

Storage & Filing

These are the 5 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 5 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.

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