Master key systems or separate keys for commercial doors

Choosing how keys work in a commercial building

When you manage a commercial property, the way keys and locks are organised affects daily operations, security, and how easy it is to control who goes where. Two common approaches are master key systems and separate keys for each lock. Each has its strengths and its trade-offs. Which one fits your building depends on the size of your team, the layout of your space, and how much control you need over access.

How a master key system works

A master key system uses locks that are pinned to accept more than one key. Each lock still has its own change key that opens only that lock. But a master key, held by a manager or a maintenance person, can open all locks in the system. The locks themselves contain extra pins that allow the master key to turn the cylinder while still keeping individual keys restricted to their own lock.

This setup is common in office buildings, schools, and apartment complexes where certain people need access to many areas but others should only reach their own space. The convenience is real: one key can open every door in a building, or a subset of doors if the system is designed with sub-master levels. For example, a floor manager might have a key that opens every office on their floor but not the basement or the roof access.

The case for separate keys

Separate keys mean each lock has its own unique key that opens nothing else. This approach is simpler to install and costs less upfront because the locks are standard cylinders with no special pinning. It also gives clear separation: if a key is lost, only that one lock is compromised. The loss of a master key, by contrast, can require rekeying the entire system.

Separate keys work well for small businesses with few doors, or for spaces where each area needs total isolation. A storage unit facility, a small workshop, or a single-suite office can run perfectly fine with individual keys. The downside is key management: someone with keys to multiple doors carries a heavy ring, and giving a new employee access to several areas means handing over multiple keys.



What to weigh when deciding

Several factors push you toward one system or the other. Think about the number of doors and the number of people who need access. A master key system scales better as the building grows. If you have twenty offices and a cleaning crew that needs to enter all of them, a master key saves time and reduces the number of keys in circulation. If you have three offices and one person cleans them, separate keys are simpler.

Another factor is the security level required. In spaces where you need a strict audit trail, such as a server room or a pharmaceutical storage area, separate keys paired with a key cabinet that logs who takes which key can provide clear accountability. Master key systems can also be designed with restricted keyways, where the key blanks are patented and only a licensed locksmith can cut copies. This prevents unauthorised duplication and keeps the hierarchy intact.

Managing keys day to day

Whichever system you choose, how you store and issue keys matters. A key cabinet with a logbook or an electronic tracking system helps you know who has which key at any time. For master key systems, the master key itself should be stored securely and signed out only when needed. For separate keys, a simple pegboard with labelled hooks can work, but it offers no audit trail.

For larger operations, managed access for commercial properties often includes a mix of mechanical master key systems and electronic access control on sensitive doors. The master key gives convenient access to general areas, while electronic locks on high-value rooms provide a detailed log of entries. This hybrid approach balances convenience with accountability.

Restricted key systems and security

If you choose a master key system, consider using restricted key blanks. These keys are cut from a patented profile that only the manufacturer and authorised dealers can supply. A hardware store cannot duplicate them. This protects the hierarchy of your system: someone who finds a lost master key cannot simply get a copy made. The same protection is available for separate key systems, though the cost per key is higher.

Restricted keys also make it easier to track key issuance. Because only certain locksmiths can cut them, you can control who orders duplicates. This is especially useful in buildings where turnover is high, such as retail chains or multi-tenant offices.



When separate keys make more sense

Separate keys are not just for small spaces. They also suit situations where access needs are highly individual and do not overlap. A medical clinic with multiple practitioner suites, each with its own waiting room and treatment area, may find that separate keys keep each suite completely private. No one has a key that opens another doctor's patient files or medication storage.

Separate keys also simplify rekeying after a departure. If a tenant moves out, you rekey only that suite's lock. In a master key system, you may need to rekey the entire building if the master key was compromised, or at least rekey the affected section and issue new sub-master keys to everyone else.

Hybrid approaches

Many commercial properties end up with a hybrid. The main entrance and common areas use a master key system so that staff, cleaners, and maintenance can move freely. Individual tenant spaces or high-security rooms use separate keys or electronic access. This gives the convenience of a master key for routine movement and the isolation of separate keys where it matters most.

Another hybrid is to use a master key system with a removable core cylinder. The core can be swapped out quickly with a control key, making rekeying fast and inexpensive. This works well for buildings where access needs change often, such as coworking spaces or short-term rental properties.

Planning for future changes

Think about how your building might evolve. If you expect to add doors, subdivide spaces, or change tenant layouts, a master key system designed with expansion in mind saves trouble later. A good locksmith can design a system with room to grow, so new locks integrate without rekeying everything. Separate keys are simpler to add, as each new lock gets its own key, but the key ring for staff who need access everywhere keeps getting heavier.

For properties where staff turnover is high, **managed access for commercial properties** often includes an electronic component. Electronic locks can be rekeyed instantly by changing a code or deactivating a credential, with no physical lock change. Combining this with a mechanical master key system for backup access gives flexibility without sacrificing reliability.



Making the call

There is no universal right answer. A master key system suits buildings where many people need access to many areas, and where the risk of a lost master key can be managed through restricted keyways and good key control. Separate keys suit spaces where isolation matters more than convenience, or where the building is small enough that a handful of keys is manageable.

Talk to a commercial locksmith about your floor plan, the number of users, and the security level each door requires. They can help design a system that matches how your building actually works, not just how you wish it worked. The right setup will make your property easier to run without creating security gaps that cost more in the long run.