



COLOR-CODED FILING

PROVIDES
FAST ACCESS TO
INFORMATION

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BY MARK LANGEMO, Ed.D., CRM

As the information age matures and as technology advances, one fact remains clear—rapid access to information (paper records, magnetic media, microforms and optical media) is essential for use in making decisions and doing business. Storing, retrieving, managing and eventually eliminating increasing amounts of records and information that are created and gathered are problems in most organizations. Collecting, creating, storing, and retrieving data is often an extremely space- and time-consuming process.

Enter color coding and color-coded filing systems. The human eye can usually distinguish over 11,000 color variations. Color plays comfortable and important roles for us each day as we routinely use color to identify, classify and recognize objects around us.

Think what it would be like if we

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couldn't use color to help us find a car in a large parking lot, know when to stop or go at intersections, see what electrical wires to connect, locate areas on a map, or find seats at a ballgame. An ideal business application for the use of color is the development of color-coded filing systems for business records.

Color coding provides exciting potential to improve existing filing systems and for new file-system development. Color coding is the assignment of color to a letter, number or item in order to make them more easily identifiable.

In filing systems, the assignment of color for each number 0 through 9, and for each letter A through Z, aids in filing and retrieval of all types of files. The assignment of colors to letters, numbers or other identifiers in a particular position on a file folder results in the formation of a color-block pattern. It is easy to see—when these patterns of color are broken—that a misfile has occurred.

Historically, color coding of filing systems for paper records is roughly 30 years old. Its development paralleled the gradual transition from traditional drawer filing cabinets to shelf filing that began about that time. Color coding was a natural development to accompany shelf filing because the ends of the folders were readily visible.

At first, color coding was used primarily for large numeric filing systems. With the development of equipment to automatically apply pressure-sensitive labels to the edges of file folders at high speeds came more manufacturers who could feed blank folders through computer-controlled, high-speed labelers. Alphabetic or numeric labels can now be applied in any sequence.

By using the system of printing bar codes or machine-readable characters on labels in addition to the colors and digits or letters, folder-identification information is made machine-readable by a hand-held wand from an appropriately configured computer. These developments now make it easier than ever to convert existing systems to color coding and to quickly and efficiently develop

new quality filing systems.

Today, all types of filing—alphabetic, numeric, alphanumeric, subject and other systems—are in widespread use. Professional records managers in business, industry, government and other organizations strongly advocate, and make extensive use of color coding.

Shelf files allow use of end-tab folders that can be easily color coded so that files can be accessed visually, allowing them to be located prior to hands-on manipulation of cabinets or folders. A well-planned, color-coded filing system should make it possible

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for users to be visually guided to within two or three linear inches of the folders they seek, and usually directly to the specific folder itself, through the use of color coding.

Shelf files often allow storage of over 300% more files in the same floor space than with drawer methods and often reduce filing time by 30% to 50%. Visual access to records, faster filing and retrieval, extremely lower hardware costs, easy adaptability to store records of all media, and an increased attractiveness are some of the reasons why shelf filing systems are growing steadily in popularity.

The human eye can read colors and patterns of color much faster and from greater distances than it can read characters and groups of characters. That's the reason why traffic lights are coded red, green and yellow.

When we color code the digits or a number of the letters of a name in a

filing system, we find that groups of colors are faster to read than groups of ordinary letters and numbers. Files in sequence create blocks of color, making them easier to scan.

Like spotting an apple in a bowl of oranges, misfiles are easily identified or flagged for correction—virtually eliminating costly misfiles. Detecting misfiles is easy. All you need do is match the colors. That's important at a time when the estimated cost of each lost document in business filing systems exceeds \$100 each.

Information's value is directly proportional to its availability. Between 1% and 5% of all records in the average office are misfiled. Color-coded filing systems dramatically reduce the number of misplaced files and improve the availability and use of information. Misfiles need no longer delay your business and tie up professional and office personnel in costly, time-consuming, panic-ridden searches.

Creative use of color, such as year bands applied to folders to specify the last dates files were active, assist dramatically to facilitate file purging and tracking. Specific identifiers (codes) can easily be developed and implemented using color coding.

For example, an "A" color wrap at the top of a patient's file in a doctor's office can identify that individual as an "allergy patient," that is easily distinguished from the "H" of a "heart patient." Years that files are to be reviewed and records-retention periods are but a few examples of specific identifiers that can be easily implemented using color coding.

Color-coded filing systems are relatively easy to cost justify. A cost-effective filing system that provides faster and easier access to documents, prevents errors, occupies less space, is more flexible and can have a direct impact on a company's profitability.

Timed tests (using work-sampling techniques) can be completed to compare the time required to retrieve a limited number of documents from non-color-coded systems with retrieval time for the same number of documents from color-coded systems. Between 75% and

90% of each dollar spent in filing areas is for personnel salaries, and color coding can frequently save from 30% to 50% and more of funds now spent in noncolor-coded files. That "people cost factor," coupled with lower costs for floor space and hardware, can yield savings that can make a significant financial difference in today's competitive environment. Implementing color coding leads to measurable increases in personnel productivity, which ultimately makes a direct contribution to profits.

Readily available records and information is critical to the success of every business. Paper is here to stay (in quantity) and color coding of filing systems is proving to be an effective approach to management of paper documents.

Color coding of records, however, is not restricted to paper records. Systems, equipment and supplies are available for use in color coding magnetic tapes, disks, diskettes, microfilm cartridges, microfiche, optical disks and all media of business records.

