numbers in file names, consider preceding the number with zeros (i.e., 001, 002, etc.) to help sort the files.
- Spelling and grammar matter, even in naming conventions. Make sure your spelling and grammar are accurate so they appear correctly in searches.
- Just say no to abbreviations whenever possible. They might make sense at the time you saved the file but there's a potential that you'll forget what they mean. If you use abbreviations, consider keeping a key (both digital and printed).
- Consider adding metadata to your files; metadata helps when you use the search function on your computer.

Getting Organized

- **Start small:** Your files didn't become disorganized in a day, don't set the expectation for yourself that you'll get organized in a day. Choose a set amount of time at a specific interval to work on organizing your files. This could be 10 minutes a day or one hour every two weeks. It doesn't matter what the interval is as much as making sure you adhere to that schedule and don't procrastinate.
- **Adjustments are okay:** It's okay to make small adjustments to your file organization if the adjustment makes sense to you. Be aware though, if you make a lot of adjustments or large adjustments the system you set up may become inefficient and take entirely too much time to maintain.
- **File immediately:** Are you guilty of finding document after document and saving them all as quickly as you can so you don't lose out? STOP doing that. As soon as you download or create a new file, put it in the appropriate folder. Avoid the Downloads folder if at all possible. It really doesn't take that much more time to file it immediately if you have an efficient folder structure and then you don't have to spend time organizing those files later.
- **Organize the orphans too:** All your files should be contained within a folder. Don't leave an orphan file sitting alone and uncategorized.
- **Delete unused items:** Your organizing sessions are the perfect time to evaluate your old files. If files are unused – *truly unused, not just an archived file*, treat them the same way you would treat a candy wrapper – trash them.
- **Regular maintenance:** Set an appointment to maintain your organized files. Whatever the interval set a scheduled time to cull your files regularly.
- **Management software need not apply:** Sure, you could spend the big bucks to get yourself some management software but consider this: management software does exactly the same thing that manual organization does. It just does the organization with more bells and whistles and for a higher price.
- **Focus on one digital area at a time:** Don't jump from area to area or folder to folder during your organizing efforts. Concentrate on one area at a time until you finish that area (in this context, an area could mean a folder, a drive, etc.)

Tips & Tricks

- Don't save files on your desktop; it's not a dumping ground. A cluttered desktop can be a source of stress and frustration. And your computer's desktop likely isn't included in backups so anything stored on the desktop runs the risk of disappearing if your computer crashes.
- Use shortcuts for a quicker way to access items you use often. A shortcut allows a file to appear in two places at once without requiring you to copy and paste that

file in multiple locations and try to remember to keep multiple file copies sync'd and updated. They also work well on your computer's desktop.

- Put a shortcut to Windows Explorer (or Mac Finder) on your desktop or quick launch bar for quick and easy access.
- Use the computer's search function often – it can make finding a file quick and efficient. Keep in mind that the computer's search function works very similar to a Google search – you can use wildcards, quotation marks, etc. to make your search more specific.
- Don't use files as digital post-it notes. If you need to write (or type) notes or thoughts, use a note-taking program or app (such as Evernote or OneNote). Doing so will keep stray text files off your computer.
- Don't forget to have a backup plan. Backups are best in threes – three different and separate backup locations, with at least one residing off-site (i.e., not in your home).

Have Some Fun!

Have some fun by customizing your folder icons. You don't have to stick with that boring folder icon provided by your computer's operating system. Search the web to find some fun folder options – or use your own images! As a bonus, unique and colorful folder icons can help you quickly identify your folders and you can coordinate with your physical filing. There's one important thing to keep in mind, however. When you change the icon on an image folder, the preview function for that folder disappears.

Here are a few places I like to look for unique and fun folder icons:

- Folder Marker (<https://foldermarker.com/>)
- Pixabay (<https://pixabay.com/>)
- Iconfinder (<http://www.iconfinder.com>)
- Deviant Art (<https://www.deviantart.com/>)
- IconArchive (<http://www.iconarchive.com/>)
- Favicons (www.favicon.cc)
- DigitalCitizen (<https://www.digitalcitizen.life>)
- Etsy (www.etsy.com) – icon packs on Etsy are for sale, there are no free packs
- Adobe Stock (<https://stock.adobe.com>)
- FindIcons (<https://findicons.com/>)

Don't stop with organizing just your digital genealogy files – you can apply these concepts to ALL of your digital files!