



**HOW TO  
KEEP YOUR DESK  
CLEAR WITH THE**

# **FUTURE FILE**

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## **A “SNOOZE BUTTON” SYSTEM FOR PAPER**

How can you keep your desk organized when there's still work to do? Filing documents in a drawer may get them out of sight, but how can you ever find them again? The solution is to “forward” documents to the day you'll need them with the Future File, a 43-folder system for each day of the month, and each month of the year.

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# PAPER WON'T DIE- AND THAT'S NOT A BAD THING

*When my district switched to an all-electronic hiring system, I was relieved—until I realized I had to print more than 500 pages of application documents for a single job opening.*

I thought it would be a paper-free process, but it ended up consuming all of my printer toner and an entire ream of paper.

The drawbacks of paper are obvious:

- It costs money
- It's heavy to transport
- It takes up physical space to store
- It can only be in one place, and doesn't lend itself to collaboration the way a Google Doc does
- There's no backup unless you make a copy—which multiplies many of the drawbacks

So as computers became a larger part of professional life, many of us expected the "paperless office" to become a reality. We expected paper to disappear completely, but instead, we deal with more paper than ever before. Paper is here to stay.

One reason is that digital tools generate more information than we've ever had before. Modern assessment tools, accounting programs, student information systems, and other data management tools generate reams of data that we often find ourselves wanting to print.

But why do we print it? Why can't we leave digital data in digital form?

Our hiring system allowed us to digitally "sort" applications into "yes" and "no" groups as we narrowed down our list of more than 100 applicants to just a handful to invite for interviews. But we wanted this sorting process to be collaborative, and it was much easier to discuss and sort the applications in hardcopy

than in an online system that only I could access.

Paper is useful in much of the work we do as instructional leaders, including planning, making decisions, writing complex documents such as teacher evaluations, and even reading.

So if you've felt behind the times because you still rely on paper, you're not alone, and you don't need to feel bad.

Besides, you couldn't go paperless even if you wanted to, because other people are constantly giving you paperwork to deal with—forms, notes, copies of articles, letters—and digitizing this paper doesn't usually make sense.

Think about one of paper's downsides—the fact that it takes up physical space in your office—and look at it from a positive perspective: if there's a document on your desk, you need to do something with it!

We rely on this fact all the time, and in fact, we keep piles of paper on our desks because they serve as reminders of what we need to work on.

The problem is that this "reminder" function breaks down after you have more than a couple of documents lying around. Soon, it's just a mess.

But it doesn't have to be.

In this guide, you'll learn how to use the Future File, a 43-folder system that I'll explain in the following pages, to keep exactly the paper you need for today on your desk, while the rest is safely "snoozed," out of sight and out of mind until just the right day.

Sincerely,



Justin Baeder, PhD

Director, The Principal Center

# SNOOZING PAPER UNTIL THE DAY YOU'LL NEED IT

*Paper is a great reminder of unfinished work, but only if it's well-organized.*

We have file cabinets for organizing paper by project or topic, but once it's filed, it's easily forgotten. We need a better system for organizing hardcopy documents according to the date we'll need them on.

Imagine if your calendar didn't show you just today's appointments, but showed instead a giant list of all of your appointments, for the entire year, in no particular order. That'd be ridiculous, right?

And yet, that's essentially how most people handle the hardcopy documents they're still working on.

## The Trouble with Clutter

Imagine that you have a list of five things to accomplish before the end of the day. You glance at your list, pick out the next item to work on, and get to it. You repeat the process until you're finished with everything.

Now, imagine that instead of a list, you have five hardcopy documents that you need to deal with today. No problem, right? You can easily choose when and how to work on each of the five documents.

Now, imagine instead that you have 100 documents on your desk, some of which can't actually be worked on today. Perhaps some of them are out of date and need to be filed or trashed; others can only be done with the help of certain staff members—who aren't available today; still others pertain to events far in the future, like conferences you're thinking of attending.

Can you still glance at such a huge stack of paper and pick the right thing to work on next? Of course not.

