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Storage & Filing

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

Top 10 Questions — Storage & Filing

1 **What is the difference between a lateral filing cabinet and a vertical filing cabinet?**

Vertical filing cabinets have narrow drawers (15 inches wide for letter, 18 inches for legal) that pull out front-to-back, making them compact in width but deep in footprint. They are ideal for individual workstations and tight spaces where floor width is limited. Lateral filing cabinets have wide drawers (30–42 inches wide) that pull out side-to-side and are 18–20 inches deep — a much shallower footprint that allows them to fit along walls and double as credenzas or printer stands. A lateral drawer holds significantly more files per drawer — 350–400 letter folders versus 150–200 in a vertical — making laterals the standard for shared filing areas and high-volume departments. For most commercial shared filing environments, lateral filing cabinets are the practical specification; vertical files are appropriate for personal workstation filing or in offices where floor width is severely constrained.

2 **What steel gauge should I look for in a commercial filing cabinet?**

Commercial filing cabinets are constructed from cold-rolled steel, and gauge (thickness) directly determines strength and durability. The lower the gauge number, the thicker and stronger the steel. For commercial environments: 18-gauge (0.050 inch) is premium commercial grade, appropriate for high-security and high-cycle institutional environments; 20-gauge (0.036 inch) is the standard commercial specification for general office filing and shared departmental storage — the most common commercial specification; 22-gauge (0.030 inch) is light commercial, adequate for personal workstation filing and low-volume use. Anything above 22-gauge (thinner steel) is residential grade and should never be specified for commercial environments — residential-grade cabinets fail significantly faster under the daily cycle counts of a commercial office.

3   What is full-extension vs. three-quarter extension on filing cabinet drawers?

Full-extension drawer slides allow the drawer to open 100% of its depth, giving complete access to the entire contents from front to back — files at the very back are as accessible as files at the front. Three-quarter extension slides open the drawer approximately 75% of its depth, leaving the rear 25% partially concealed and requiring the user to reach over the front files to access items at the back. For any shared lateral filing environment where the drawer is 30–42 inches wide, full-extension slides are essential — without them, the deepest files in a shared lateral drawer effectively become unreachable without significant inconvenience. Full-extension slides are rated for 75–100 lbs. Three-quarter extension is adequate only for personal workstation vertical files where the drawer depth is shorter and access is less frequent.

4   How much floor clearance do I need in front of filing cabinets?

Lateral filing cabinets require 36–42 inches of clear floor space in front of the cabinet for a drawer to fully open and for the user to stand and reach comfortably. In practice, allow 42 inches minimum in any shared filing area where multiple people access drawers simultaneously. Vertical filing cabinets require 40–48 inches of clear floor space in front — their drawers extend fully forward and require more depth than lateral drawers. In addition to the front clearance, maintain 36-inch clear aisles around filing areas for ADA accessibility and emergency egress. When planning a filing room, lay out cabinet positions on paper before purchasing to verify that open-drawer clearances do not overlap — two facing lateral cabinets with fully open drawers require a combined 72–84 inches of aisle width between them.

5   What locking system should I specify for HIPAA or confidential record environments?

HIPAA-regulated environments, legal departments, HR offices, and any location storing confidential personnel or financial records require higher security than standard cam locks provide. Specify pin-tumbler cylinder locks for these environments — they offer significantly higher pick resistance than cam locks and are the standard for regulated environments. For large installations with many cabinets, implement a master key system that provides one master key for authorized administrators while assigning individual keys to specific users or departments — this allows management access without distributing a single key to all users. For environments where the audit trail matters (healthcare, financial, government), electronic keypad or RFID access locks are the highest-security option: access is logged with a time stamp, access lists can be updated without re-keying, and individual access can be revoked immediately without changing physical locks.

6   How do I calculate how many filing cabinets I need?

Start by counting the linear inches of files currently in use — measure the total occupied length of your existing hanging file folders across all current storage. Divide that total by the usable drawer width of the filing cabinet you plan to purchase, accounting for approximately 80% packing efficiency (files rarely fill a drawer completely without crowding). Add 25% growth factor for files that will accumulate over the next 3–5 years. Example: a department with 120 linear inches of current files needs approximately four drawers in a 36-inch lateral cabinet (36 inches × 0.80 efficiency = ~29 usable inches per drawer; 120 ÷ 29 = ~4.1 drawers). Also categorize files as active (access daily or weekly), reference (monthly or quarterly), or archive (rarely accessed) — active files belong at workstations, reference files in shared cabinets, and archives in lower-cost off-site or back-room storage.

7   What is the best filing cabinet finish for a commercial office?

Baked enamel or powder-coat finish over 20-gauge steel is the commercial standard for filing cabinets. Baked enamel is applied as a liquid and cured at high temperature, creating a hard, smooth surface that resists chipping, scratching, and cleaning chemicals. Powder coat (applied as a dry powder and cured) provides a similar level of durability and is common on higher-end commercial cabinets. Both finishes are significantly more durable than painted finishes, which chip and scratch under the daily abrasion of drawers opening and closing. For color selection, neutral gray, charcoal, and black are the most common commercial specifications — they hide minor scuffs, coordinate with most office environments, and are consistently available for replacement units. White is popular in modern offices but shows wear more readily in high-traffic environments.

8   What storage furniture do I need for a wardrobe or personal items area?

Personal item storage in commercial offices typically requires wardrobe cabinets for coats and outerwear, and individual locker towers or pedestal storage for personal items at assigned workstations. A single 36-inch wide wardrobe cabinet accommodates approximately 8–10 coats on a hanging rod with a shelf above for hats, bags, and accessories. For open-plan or hot-desking environments without assigned workstations, individual locker towers (12–15 inches wide, one per employee) provide secure personal storage for bags, personal electronics, and valuables. Specify locking mechanisms on all personal storage — cam locks for general use, combination locks or pin-tumbler locks where key management is impractical. Place wardrobe and personal storage near building entries or break areas to minimize the distance employees carry belongings into the work area.

9   What is the difference between a supply cabinet and a filing cabinet?

Filing cabinets are purpose-built for hanging file folders — their drawers include suspension rails or full-suspension file frames that hold folders upright and allow easy lateral movement for searching. Supply cabinets use adjustable shelving rather than file suspension hardware and are designed for general storage: office supplies, printer paper, binders, cleaning products, and non-document materials. Using a filing cabinet for general supply storage wastes the suspension hardware and may damage the rails; using a supply cabinet for hanging files requires adding hanging file frames (which may or may not be compatible). For a properly organized office storage system, use filing cabinets exclusively for documents requiring suspension filing, and use adjustable-shelf supply cabinets for everything else. Bookcases and open shelving are appropriate for binders and reference books that are accessed frequently and do not need to be locked.

10   How do I organize a shared filing room for a department?

Start by categorizing all departmental files into active, reference, and archive tiers — this determines the volume and type of storage needed at each location. Active files belong in the shared filing room in lateral cabinets with full-extension slides, organized alphabetically or by project with clear label holders on all folders. Reference files should be organized by date or project and grouped in labeled drawer sections, with a departmental index posted near the room entrance so anyone can find a folder without asking. Archive files that must be retained but are accessed fewer than once per year should be boxed, labeled with retention dates, and stored off-site or in a lower-cost storage area. Place the most heavily accessed drawers at a comfortable standing height (30–45 inches) and use the top and bottom drawers for less-accessed materials. Review and purge files annually — a filing room that grows without culling will eventually overwhelm any storage plan.

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

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