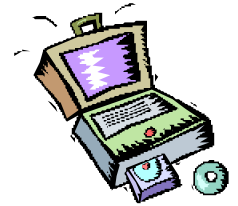




Filing Systems



Now where did I put that E-mail message?

In words like these, thousands of Government decision-makers continually call for needed information. The facts come fast from your records—if the records are carefully organized, *if* they are systematically maintained, and *if* the requester gives the right clues. If not, work falters and tempers flare.

Finding an E-mail message, a word processing document, or a spreadsheet on the shared drive of a computer network, or placing a document into a paper case file seems a simple matter—until something cannot be found. Then an office comes face-to-face with the age old problem of recordkeeping. Both managers and staff wish they had mastered the basic principles when the files were first established and had consistently applied these principles in their daily filing.

This toolkit was prepared to offer guidance to Federal offices that have a few file cabinets or share workspace on the organization's local area network, and where specified employees keep the records as a collateral duty.

Why is a File System necessary?

Managing paper records or documents continues to be a formidable task. This in spite of the development and availability of computers. Because it is progressively easier to create, print, copy and transmit documents, the paperless office remains a myth. Because of this problem and the ongoing need for organizations to have the right information available quickly, files management is a critical business function. The process of designing, documenting, and implementing standard procedures for classifying, sorting, and storing information to ensure its cost-effective and timely retrieval is called **file system development**.

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is our national recordkeeper. At NARA we work to ensure that anyone can have access to the records that matter to them. NARA ensures, for the Citizen, and the Public Servant, for the President and the Congress and the Courts, ready access to essential evidence. Thus, one of NARA's Primary goals is to ensure that all records are controlled, preserved, and made accessible as long as needed. NARA—Rocky Mountain Region, Bldg. 48, DFC, Denver, CO 80225, Records Management Division—303-407-5720, workshop.denver@nara.gov



The purpose of filing things—paper, electronic, photographic, or otherwise—is to FIND them later on when needed. An effective filing and retrieval system facilitates business activities by providing timely access to complete, accurate, and up-to-date information on which sound business decisions can be made. If “filing” is viewed as simply putting papers ‘out of sight’ or “saving” electronic documents—with no retrieval standards or systems—important information is likely to be lost, or at best, slow, difficult and costly to retrieve.

Major Components of an Active File System

- *Standard File Structure* or indexing scheme, usually including a file coding or numbering pattern for each level of the index
- *Written rules for file terminology.* Standard spellings for key words and terms, a requirement to spell out acronyms, and alpha and numeric filing rules.
- *An up-to-date listing of all file titles* (paper and electronic)
- *Standard procedures for updating the system.* Also procedures for transferring the files to inactive storage in an offsite records center, or digital records, online, nearline, or offline storage. .
- *Written procedures* for end users and for employees who maintain the file system, and training.

Steps in File System Development.

Step 1: Review the current status. Determine whether your agency has implemented any part of a records/information management program and whether this program includes any file systems or a current records retention program. Does a filing system of any kind exist and do people use it? How are electronic files being saved and arranged on the shared drive of the server?

Step 2: Determine User Requirements. Ask and listen to the people who actually file things and retrieve paper and electronic records. Ask them to describe specific problems they have encountered. This helps you determine what type of filing system to use and how complex or simple it should be, and it helps you in gaining user buy-in to the system. User acceptance cannot be overestimated as a success factor.

Step 3: Review Alternatives. Consider more than one type of file arrangement; enumerate the strengths and weaknesses of each, and know that there is no perfect filing system in existence.

Step 4: Analyze Costs and Benefits. Determine the costs of implementing a new system, as well as the ongoing costs of NOT implementing a new system. Factor in lost time and business opportunities resulting from the status quo.

Step 5: Select Alternatives: Make a recommendation based on the expected benefits, costs, and resources available to implement the new system. Provide two acceptable (at least) options from which users can choose.

Step 6: Plan and Execute Implementation. Develop a timeline of when and by each physical implementation phase will be completed. Develop target dates and fallback options if unexpected situations arise.

Step 7: Follow Up and Revise. About three months after a new system is implemented, conduct a follow up study to determine whether corrective actions are needed. If so, go back to Step 3. Schedule a review annually thereafter.

Records Survey. Determine major records series or categories that each office and user creates. Such a survey is most effectively done by face-to-face contacts with end users, physically reviewing files and collecting your findings on a survey form. (The NARA—Rocky Mountain Region has an electronic survey form that can be used to collect survey information. Contact the Records Management Division at (303) 407-5720.) Any survey should collect information on the following:

- office name and function;
- for each office, where the records come from and go to, and how they are used in that office;
- what formats (paper, electronic, etc.);
- how frequently are different records in the office referenced by users;
- how long are the files needed for everyday business and when do they start to become inactive;
- how long are records maintained (is the retention schedule followed);
- how do people name their files;
- is a list or index to the files maintained somewhere

Analyze the Survey Information. After completing the walk through and survey, start planning the system and analyzing the data you gathered. Consider the following: active and inactive records found; activity level, especially for electronic records; whether to classify a records at the document or folder level; the options for sequencing files—numeric, alphabetic, chronological, alpha—numeric, subject, etc.; keyword indexing; associating the files to the retention schedule; structuring the index.

Arrange records “hierarchically” and “functionally”.

- > Hierarchically means arranging your information from the “general to the specific. (See sample).

HUMAN RESOURCES

Benefits

Payroll

Retirement

CSRS

FERS

- > Functional arrangement means that you name things and categorize them by the core business functions of your agency (which rarely change), rather than by the current organization chart (which can change frequently).

Organizational

Department of Electricity

Functional

Power Management

A Word On Electronic Filing. Always keep in mind the KISS (Keep it Simple and Straightforward) principle when developing filing systems. Especially ones for shared electronic files. Electronic filing systems should mirror the paper file to some extent, but they should not be nearly as complex and should have no more than five to seven levels of hierarchical electronic folders. Always develop naming conventions for electronic file names in a standard format that everyone is required to use. For example: *FILENAME—MONTH?DAY/YEAR (xx-xx-xx)—Version #.File Extension. (E.g. “Filing Toolkit—09-14-04-v1.doc”).*



For more information, contact the Records Management Division at (303) 407-5720 or workshop.denver@nara.gov.

This toolkit was developed from the following resources:

Active Filing for Business Records. Ann Bennick, CRM. ARMA International, Prairie Village, KS (2000)

Basic Records Operations. General Services Administration, National Archives and Records Service. 1981.

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