The more jumbled and cluttered your pile, the more un-doable it becomes. Even if it were possible to work on every item in the pile, it's paralyzing to have so many options to choose from.

## Why Snoozing Is So Powerful

If, instead, we're careful to keep only the documents that we need for *today* out on our desks, we'll be in a much better position to get all of that work done, and keep our desk clear for tomorrow's work.

Think of it this way: Your desk is a workspace, so everything that's on your desk that you're not working on right now is simply in your way. The better you can get everything out of sight until you need it, the more you'll be able to accurately prioritize among what does need to get done today.

## Snooze It If...

When should you snooze a document to a future date? Here are a few common scenarios:

- You need to take some action on the item, but can't do it today because you're waiting on something else
- You need to talk to someone, but that person isn't available today
- You're monitoring a situation, so you're holding on to the document, but no action is needed yet
- You're still thinking about a decision, such as whether to attend a conference, and you still have time before the deadline
- You did all you could on the document today, and need to work on it again in the future, at a time you've blocked off
- You have too much to do today, and you want to spread out your workload across several days

## Don't Just Kick the Can Down The Road

Some of the scenarios above could lead to procrastination, so be careful not to confuse purposeful snoozing with aimless procrastination.

The key difference? Actually *planning* to work on the item on the day you snooze it to.

In the following pages, you'll learn exactly how to set up your Future File and use it to snooze hardcopy documents effectively.

# FUTURE FILE SETUP

## GRAB 43 FOLDERS & GET STARTED

*The Future File system has been in use for generations. You'll be amazed at its elegant effectiveness in keeping your desk clutter-free. Here's how to set it up.*

The Future File (also known as the "Tickler File") is simply a set of 43 folders:

- 12 folders for the months of the year, January through December
- 31 folders for the days of the month, 1–31

The system works on a "rolling" basis, so you never need more folders, and you always have 31 days of daily folders and 12 months of monthly folders in which you can "snooze" any document—or really, any flat object that will fit into a file folder, such as a CD or flash drive.

### Create Your Folders

I recommend using normal letter-sized manila folders, but if you want to get fancy, heavier folders are fine, too.

Label the folders 1 through 31, and January through December. I recommend using a label maker or Avery 5160 file folder labels—the better your system looks, the more likely you are to take pride in using it. I've included labels you can print in this document.

Have your secretary make you a set, as well as a set for the office staff if you'd like.

### Organize The Folders

Arrange the folders in the following order, from front to back (let's assume today is July 15):

- Tomorrow's folder (e.g. "16" for the 16th of the current month)
- The rest of the days for the current month (e.g. 17-31)
- Next month's folder (e.g. August)

- The remaining daily folders, in order (1-15), representing those days in next month (e.g. August)
- The rest of the months, in order (e.g. September-June), allowing you to snooze documents for up to a year

Each morning, you'll find the folder for that day at the front of the set. If today is the 15th of the month, tomorrow you'll see the 16 folder at the front, followed by 17, 18, and so on up to 31. You'll then see the new month's folder, then the rest of your daily folders.

### Decide Where To Keep The Future File System

You may be tempted to keep the Future File system in a desk drawer or file cabinet, but at least at the beginning, I recommend keeping it in a standing file box on your desk, or somewhere else where you can see it and easily reach it.

When you start snoozing documents, the greatest danger is that "out of sight" will become "out of mind," so to avoid forgetting about the system entirely, keep it where you won't be able to miss it. Having the system handy will also reduce the difficulty of adding documents to it.

