

Letter-Size Paper vs. Legal-Size Paper

By Michael F. Walsh

I can't stand it any more. The "Plain Language" column in the July 1989 issue of the *Michigan Bar Journal* regarding the relative merits of letter-size replacing legal-size as a court standard was the last straw.

Let's be honest about costs of legal-size paper versus letter-size paper.

Fact One: The width is the same, 8½ inches. The only variable is in length.

Fact Two: The standard margins are the same; one inch at the top and one inch at the bottom.

As a result of facts one and two we can use for comparison purposes the net values of 9 net inches for 8½ x 11 and 12 net inches for 8½ x 14. Legal-size therefore contains ⅓ or 33⅓% more useable space than letter-size. If legal-sized items cost more than 33⅓% more than comparable letter-sized items it is safe to assume that letter-size is cheaper. Contrariwise, if legal-size costs less than 33⅓% more than a comparable letter-sized item then legal-size is cheaper.

On the day I read the Plain Language article, I received a circular from a national office supply firm. Hammermill copier paper was \$7.48 for 10 reams of letter-size and \$8.98 for 10 reams of legal-size. To make the legal-size as expensive as the letter-size paper they would have had to raise the price of the legal-size paper by \$.99 to \$9.97 (\$8.98 x 1.333) which would mean about an 11% increase. Pendaflex hanging file folders (per box of 25): letter-size—\$9.98; legal-size—\$11.54; break even point \$13.30 for an

increase of \$1.76 or about 15%. I could go on but the reality is that *letter-size is always more expensive than legal-size to purchase.*

Within limits larger sizes are more efficient than smaller sizes. If you think not, I encourage you to look at the size of computer printouts. They make legal-size look small by comparison. If larger sizes are more efficient than smaller sizes the natural inquiry is: Why did the federal government go to standardization at 8½ x 11? The answer may surprise you. Accepting 8½ x 11 paper was the federal government's attempt to increase the size of their paper.

Right about now you probably think that the writer of this item is crazy. A little historical perspective may help at this time.

Early in World War II, we as a society began to experience shortages in a number of commodities due to the war effort. One of those commodities was paper, primarily I understand, because of the need for some of the raw materials in the manufacture of munitions. As a result, the federal government adopted a smaller size of paper for correspondence. That size was 8" x 10½"; one-half inch smaller on each dimension than standard letter-size paper.

The war ended and soon thereafter all rationing stopped. Gasoline, rubber, sugar, and the like were uniformly available. But the federal government remained on 8" x 10½" paper.

8" x 10½" paper remained government standard for over 40 years. Since it was a non-standard size the suppliers charged more for it. Finally it was decided to abandon 8" x 10½" and go

to a standard size of 8½" x 11." It was cheaper to use larger paper.

Clearly there was a savings in going from 8 x 10½ to 8½ x 11. Was there, however, any savings by going from 8½ x 14 to 8½ x 11? I quote from Ms. Christie: "There hasn't been a cost analysis by the federal court system and, in retrospect, there should have been. I'm sure that the savings in time, space, and material have been substantial, but we don't have any figures to back up my hunch." And this writer will bet that there never is such a study. The simple economic facts are that letter-size is about 20% more expensive than legal-size when you remember that legal-size holds 33⅓% more than letter-size.

As a private practitioner I can't afford to use hunches. That extra 20% comes out of my pocket. Want some more figures? See chart on next page.

These are actual figures, not hunches.

There are a number of statements in the article which caught my eye.

Quote: "We redesigned our records area when the rule was adopted and gained twenty percent additional filing space by shifting to letter-size open shelving."

"Plain Language" is a regular feature of the *Michigan Bar Journal*, edited by Joseph Kimble for the State Bar Plain English Committee. Assistant editor is George H. Hathaway. Through this column the Committee hopes to promote the use of plain English in the law. Want to contribute a plain English article? Contact Prof. Kimble at Cooley Law School, P.O. Box 13038, Lansing, MI 48901.

