



Lateral File Cabinet vs Vertical File Cabinet

Comparison

Discount Office Furniture | Expert Guidance | Free Shipping

Quick Verdict

Lateral cabinets are the better office choice for most situations — more capacity per drawer, a flat top surface you can use, and a lower, friendlier profile. Vertical cabinets win when space is extremely tight and you have minimal wall width to spare.

Feature / Factor	Lateral File Cabinet	Vertical File Cabinet
Filing Orientation	Side-to-side (left to right)	Front-to-back (front to rear)
Typical Widths	30", 36", 42"	15", 18" — narrow footprint
Typical Height (2-drawer)	28"–30"	28" (low) or 52"+ (4-drawer)
Capacity per Drawer	60–75% more than vertical	Standard — letter or legal, not both
Letter AND Legal Filing	Yes — most models handle both	Usually letter OR legal, not both
Flat Top Usable as Surface	Yes — at desk height	Only low-profile models
Floor Space (2-drawer)	~36"×18" footprint	~15"×28" footprint
Wall Space Required	More width needed	Minimal — fits in narrow gaps
Price Range	\$300–\$1,200+	\$200–\$800+
Weight Capacity per Drawer	75–150 lbs typical	60–100 lbs typical

The Real Differences That Matter

Filing orientation is the core difference. Lateral drawers open wide (36"–42") and files hang left-to-right, which means you can see your entire folder tab row at a glance. Vertical drawers open deep and files hang front-to-back — great for finding one specific folder, but you have to reach deep into the drawer. Lateral cabinets also hold roughly 60–75% more files per drawer than a vertical at the same width, because the drawer is shallower and the full width is available for hanging files.

Go With the Lateral File Cabinet If...

You have adequate wall space (at least 36" wide) and prefer easy access to your files without digging. Lateral cabinets are the industry standard in professional offices for good reason: the 2-drawer model at 28"–30" height doubles as a surface for a printer, monitor, or storage items, adding functional value beyond just filing. Most laterals handle both letter and legal-size files without conversion kits, which matters if your office uses both. Budget \$350–\$700 for solid steel laterals from brands like Hirsh, Tennsco, or Safco.

Go With the Vertical File Cabinet If...

Your office is tight on wall space but has usable depth, or you need to tuck filing into a narrow slot (between a desk and a wall, for example). A 15" vertical cabinet fits in gaps where nothing else goes. High-profile vertical cabinets (4- or 5-drawer) pack a lot of filing into a small footprint — up to 5 drawers in a 15"x28" floor area. They're also typically less expensive than comparable laterals. If you're primarily filing one size of document (letter-only, for example) and space is the constraint, vertical is a solid choice.

Capacity Math Worth Knowing

Here's the concrete comparison: a standard 2-drawer vertical holds approximately 450–500 letter-size folders. A 2-drawer lateral at 36" wide holds approximately 700–800 letter-size folders — roughly 60% more in the same number of drawers. If you have hundreds of active files, that capacity difference becomes significant over time. You'll need fewer lateral cabinets to hold the same volume, which can offset the higher per-unit cost.

Security and Locking Options

Both laterals and verticals are available with core-removable lock cylinders, which allow master-keying for office security systems. For environments with sensitive files (HR, legal, medical), look for cabinets rated for legal-weight hanging files in all drawers and with anti-tip interlock systems that prevent more than one drawer from opening at a time. Both styles are available in steel construction with powder-coat finishes — the standard for commercial environments requiring durability and fire resistance (see our fireproof cabinet comparison for full fire-rated options).

Bottom Line

Lateral for capacity and convenience; vertical for tight spaces. Both ship free from FindOfficeFurniture.com — call [888-719-4960](tel:888-719-4960) to discuss size and quantity options for your filing needs.

Ready to find the right furniture?

www.FindOfficeFurniture.com | 888-719-4960 | Free Shipping · Expert Guidance