### Set Reminders To Check It

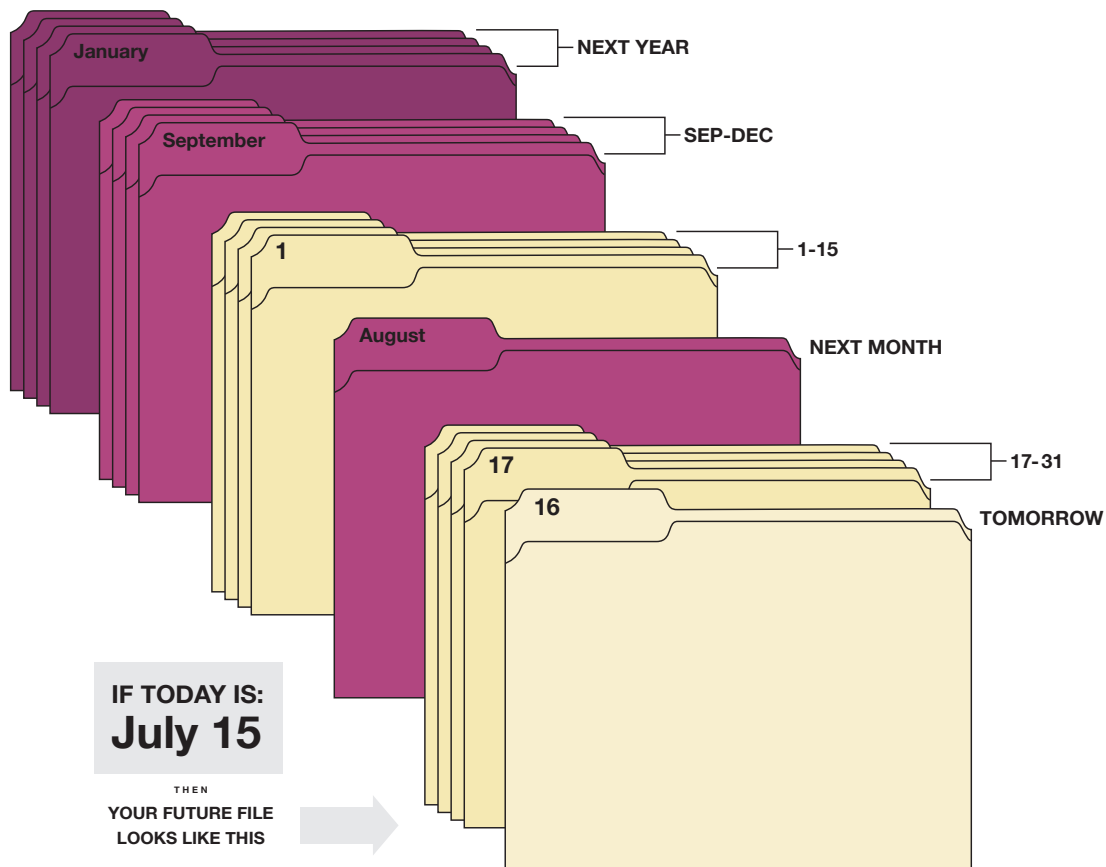
In time, you'll develop the habit of checking your folder for the day each morning. At the beginning, though, you'll need to set a specific reminder to pull out the folder first thing when you arrive (or right before you leave on the previous day). You can put an appointment on your calendar, or make your secretary responsible for reviewing the Future File with you each morning.

Whatever you do, don't allow a day to go by without checking the system. Even if it's empty, developing the habit and trusting the system are essential to using the system effectively.

### Check And Move Today's Folder

When you check your daily folder:

- Remove everything from it, and place it in your inbox



- Move the folder so it represents the same day in the following month (e.g. if it's the 15th, move it behind the 14 folder, to represent the 15th of next month)
- If there are fewer than 31 days in the month, e.g. in February or April, check the remaining daily folders on the last day of the month.

If it's the first of the month, you'll also need to check the monthly folder, and put each item in your inbox or a daily folder.

### Do The Work

Once the day's documents are on your desk, commit to either dealing with them that day, or planning a specific day in the future—with time set aside on your calendar—so the Future File doesn't become a tool for procrastination.

### Use Complementary Tools

The Future File works best in concert with other tools, including your to-do list and your calendar.

When you snooze a document, add whatever work it represents to your to-do list, where you can concisely review it alongside all of your other pending tasks and projects.

