

Using Colour Coding in a Filing System

What is Colour Coding?

Colour coding refers to the use of colour to distinguish files from one another. The human eye can read colours and colour sequences much more quickly and from much greater distances than letters or numbers. Colour can be added to the filing system to improve retrieval speed and reduce misfiles.

The Active Filing series gives you tips on how to manage active records in your department.

There are several different ways to use colour in a filing system. The most common methods include colour signals, colour charge-out cards, colour file folders, and colour labels. This tip will look at the different ways that you can use colour in a filing system.

Types of Colour Coding

1. Colour Signals

Colour signals are plastic clip-on or adhesive tags that are attached to files requiring special attention. For example, you can use a red signal to flag a file for review for an Access to Information request, or a blue signal to identify files that require quarterly review by management.

2. Colour Charge-Out Cards

Colour charge-out cards can serve as easy reminders that files have been signed out and not returned. Different colours can be used to show when a file was charged out. For example, you could use different colours to represent the day of the week, the week, or the month that the file was charged out of the filing station. By looking at the colours, you can easily tell if the file is overdue or not. Colour charge-out cards can also be used to identify different borrowers.

3. Colour File Folders

Colour file folders may be used instead of plain white or manila folders. Different colours can be used to identify different functions, work units, series of records, or dates. For example, blue folders could be used for "Finance" and yellow folders for "Human Resources". You could also use different coloured file folders for different fiscal years. One caution: the dye from red file folders can bleed onto the papers inside if the folders get wet.

4. Colour Labelling

Colour labelling systems use coloured labels to represent the numbers or letters that you use to code the files in your filing system. For example, in a numeric system, each number from 0 through 9 is represented by a different colour. The letters of the alphabet, months, and years can also be assigned colours. A strip of labels is added to each file, creating a colour representation of the file code.

When the files are placed in the filing cabinet, bands of colour form across the file folders. This makes it easy to spot misfiles by the interruption in the colour bands.

Remember that colour labelling is not the filing system. Rather, it is a way to identify file folders within a filing system. In other words, the filing system must be created before you start adding colour labels.

Colour labelling is labour intensive and may have significant added costs for supplies. As a result, it is not a practical solution in many situations. It is most effective in large numeric filing systems with large numbers of case files and high levels of retrieval. For example, doctors and dentists offices often use colour labels for their patient files. The patient files are usually coded by a patient number or by the patient's name.



Figure 1: Example of Colour Coded File Labels

Why Use Colour Coding in a Filing System?

Using colour coding in a filing system will reduce the time spent retrieving and re-filing folders. Colour coding also reduces the chance of losing files through misfiling. Colour coding can be used to flag files for action and may be an important part of a bring-forward system.

A Note of Caution:

Colour coding should be used to achieve very specific goals and be part of a well thought out plan. Colour coding is effective if it is implemented well, but too much colour coding can defeat the purpose.