

# Flat File Cabinets

These are the 10 most commonly asked questions about flat file cabinets for commercial office environments, with straightforward answers to help you make a confident, well-informed purchase decision.

## Top 10 Questions — Flat File Cabinets

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### What interior width flat file cabinet do I need for architectural drawings?

ANSI D (22" × 34") and ANSI E (34" × 44") engineering drawings require a cabinet with at least 43-inch interior width. Full-size architectural drawings in ARCH E format (36" × 48") require a 50-inch interior width cabinet. The practical rule is to choose an interior width at least 6 inches wider than the widest sheet you need to store — this allows documents to be placed without forcing corners and leaves clearance for hanging file jackets. For a typical architecture or engineering firm storing a mix of standard drawings, the 43-inch interior width handles the vast majority of sheets. If you regularly work with ARCH E sheets or oversized GIS maps up to 50 inches wide, specify the 50-inch model.

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### How many drawers do I need and how much does a flat file hold?

Five-drawer configurations are the commercial standard for flat file cabinets. Each drawer holds approximately 50 unfolded sheets per drawer for typical bond-weight drawings, though heavier materials (mounted photographs, foam-core art) have lower per-drawer capacity. A five-drawer unit can store up to 250 active-project sheets or approximately 450–600 semi-active sheets when packed more densely. For active project archives, plan approximately one drawer per active project set or drawing category. The cabinet interior depth of 32–38 inches accommodates standard drawing heights for ANSI D, E, and ARCH E sheet sizes. Never exceed the rated per-drawer weight of 50–60 lbs — overloading causes drawer sag and damages the slide mechanism.

**3****Should I get a flat file cabinet with or without a base?**

With-base units sit at approximately 22.5 inches — ergonomic working height where drawers can be accessed comfortably without bending. The integrated base typically cannot be stacked on top of. Without-base (flat) units sit at approximately 16.5 inches and are designed to be modular and stackable — two units can be stacked on a companion base, approximately doubling the drawer count in the same floor area. For most offices with moderate storage needs, a with-base unit at comfortable working height is the practical choice. For archive-heavy organizations needing maximum drawer count, the stackable no-base configuration is more efficient. Never stack flat file cabinets beyond the manufacturer's specified maximum — the combined weight of loaded drawers creates significant top-loading stress.

**4****What construction features should I look for in a commercial flat file cabinet?**

Ball-bearing drawer rollers are the commercial standard — they provide smooth, consistent operation across thousands of open-close cycles and outperform nylon rollers under heavy loads. Positive closure ensures each drawer closes completely and stays closed, preventing dust infiltration and document curling. A rear hood (formed metal stop at the back of the drawer) prevents documents from sliding out the rear when the drawer is fully extended. A hinged front depressor (spring-loaded flap at the drawer front) prevents documents from curling over the front edge when the drawer opens. Courtesy stops prevent accidental full drawer removal. Chrome handles with label holders allow each drawer to be identified. Verify all five features are present before ordering a commercial model.

**5****How is a flat file cabinet delivered and does it ship assembled?**

Commercial flat file cabinets ship fully assembled — this enables rapid deployment but means the cabinet cannot be disassembled to fit through narrow doorways or elevators. A 50-inch, 5-drawer unit with base weighs approximately 280 lbs empty and 350 lbs when loaded. Most commercial flat file cabinets require dock delivery — a loading dock or freight elevator is necessary; residential delivery is not available for full-size units. Measure all access points (building entry, corridors, elevator interior dimensions, and the destination room doorway) before ordering. Plan for permanent placement at delivery — repositioning a fully loaded flat file is a significant undertaking requiring 2–3 people and proper equipment.

**6****What color options are available for flat file cabinets?**

Commercial flat file cabinets are finished in baked enamel — a factory-applied finish electrostatically bonded and cured at high temperature, which provides far superior durability compared to air-dried paint. Standard color options include Tropic Sand (warm beige/tan — the most commonly specified finish for architecture and engineering offices), Black (modern, high-contrast — popular for design studios and media companies), Gray (neutral medium gray — coordinates with modern office palettes), and White (clean, minimal — popular in healthcare and education environments). Most manufacturers do not offer custom colors on flat file cabinets. If matching an existing palette is critical, verify with a physical color sample before ordering — catalog renderings of baked enamel finishes vary significantly from screen to real life.

**7****Do flat file cabinets come with locks and do I need one?**

The most common commercial locking configuration on flat file cabinets is a single-key lock that secures all drawers simultaneously — one key locks and unlocks the entire unit. This provides document security without the complexity of per-drawer key management. For any environment storing regulatory submittals, client deliverables, government drawings, or legally sensitive project files, specify a locking model — the incremental cost is minimal compared to the risk of unauthorized access. Non-locking models are appropriate for open-access environments where document security is handled at the room level (key-locked door to a secure records room). Master key systems are available from some manufacturers for multi-cabinet installations.

**8****What is the difference between a flat file cabinet and a plan file chest?**

Flat file cabinet and plan file chest refer to the same product category — the terms are used interchangeably in the industry. Both describe a steel cabinet with wide, shallow horizontal drawers designed for storing large-format documents flat without folding. Some manufacturers use 'flat file' while others use 'plan file,' 'plan chest,' or 'map cabinet.' The distinction that does matter is between a flat file with shallow drawers (the standard configuration, with drawers typically 2-1/8 inches tall) and a flat file with deeper drawers designed for storing portfolios, mounted artwork, or foam-core boards. When ordering, confirm the specific interior drawer height matches the thickness of the materials you need to store.

**9****How do I organize documents inside a flat file cabinet?**

The most effective approach is to assign each drawer a project, client, date range, or drawing category and label the drawer face with a label holder (standard on commercial models). Within each drawer, use hanging file jackets or polyester file pockets to separate individual documents or drawing sets — these prevent sheets from mingling and allow each document set to be lifted out as a unit. For archival-quality storage of photographs, fine art, or historical documents, line drawer interiors with acid-free tissue or archival board to prevent chemical interaction between the steel surface and paper. Periodically review drawer contents and retire inactive drawings to a less-accessible secondary archive to keep active-use drawers efficiently organized.

**10****Can flat file cabinets be used for art or museum storage?**

Yes — flat file cabinets are widely used in museum, gallery, and archival storage for fine art prints, photographs, and historical paper-based documents. For archival-quality use, specify cabinets with baked enamel interiors (not raw steel), and line each drawer with acid-free tissue or archival board to create a barrier between the steel surface and sensitive materials. Ensure the cabinet has positive closure to keep dust out and a controlled humidity environment in the storage area. Avoid storing wet or damp materials in flat files — moisture can transfer between stacked items and accelerate deterioration. Some manufacturers offer flat files designed specifically for museum use with additional chemical-resistance treatments and finer drawer clearances for sensitive document handling.

Have more questions? Our office furniture specialists are ready to help.

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