And if a document will take a while to deal with, make sure you make an appointment on your calendar to block off time to actually work on it. Don't do this for minor items, but be realistic—if it's going to take 20 or 30 minutes, that time isn't going to be available unless you block it off.

For more helpful productivity tools, check out the Instructional Leadership Challenge.



# TROUBLESHOOTING FIXING UNHELPFUL HABITS

*The future file is a powerful tool—one that can unfortunately lend itself to unhelpful habits like procrastination.*

What makes the Future File transformative is that it allows you to completely eliminate paper clutter from your workspace. Instead of having documents old and new filling up your desk forever, you can keep out just the documents you need for today. Everything else gets filed away in mere seconds, so you have room to work, and the mental clarity to focus on today's paperwork.

Even so, it's easy to slip into unhelpful forms of procrastination.

## **The Snooze Cruise**

It's tempting to turn tomorrow's folder into a garbage barge and dump every document on your desk into it.

Don't.

If you won't have time to finish everything on your desk today—as will be the case most days—use a strategy I call Next Action Stickies.

Simply go through the pile, and using sticky notes, add a brief note to yourself about what to do with the document. Be very specific, and note the actual, physical action you'll need to take, like "Put on Jen's desk." The more specific and direct you are, the more likely you'll be able to just do it next time you see the document (or even on the spot).

If you won't be able to handle the document tomorrow, think about what specific day you'll get to it. If it'll take substantial time, block it out on your calendar, on the spot.

Whatever you do, don't let an unsorted, un-reviewed pile get dumped into tomorrow's folder.

## **The Unexamined Pile**

The whole point of the Future File is to keep exactly the right documents in view on exactly the right day. So make sure you don't keep a pile on your desk from day to day. Everything—*everything*—must be removed by the end of

the day for the Future File to work optimally.

If you can't decide which folder to put a document in, use a Next Action Sticky, and if that doesn't help, you may not need to do anything with the document, so just file it in your file cabinet or trash it.

## **The Brick**

Over time, you may develop a mini-stack of papers that you keep snoozing from one day to the next. You may know what's in it, and you may even have a good Next Action Sticky on every document. Even so, resist the temptation to simply chuck the whole pile into tomorrow's folder.

Instead, break it up. Review each document separately—which will only take a second—and think about why this pile has persisted for so long. Do you need to talk to someone? Articulate a more specific next action? Call it quits on a particular idea?

Force yourself to decide, because clutter comes from indecisiveness.

## **AM/PM**

Finally, if you find that you're reviewing your daily folder too late in the day to act on many of the items, make time first thing in the morning. You might prefer to devote certain spots on your desk to work that needs to be handled at a certain time of day, when other staff are available or when your energy level is a good match for the type of work.

## **Self-Discipline**

An alarm clock's "snooze" button can be your undoing if you don't have the discipline to get up when your alarm goes off (or after minimal use of the snooze button). Similarly, it's going to take self-discipline to use the Future File effectively, but it's worth it.

If you have a success story to share, please get in touch with me at [justin@principalcenter.com](mailto:justin@principalcenter.com).

## **BILT: Before I Leave Today**

You may find it helpful to keep a "BILT" folder to review before you leave for the day.

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February

March

April

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August

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November

December

BILT

Print on Avery 5160  
1" x 2<sup>5/8</sup> " labels

# **BECOME A MEMBER OF THE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ASSOCIATION**

The logo for the Instructional Leadership Association is a large red rounded square containing a white square with a thin white border. Inside the white square, the words "INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ASSOCIATION" are written in a bold, white, sans-serif font, stacked in three lines.

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**JUSTIN  
BAEDER**  
PhD



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As Director of The Principal Center, it's my professional mission to help school leaders confidently get into classrooms, have feedback conversations that change teacher practice, and discover their best opportunities for school improvement. You can find my latest articles, Principal Center Radio interviews, online courses, and more resources like this guide at [PrincipalCenter.com](http://PrincipalCenter.com).

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