The potential use of color coding and shelf filing should be considered when improvement of a storage and retrieval system for any records media is considered. It isn't possible to load a magnetic tape (or any other computer media) into a computer system until the tape is located and retrieved. The advantages of color coding for these media apply to virtually the same extent that they do for paper document systems.

Color-coding principles and supplies can be used with a range of filing equipment. It can be implemented with traditional pull-drawer files, lateral roll-out cabinets, mechanical files, lateral suspension cabinets and mobile files.

Flexibility is another advantage of color-coded filing systems. These systems will usually accommodate changes in filing requirements more easily and quickly than most other systems. That feature is especially important today when changing technology and the dynamics of business activities frequently necessitate changes in filing systems and procedures.

The use of color in offices and work areas brightens filing systems, provides a morale-boosting psychological bene-

fit, and results in file areas looking more modern and professional. Color coding can transform a dull and unattractive file system area into an appealing and inviting area.

Conversions to shelf filing and color coding can often be a productive first step to computerized tracking and control of files. Using color-coded folders that are also bar coded, a hand-held wand from an appropriately configured computer system can scan the optically readable bar codes for computer identification. In other words, human-readable letters and numbers can be "read" into a data base containing indexing,

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cross-referencing and retention information about every folder in the system.

Looking to the future, records-management software (over 40 packages are now available) can become the key to easier and faster information indexing, storage, retrieval and management. Color coding provides rapid visual access to records. The use of records management software on PCs, minicomputers and mainframe computers can be used to pinpoint document locations, allow for multiparameter indexing and retrieval, track log-ins and log-outs, and automate other file-management functions.

Alphabetic filing, the oldest filing method, is still extensively used today. Alphabetic filing is direct filing because reference to an index is not required. Color coding can be used in the form of two or three letters. This usually entails color coding the first two or three letters of the first indexing unit of the name, according to the *ARMA Rules for*

Alphabetic Filing (ARMA, Box 8540, Prairie Village, Kans. 66208). In other words, a file folder for "George Bush" could be color coded: "BU" or "BUS."

With straight-numeric filing, numbered folders are placed in the file in sequential order. Color-coded labels are placed on the full end tabs of the folders. A disadvantage of straight-numeric filing is that the most recent numbers assigned typically generate the greatest amount of file activity and often results in personnel bunched into the same area.

Terminal-digit filing uses consecutively assigned numbered folders. Like straight-numeric filing, color-coded labels (with the digits reading from top to bottom) are placed on the full end tabs of the folders.

However, the users of the system divide the file number into groups of two digits called the primary, secondary and tertiary numbers. The file number 134589, for example, is broken into groups of two (13-45-89) with the group 89 becoming the primary number (often associated with the primary guide of a file system), the group 45 becoming the secondary number (often associated with the secondary guide of a file system) and 13 becoming the tertiary number. With terminal-digit filing, employees become accustomed to working with small numbers and activity is spread throughout the filing system.

Color-coding systems can be readily devised and adapted to virtually any classification systems. Records-management books are available as references when planning systems. A wealth of experience is available from vendors that can be valuable when setting out to improve or develop an information storage retrieval system utilizing color coding.

If you plan to convert a color-coded system, consider these guidelines:

- Learn about color-coding systems and the equipment technology and supplies that are available.
- Visit offices where color-coded filing systems are in use. Visit with your staff and combine your thinking about how the best filing system including color coding, can be developed.

- Schedule and complete a preliminary file purge, cleaning out duplicate copies of filed documents. About a third of the volume of documents can often be eliminated through completion of a preliminary file purge. The purge (elimination of the excess volume) makes completion of the remaining steps easier.

- Inventory the records that remain in the system(s) after the preliminary purge. During the inventory, decide if the current classification system can continue to be used or if a new one should be devised.

- Evaluate the adequacy of the current equipment and supplies. Cost justify, if at all possible, a conversion to

shelf-filing equipment if that equipment is not already in use.

- Consider converting to or developing either an alphabetic system or a numeric system whenever possible. Numeric and alphabetic systems are the easiest to color code, teach, use and understand. Use the *ARMA Rules for Alphabetic Filing* as the basis for alphabetic filing or for the alphabetic index to a numeric system.

- Design with your staff, and possibly some vendor assistance, your color-coding scheme. Keep your color-coding system as simple as possible (the tendency is to use too much color). Thoroughly discuss the system design with a sample of your file system users to make sure they understand it and will support it. Shop carefully to obtain the needed supplies to implement the color coding. Decide if bar codes should be a part of the color-coded labels for potential use with a wand, records-management software and computer system.

- Consider selecting and implementing a records-management software package that can be used for file indexing, implementation of records-retention schedules, file tracking, log-out and log-in of records to and from users, and related records-management functions.

- Get started. Don't wait and miss opportunities for your organization to benefit from the implementation of color coding. Good filing systems make possible rapid retrieval of information for a minimum financial expenditure and make a direct contribution to profits.

Information is one of your most critical and valuable assets. Color-coded filing systems are tools in wide use in many organizations and are certainly systems for the future, in quality organizations. ☐

Dr. Mark Langemo is a certified records manager and vice president of Profile Systems, Inc., of St. Paul, Minn., a records-management company and commercial-records center. Dr. Langemo has over 20 years of experience as a university professor of records management and was recognized by ARMA (Assn. of Records Managers & Administrators) for "distinguished contributions to the field of records management."