ORGANIZING YOUR COMPUTER

Think of your computer as a virtual filing cabinet and you'll have a useful image to guide your work in getting and staying digitally organized. The fact that the files and folders are all data and not paper is the only distinction of note – otherwise, a file is a file is a file, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein.

You may not have a physical filing cabinet, you may not own a single folder, and you may be surrounded by stacks of papers in an order recognizable only to you. That's fine. When we are finished with this chapter, your computer's organizational structure will become the blueprint for any future filing you'll do of actual paper.

First, go to where your computer is. Make sure it's on and that you're at your desktop. You should already have a folder called either documents on your hard drive. Find it now, please. If you don't, for some reason, create a new folder now and name it documents.

This will now become your root, or base, folder for all your documents and personal files. By personal files, I mean all data or documents that you have the ability to download, create, or modify on your computer. Remember, we're not altering stand-alone software applications or programs, and unless you are also a computer programmer, you should probably never be inside an application's folder altering or moving or deleting any files. Files with seemingly innocuous names could be pivotal pieces of code that will irreparably impair an application's ability to run on your computer. When it comes to application folders, remember this adage: when in doubt, stay out.

Unlike a real file cabinet, additional drawers take up a fraction of space they would if they were in 3-D, so there's no limit to the number of drawers you may have in your file cabinet. The rule in creating them is that you should make their names specific enough to be recognized by someone other than you but not so specific that they would contain only one thing. That would be a better choice for a folder within the drawer, rather than the drawer itself.

As an example, here are some folders on my computer that represent my file drawers:

DOCUMENTS

QUICKEN AND QUICKBOOK FILES
ANDREW MELLEN, INC.
FINANCES
MEDICAL AND HEALTH
CURRENT WRITING
OFFICE SUPPLIES
CORRESPONDENCE, PERSONAL
CORRESPONDENCE, PROFESSIONAL
GARDENING
GRAD SCHOOL
OWNER'S MANUALS
PHOTOS
TRAVEL

Many of these folders contain subfolders that further separate the contents into more specific groupings. Consider these folders within the specific drawers.

DOCUMENTS

ANDREW MELLEN, INC.
        AMI ARTWORK
        AMI BIOS, RESUME, AND HEAD SHOTS
        AMI CONTRACTS
        AMI GIFT CERTIFICATES
        AMI PUBLIC RELATIONS
        AMI WORKSHOPS AND SEMINARS
        CLIENT FILES

If we drill down one more level, this is how that looks:

DOCUMENTS

ANDREW MELLEN, INC.
        CLIENTS FILES
                BECCA and CAROL
                PATTI and NINA
                IRIS
                CASUAL CLIENTS
                INACTIVE CLIENTS

And one more level looks like this:

DOCUMENTS

ANDREW MELLEN, INC.
        CLIENTS FILES
                BECCA and CAROL
                PATTI and NINA
                IRIS
                CASUAL CLIENTS
                INACTIVE CLIENTS
                        AMANDA S.
                        MARK A.
                        RICHARD M.

Now start to list the names of drawers (or folders) you would have in your file cabinet in your Documents folder.

DOCUMENTS

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Great. Now for all of those drawers, begin to outline the folders that would live inside them.

_____ (DRAWER NAME FROM ABOVE)

_____ (DRAWER NAME FROM ABOVE)

_____ (DRAWER NAME FROM ABOVE)

_____ (DRAWER NAME FROM ABOVE)

_____ (DRAWER NAME FROM ABOVE)

_____ (DRAWER NAME FROM ABOVE)

_____ (DRAWER NAME FROM ABOVE)

You can either photocopy the above list and use it as a worksheet or, after completing this list, use it as a template to actually create these folders on your computer. Ultimately, that's what you're going to want to do anyway. This exercise should get you thinking in these terms (folders and subfolders) and give you a visual map you can play with and alter without any consequences.

Continue to go down as many levels deep as you need to in creating subfolders, accurately and thoroughly corralling all your documents. In your attempts at specificity, pay attention to whether you have created folders that will contain too many documents or folders that contain only one document. Chances are that one document could find somewhere else to live. But if that is not the case, stick to your guns and maintain the folder with only one document. Deliberation will guide you in how best to arrange these.

The goal of all of this is to be able to find documents with a few clicks of your mouse. This part of the organization is the foundation. The promise or result is always knowing where everything lives and (almost) instant access.