<u>Product</u>	<u>Cost</u> <u>8½ x 11</u>	<u>Cost</u> <u>8½ x 14</u>	<u>Breakeven</u>	<u>Savings</u>
Legal Pads	\$ 6.99	\$ 8.97	\$ 9.32	4%
Southworth 25# Typing Paper	14.24	18.17	18.98	4%
11 Pt. Weight Manila File Folders	8.37	10.99	11.16	2%
3½" Pocket Folders	.74	.89	.99	11%
Storage Boxes Saxon Steel	21.48	24.72	28.63	16%
2 Drawer Fireproof File Cabinet	699.88	759.88	932.94	23%
4 Drawer Standard File Cabinet	144.88	174.88	193.13	10%

Response: This would be true only if they narrowed the aisles between files by over 50%. People are fooling themselves with those figures. To find out the actual lost space we would need an engineer, but the lost capacity is approximately 10%. Assuming 18-inch deep shelves for 14-inch files replaced with 15-inch deep shelves for 11-inch files the respective capacities are 12 over 18 or 66⅔% utilization for 14-inch files and 9 over 15 or 60% utilization for 11-inch files. The loss is the difference, or $6\frac{2}{3}\% \div 66\frac{2}{3}\% = .1$ or 10%. It is actually a little more or less due to variances in shelf sizes and because although one sheet of paper is negligible in thickness, a large number, a shelf full, is far from negligible.

Quote: "To understand the inconvenience of legal-size paper, it is important to consider that we are required to keep records at the courthouse for five years. That means we have roughly 45,000 cases filed here at any given time, and one of our continuing problems is finding the space to store all the paper."

Response: If we used legal-sized paper would there be more cases filed? Or would the court keep them a shorter time? The number of cases on file and the length of time they are kept on file have no bearing on the size of the paper in those files. In my personal opinion the problem is that the rules require that needless items

be filed but that is a function of the court rules not the size of the paper. The problem is not the length of a particular file or even its length and width, it is the volume of 45,000 files. Everything else being equal, the shorter you make them the thicker you make them.

Quote: "We save money by buying files in the smaller size. Then when we ship them after five years to the Federal Record Center in Chicago we receive additional savings if the files are letter-size because we fit more paper in the shipping boxes."

Response: This quote is half right. You do save some money by purchasing files in the smaller size; according to my national office supply brochure, about 20%. However, when you start creating any second volumes of a file any savings goes out the win-

dow. Clearly, however, you have a net savings in the purchase of file folders.

I have a hard time understanding how a shipping box that is full of papers is "more full" if the papers are 11 inches long than if they are 14 inches long. In the private sector full means full.

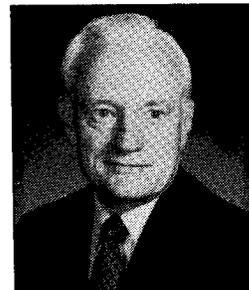
I notice that the analysis stopped at shipping costs. I assume that the court doesn't have to rent storage space or if it does its rent is at a government facility which doesn't charge real costs. Because if it did, that extra 20% would take a heck of a toll out of any minimal amount of savings on buying file folders. Because don't forget that all of your paper products are costing you more than they would if you were using legal-sized paper.

Quote: "Besides the savings in space, we're saving time and money when we have to copy pleadings. That is a big part of a record clerk's job, and copying is much quicker when he or she is dealing with a standard paper size and the automatic paper feeder can be used."

Response: I've already pointed out that the so-called savings in space is a myth; in actuality there is probably a net loss. Is it truly more efficient to have a person copy 120 pages of letter-size than 90 pages of legal-size? The paper costs would say "no." The copier machine costs would say "no." The difference in toner costs is infinitesimal. Wear and tear on the machinery is clearly less for 90 copies than 120

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copies. Many of the new high speed copiers on the market now can automatically choose between paper sizes when using automatic paper feeders.

Quote: "Some say you can write more on legal-size paper, but the truth is that most legal secretaries use huge margins."

