

The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information

By Craig Robertson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021.
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Take a moment and picture your work area. Chances are, somewhere there is a filing cabinet. It might be black or green, tall or short, or a drawer in your desk. It might house files about collections, artificial or clippings collections, maps or oversized materials, or your personal work records. You may access it daily, monthly, or rarely. Regardless of its function, it is part of the physical space and atmosphere that induces images of organization and safekeeping. Keep those images in mind; reading this book will change how you look at and think about filing cabinets.

To some, the idea of reading about the history of the filing cabinet may seem less than exciting. However, Craig Robertson's *The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information* turns an object that many of us take for granted into a deep and fascinating history that is thoroughly enjoyable to read. The book centers on how the filing cabinet changed the business sphere, but the parallels to archival work are abundant. The filing cabinet's invention more than a century ago reverberates today through understanding the history of organization, business, information, indexing, physical space, gender, capitalism, and so much more.

One point that Robertson makes in the introduction sets the tone for the book: the difference between a file cabinet and a filing cabinet. He uses "filing cabinet" purposefully, "because its unambiguous emphasis on the action, not the object, foregrounds the importance of the filing cabinet as a site of labor" (p. 14). This makes the cabinet less an inanimate object used for storage and more an object that a person interacts with to preserve knowledge. Therefore, it is an active object that is a means to access.

The cabinet alone does not facilitate access; the files, folders, index cards, dividers, machinery, and labor create the whole of access to knowledge and information. I was quite captivated by how Robertson traces the history of paper storage. The details he provides about standardizing paper sizes, the development of folders and tabbed folders, and using index card dividers as part of an organization schema are highly informative. Some of the details are interesting facts themselves, such as how "manila" folders were patented in 1843 and originally made from "abaca fiber, which came from a species of banana unique to the Philippines" (p. 126); how in the 1920s at least twenty-four different sizes of paper used for business records in the United States evolved into the acceptance

of two paper sizes (8.5" x 11" and 8" x 10.5"); and that the A4 size of paper was a standard created in Germany.

Robertson also delves into how filing cabinets were made of steel because it was "the modern construction material" (p. 82) and offered more protection than those made of wood. They were often painted olive green because it was a "neutral tone which harmonizes with any surroundings" (p. 87). Businesses moved away from folding papers for storage (e.g., to keep in cubbyholes in a desk) to using metal fasteners to keep records together to maintain the integrity of the information. Robertson also describes what archivists often continue to call "vertical files," meaning artificial collections of newspaper clippings or photographs organized by subject or person. And, amusingly relevant to current archival work, standard practices included admonishments about overstuffing folders.

More important, all these details coalesced into significant changes for managing papers. Indeed, "the 'system' that office equipment companies were trying to sell incorporated other technologies that enhanced the granularity of modern storage practices, including index systems, charge systems, cross-reference systems, and systems for transferring old documents into storage, usually at the end of the financial year (what is now called records retention)" (p. 140). Again, the details Robertson discusses are very familiar to archivists and especially records managers: implementing alphanumeric classification systems; further dividing files into subsections that may be chronological, alphabetical, high-use, or other divisions; employing "out" cards when files were removed for use; and colored tabs for different categories.

Labor is a major theme throughout the entire book. Filing cabinets and their systems were implemented to create more efficient procedures. Robertson argues, "Information labor is situated in the temporality of efficiency, a belief in the necessity of speed, which marked filing as instantaneous" (p. 176). Perhaps the most significant distinction he makes is between *information* and *knowledge*: "To work with information did not require thought; the need to *not know* separated information labor from knowledge work" (p. 179). This distinction was important within the context of the gender divide; men did the thinking and "knowledge" work, women filed the information, which they did not need to understand to do their jobs.

Though filing was generally seen as "women's work," there were glimmers of encouragement to be successful. Companies desired employees who possessed curiosity and pride in their work, taking it "beyond the mere action of putting papers in order" (p. 216). However, this was still within the limits of it being "women's work." Robertson's analysis solidly demonstrates how filing was essentially a profession for middle-class white women, or those who aspired to reach that level. He gives detailed statistics about education,

marital status, age, and class. Robertson acknowledges that these positions were “unavailable to Latina, Black, and Asian women except on a very limited basis, usually within their own communities” (p. 197). His discussion focuses primarily on white women, leading me to suspect that there is less information available regarding employment beyond white women, leaving it open as an area requiring further research.

Attempts were made to professionalize filing, and associations were created that held regular meetings. One distinction made was the difference between file executives and file clerks: the executive created the information and the clerk retrieved it. Robertson mentions one of the challenges was the difficulty in distinguishing file executives from business librarians, the latter who “summarized, extracted, and indexed the contents of documents and books” (p. 218) to be readily available when requested. In a simple interpretation, the file executives were responsible for access, and business librarians performed the more “intellectual” work of interpreting and classifying the information.

An interesting correlation is how such clerical work and domestic duties were viewed similarly. Robertson examines how women’s employment duties and home domestic work were both intended “to maintain the spaces to allow men to do what they needed to do” (p. 223). He explores the influence of office equipment on the home to create a more efficient household. Cabinets were designed to organize kitchens for efficient cooking, and options for drawers and cabinets in closets to accommodate the variety of clothing and accessories. Eventually, this led to filing cabinets in the home to organize information—bills, receipts, recipes, address lists, and personal records, as well as clippings files for topics such as gardening or decorating. As Robertson states, “the story of the emergence of the vertical filing cabinet is in part the story of how filing as a mode of labor and organization became an element of everyday life” (p. 246).

I must acknowledge that, until I read this book, I was unaware of how much the corporate world influenced archival work. I have read much about the influence of library practices on archives, but this book fills in gaps and addresses topics that raise the possibility that the business world perhaps influenced archives more than libraries did. As Robertson describes the intricacies of filing in cabinets, one could substitute a filing cabinet drawer for a page box, an index for a finding aid, and so much more to draw parallels to current archival work. I especially thought about how archivists’ decisions about what items to group in folders, placing more heavily used papers in close proximity, and whether to use alphabetical or chronological organization align more with business than with library practices.

Robertson’s book is thoroughly researched and intricately written, and a review cannot possibly capture all the fascinating aspects of his comprehensive history. I read *The Filing Cabinet* through the lens of a historian and archivist,

constantly envisioning the daily work of archivists. One quote that captures the connection to archival work is this: "The integrity of a filing cabinet promised not only protection and preservation but also access . . . manufacturers and users valued integrity only to the extent that it enabled paper to be stored and retrieved quickly with minimal effort" (p. 96). Change "filing cabinet" to "archives" and "manufacturers" to "archivists" or "records managers" and the quote summarizes how archivists collect materials to preserve and create access to historical records.

I highly recommend *The Filing Cabinet* for anyone interested in the development of physical organization. But it is so much more than that, exploring how a seemingly innocuous object transformed not just the workplace but how people think about the organization of information, which greatly influenced how archivists and records managers continue to manage archives and records.

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