

# Clearing Up Your Paper Trail

IT'S NOT JUST YOUR E-MAIL THAT CAN LEAK INFORMATION.



WITH ALL THE ATTENTION PAID TO internet security these days, it's easy to overlook the need to protect old-fashioned paper documents. Even the most sophisticated firewalls and anti-hacker software won't help if someone prowling through a dumpster comes across your old financial statements or other sensitive documents.

One way to keep paperwork secure is to reduce the amount of sensitive information committed to paper in the first place. Reviewing credit card and bank statements online can help. As for information that must be printed, keeping it from prying eyes requires a good organizational plan and a sturdy paper shredder, says Leslie Rochlen, owner of Connecticut-based Paper Tamers ([papertamers.com](http://papertamers.com)).

"A lot of identify theft comes from receipts that are casually tossed out," Rochlen says. But identity theft isn't the only danger. You don't want sales reports or other documents winding up in the hands of competitors. And papers floating around on your desk could contain sensitive information that a visitor might see, even without meaning to.

Rochlen predicts that as scanners drop in price and improve in speed, small businesses may be able to scan pertinent papers into their computers and destroy the paper copies immediately. But most scanners within the price range of small

businesses are still too slow to make that practical. So for now companies have little choice but to deal with lots of paper.

Even offices that have shredders often neglect them, Rochlen says, because papers pile up to the point that nobody wants to feed sheet after sheet into the machine. The solution is "really nothing fancy," Rochlen says. "It's a matter of figuring out what paper comes into your office, where it goes, and how long the information is relevant."

**No orphan papers.** Donna D. McMillan, founder of Los Angeles-based McMillan & Company Professional Organizing ([organizer4me.com](http://organizer4me.com)), says "every document needs a home." To get a handle on loose papers, create a "hot action" file, using a small desktop hanging file container such as a DecoFlex, available at office supply stores. When a document lands on your desk, place it within the DecoFlex holder file marked for quick action, such as "bills due," "to call," or "to read." Go through the box daily.

**Make documents usable.** When you open a bill, read it, highlight the due date

and the amount you need to pay and place it in the "bills" file. When it comes time to write the check, you'll only have to glance at the highlighted figures, instead of rereading the document.

**Purge regularly.** Many companies hold onto old bank and credit statements, paid invoices, tax records, and other information longer than they should. Ask your CPA how long you should hold onto these records, and when that deadline arrives, "mark on your calendar a time to [shred old files.] Go through your files at least twice a year, and purge what you don't need."

**Shredding.** Every office should have a good paper shredder, McMillan and Rochlen agree, and it should be used frequently (see "Choosing a Shredder," below). When you go through a file, do so near your shredder. Shred items as they arrive, to avoid a buildup.

Be sure to sit near your shredder when you open mail, since even unsolicited mail can contain personal information. When in doubt, shred. McMillan says, "No one should believe their garbage, once it leaves their office, is secure." ■

## Choosing a Shredder

Shredders come in two basic types, strip-cut and cross-cut. Strip-cut shredders reduce documents to create thin, vertical ribbons of paper. Cross-cut shredders (also known as "confetti cutters") provide more security, says Paper Tamers owner Leslie Rochlen, because they cut horizontally as well, leaving much smaller pieces.

Shredders range in price from around \$30 to more than \$1,000, depending on features and capacity. You don't have to spend hundreds of dollars on a shredder, but lower-end machines, retailing for \$30 to \$50, can't handle high volumes of paper and may not be a good bet for businesses, Rochlen says. Slightly more expensive models, in the \$100 to \$200

range, come with their own waste-baskets, and won't choke on staples or paper clips.

**Prominent manufacturers:** Fellowes, Dahle, GBC, Olympia, HSM, MBM.

**Consider the features:** Models vary widely in what they do best: if high security is your priority, look for a shredder model that cuts paper into the smallest pieces (even among cross-cut shredders, size varies greatly). If volume is the key, look for ones that can gobble up 10 or more sheets at a time. If you want to shred a variety of items, look for a machine that can cut through CDs, credit cards, and other material.

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