Response: There are two problems with that statement. In my analysis I have assumed that margins are one inch at the top and at the bottom. If the margins are greater, the arguments for legal-size are even stronger. If the margins are 2 inches top and bottom, the net figures are 7 for letter-size and 10 for legal-size, in which case legal-size will hold 43% more than letter-size. To carry that logic to a ridiculous extreme, assume a margin of 5 inches top and bottom and legal-size is 300% bigger. The bigger the margin the stronger the argument for legal-size paper.

My experience is to the contrary. Most legal secretaries are professional; very few have huge margins on their pleadings. If anything, the contrary is true; there frequently is insufficient room to punch the holes for the

ACCO holders. In most offices paper is expensive.

Quote: "I found that a 155-page, legal-size file could be transferred to a letter-size file of 159 pages."

Response: I use a combination of legal-size and letter-size files. I hereby challenge the authors to come to my office, pick out any 155 pages of legal filings in my file drawer and transfer them to 200 pages of letter-size, much less 159 pages. I offer my typewriter. If they succeed they can have the typewriter. 155 legal-size pages into 159 letter-size pages; give me a break.

Bert Lance was quoted: "If the wagon ain't broke, don't fix it." I keep hearing how it will be better if we change over to letter-size pleadings as standard. But so far all I've gotten is rhetoric; no facts; no figures. Whenever I ask how it will be better, I'm just told that it will but never any facts, never any figures. Clearly legal-size is less expensive than letter-size. In my opinion the wagon ain't broke and it doesn't need fixing. Before we make the same foolish mistake that the federal court system and a number of states have made I suggest that we have an unbiased study completed to determine the actual costs of conversion and the continued costs of such a conversion. My feeling is that if such a study is accomplished, the long term costs to all concerned, including the courts, will be substantially greater than its proponents imagine.

Judy Christie Replies

(Ms. Christie is the administrative manager of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan):

The writer has missed the point. We are talking about *standardization* of paper length, and on that basis many of the points made by Mr. Walsh lose their validity. He keeps stating that letter-size is more expensive than legal-size paper. A catalog from a professional supplier to attorneys prices 2,000 sheets of 8½ by 11 paper at \$69.95 (about 3½ cents a page) and

2,000 sheets of 8½ by 14 paper at \$89.95 (about 4½ cents a page). Mr. Walsh contends that the longer paper holds more and, of course, that's true—in theory. In reality, I found that for some reason legal secretaries used much larger margins on the longer paper, which partly accounts for our ability to transfer the 155 legal-size pages to 159 letter-size pages. The rest of the story is that, as Mr. Walsh must be aware, much of a legal case is composed of material such as cover sheets, proofs of service, notices of deposition, appearances, and so on, which are easily transposed to one letter-sized page, usually with room to spare.

Mr. Walsh's most telling statement comes near the end of his letter when he states, "I use a combination of legal-size and letter-size files." I'd be interested to hear the percentage of each he has, but I'd wager that the letter-size files outnumber the legal-size, because Mr. Walsh probably uses legal-size only for state court pleadings and briefs, and letter-size for everything else (I notice his letter to the *Bar Journal* was written on 8½ by 11 paper).

At any rate, Mr. Walsh is fighting a losing battle. A recent survey of Michigan courts conducted by the Plain English Committee shows that letter-size filings range from 50 percent in some courts all the way to 85 percent in others, as estimated by the clerks and court administrators in those jurisdictions. The business world has also long since overruled Mr. Walsh on the economics of standardized paper; contrary to Mr. Walsh's assertion, the federal government did not lead the charge to standardization but joined forces when it became apparent that letter-size was overwhelming legal-size, thereby making it uneconomical to buy and stock other sizes of paper and storage equipment.

The bottom line is that we waste money filing multiple sizes of paper, 8½ by 11 is by far the preferred size, and so it should be the standard size in state government and state courts. ■

NOTICE

On March 1, 1990,
the Michigan
Supreme Court
passed a Court rule
which will require
letter-size paper
for all law suit
papers filed in
Michigan courts after
January 1, 1991.