

# Plain Language

## Project ELF

by Patrick Clarke  
and George Hathaway

The birth of Project ELF came in 1980, at the international conference of the Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA). The purpose of Project ELF (Eliminate Legal-size Files) is to reduce administrative costs in business, industry and government by eliminating legal-size paper (8½ by 13 or 14 inch) in favor of letter-size (8½ by 11 inch) for records and correspondence. To accomplish this, ELF will gradually replace existing legal-size paper, filing cabinets and reproduction equipment with letter-size components.

### Endorsements

Since its creation ELF has been endorsed by the following:

**BFMA** — In May, 1981 the international board of directors of the Business Forms Management Association (BFMA) unanimously supported Project ELF.

**Federal Courts** — In September, 1981 the Judicial Conference of the U.S. decided to eliminate the legal-size requirement for all Federal courts. Letter-size paper has been required for all lawsuit papers filed in Federal courts since January 1, 1983.

**Federal Government** — In 1982 the General Service Administration advised all Federal departments and agencies to eliminate legal-size paper, forms and file cabinets. Major federal agencies that have adopted letter-size standards are the Department of the Army, Federal Communications Commission, Securities Exchange Commission and U.S. Postal Service.

**State Courts** — Thirty-one state court systems now require letter-size paper either in whole or in part.

**State Governments** — In 1984 Delaware adopted Project ELF by state law. The Delaware law requires all public documents to be on letter-size paper. Arizona and Texas passed similar laws in 1985.

### Reasons for ELF

1. **Double Standard** — Business and government have lived too long with the double standard of paper sizes. Almost everything in the life-cycle of paper must be geared to handling two different sizes. Offices using both legal-size and letter-size files often face frustration in two different situations:

a) A letter-size paper interfiled with legal-size papers is often difficult to locate among the legal-size papers. This is especially true when the papers are fastened at the top by prong fasteners and the search is done by "thumbing" through the bottom of the pages. The shorter piece can be missed in this process.

b) When legal-size papers must be stored in letter-size files, the bottom of the legal-size paper must be folded back to fit the folder. Too many legal-size sheets intermixed in a letter-size file will create wedge-shaped files and unnecessary bulk.

2. **Cost Analysis** — The following table, developed in 1982 by Arlite Office Products, illustrates the extra costs imposed by legal-size paper in equipment and supplies.

Item	Letter-size	Legal-size	% more
File Cabinet (Vertical 4-drawer)	\$209.00	\$299.00	43
File Pockets (expandable)	1.43	1.65	15
Folders (Pendaflex)	12.00	13.70	14
Binders (Report-ACCO)	1.90	2.40	26
Paper (25% Cotton-Typewriter)	11.40	16.95	49
Paper (Xerographic)	6.30	8.05	28

3. **Waste of Space** — Legal-size file cabinets occupy 17 percent more floor space than letter-size cabinets. Office space in most cities costs between \$7 to \$12 per square foot. In Washington, D.C. and New York City, prime locations cost more than \$100 a foot. Multiply the space wasted by legal-size files times the number of files, times the cost per square foot to see how much money an organization wastes on legal-size paper. Finally more than 960 square inches of steel are wasted in the average lateral legal-size file. This is furniture grade casework steel, one of the key ingredients in the spiraling cost of office equipment.

### Michigan ELF Commission

In June, 1986 the Michigan ELF Commission was formed. The Chairperson is Patrick Clarke who is also Chairperson of the State Bar Committee on the Mentally Disabled. Vice-Chairperson is Fredericka Jackson, State Forms Administrator in the Department of Management and Budget. One of the Commission's goals is a Michigan Supreme Court rule to require letter-size paper for all lawsuit papers in Michigan courts.

Patrick Clarke is the chairperson of the Michigan ELF Commission and the chairperson of the State Bar Committee on the Mentally Disabled.

George Hathaway is a staff attorney at Detroit Edison, the chairperson of the Plain English Committee of the State Bar and a member of the Michigan ELF Commission.

Federal courts have required letter-size paper since 1983. According to Robert Mossing, Clerk of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan, the letter-size paper requirement has been very successful. Court personnel and attorneys have had no problems with the rule, and it has greatly increased the efficiency of the court.

All Michigan state courts permit both legal-size and letter-size paper. The State Court Administrative Office, which gets its authority from the Michigan Supreme Court, has encouraged the letter-size standard by developing about 400 approved SCAO court forms, all on letter-size paper. In 1981 the Representative Assembly of the State Bar approved the letter-size standard and recommended that the Michigan Supreme Court adopt a letter-size court rule similar to the federal rule. The Supreme Court declined to do so.

But the Michigan ELF Commission believes it is time to seek an affirmative court rule. In January, 1986, the Chief Justice asked the Supreme Court's Citizens' Commission to Improve Michigan Courts to consider ways to make Michigan's court system more "user-friendly." The Michigan ELF Commission believes that the most obvious way to make Michigan courts more "user-friendly" is to stop using "user-intimidating" legal-size paper. It seems common sense, in light of the very successful federal experience, to eliminate letter-size paper.

#### Conclusion

The ultimate objective of the Michigan ELF Commission is to eliminate legal-size paper in Michigan. This is also the number one objective of the Plain English movement in Michigan. The labor, materials and space savings realized through the adoption of a Court rule will yield huge benefits for all the people of the state of Michigan. ■

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