Easi File System Resolves University's Complex Document Storage Needs

SITUATIONS

FB's document storage problems at University of California Irvine (UCI) were critical. The problem wasn't justifying budget for more space. There was no more space to be had.

The Facilities Management Department must preserve and keep accessible more than 40,000 original plans and drawings. Many documents date from the university's founding and were hand-drawn by architects and engineers who are long gone. These include architectural, structural, civil, mechanical, plumbing, electrical, and other drawings for site development, infrastructure, landscape, utilities, buildings, additions, and renovations.

Flat-File Problems

The 3,300-cubic-foot room holding the essentially irreplaceable documents was crammed seven feet high with flat files whose more than 150 drawers were filled to the top with originals. Large E-size drawings were the most difficult to store and retrieve.

Since drawers were full and UCI was still adding buildings and completing renovation projects, rolls of drawings were stacked everywhere. Clamped "sacrificials"—copies used to protect originals— were in another room, worn and torn due to the metal clamps and use.

The lowest flat files rested directly on the floor, so bending and lifting risked minor injuries. Leaving a bottom drawer open presented a tripping hazard. Top drawers were stacked so high that staff could not see into them without stools or short ladders. And the aging drawers required frequent repairs.

FB reports, "Our filing structure had evolved over time and was complicated to use," says FB, so documents were prone to misfiling or not being filed.

But his biggest concern was document longevity. "Every use of an original abrades its clarity," he points out. "Even sitting unused, drawings lying flat in drawers rub each other when a truck shakes the building."

Bending and stooping to get drawings in lowest drawers presented a risk of injury.

Opening lower drawers exposed shins to injuries and was a tripping hazard.
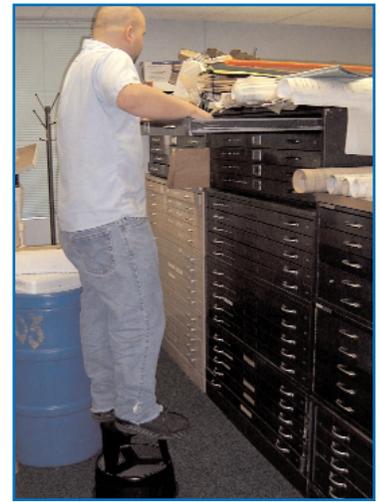
Standing on a stool to see into the top drawers was dangerous to staff.

"Sacrificials," held in document clamps, suffered from repeated use in a growing university.

This cabinet exposed original drawings to abrasion with each use.

Tatters/tears were unavoidable using the previous document storage methods.

Electronic Storage Costly and Uncertain

FB remains unconvinced about fully electronic storage. "Nobody's going to provide more than $4 million to convert these documents to AutoCAD at $100 apiece," he observes. "And you can't predict which documents can be in cheaper graphics files versus those that must be in AutoCAD because you'll someday need to manipulate them."

"No electronic medium is as permanent and accessible as a document. Today, you can't play your old 8-track audiotapes. In a few years, you won't find VCRs. And I've seen my CDs and DVDs wear. Every ten years, a new storage method will take over, so you'll migrate your documents several times during your career. Each conversion costs money and opens the door to losing files or corrupted data.

"Properly stored, high-quality ink on Mylar has a functionally unlimited lifespan," he points out. "Yet they're subject to abrasion, misfiling, fire, and water. You need physical safety for your documents and electronic storage."

THE SOLUTION

"A new physical storage system had to let us grow, protect these documents far better, and enable a logical filing structure," says FB. After 17 years with other UCI departments, his methods of justifying projects are cost-based. "We selected the Easi File system because it met our criteria at an affordable price."

Before fully committing the university's time and money, FB and Building Records department staff visited the Easi File factory to check out the units firsthand. They purchased one Easi File EF 100 as a test. "It was easy to work with, conversion was do-able, and it would eliminate injury dangers from bending, tripping, or climbing on stools." Transitioning to a new filing system also provided an opportunity to implement a new and more logical numbering system that staff had developed but not yet implemented.

UCI began with a single Easi File cabinet to prove viability and improve their numbering system.

Today, UCI has acquired six EF 100s and two EF 200s to house large E-size documents. Conversion is about 30 percent complete and the university orders new Easi File cabinets and supplies as needed. A student employee attaches appropriate holders to each document. In a parallel project, the department is scanning and electronically archiving the documents.

As the conversion rolls out, Brad Barrett, President of Easi File estimates that UCI will pay less than half the cost of competing systems, saving the university more than $60,000.

BENEFITS

"We calculated that Easi File was three times more cost-effective than flat files," says FB. "We save space, our drawings hang without touching, finding documents is intuitive, and refiling is easy so it gets done more regularly." When conversion is complete, the Easi File system will allow many more years of storage in the same 464 square feet of floor space.

"Easi File enabled a 'best-balance' solution: compact and safe storage with rapid access and refiling," FB says. He projects faster document retrievals during renovation projects and especially during an emergency.

"Oversized drawings were once a pain," FB says, "but now we maintain them in the [Easi File] EF 200." One pleasant surprise was that, even fully loaded, staff can easily push Easi File cabinets around on the carpeted floor, enabling fast cabinet rearrangement as needs change.

FB adds that the Easi File team has been very helpful in planning, prompt with deliveries, and responsive in phone support.

In Other Environments

FB says that other professionals charged with document protection and preservation should use cost justification and a well-thought-out vision of their own future needs to determine what solution is best for them. But he cautions others not to forget the human factors of easy access, refiling and human safety. "Also, work out your numbering and filing system in advance to ensure it makes sense and is fast to use. Converting your files will take time, but low-priced help can do it economically. And we feel the Easi File system is definitely worth it."

Today, more than a dozen universities use the Easi File system to manage valuable and irreplaceable documents safely, compactly and economically.
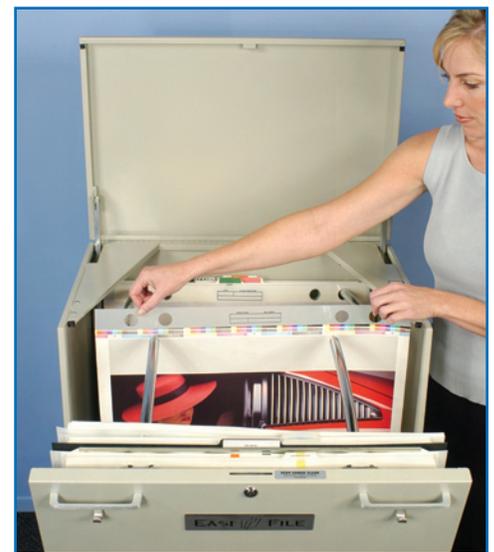
The Easi File system keeps documents safer and cleaner in less space, while sharply reducing chance for injury.