



[-] ■ CREATING AN
ELECTRONIC FILING
STRUCTURE



[-] ■ *A GUIDELINE*



© TAB 2008. Joanne Wiens,
TAB Senior Consultant.



Introduction

Most information used and exchanged in business today comes in electronic format. But unlike physical documents, which are generally stored in central filing structures that employees can easily access, electronic documents tend to be stored according to each user's preferred filing method, with many choosing to keep documents on their personal space within the network drive. This often makes it difficult for other users to retrieve the information they need to do their jobs, and also results in duplicate files and confusion over which versions are most up-to-date and accurate. Consequently, organizations lose thousands of dollars a year because of errors and reduced productivity. They may also be at risk of non-compliance with federal and industry regulations and leave themselves vulnerable in the event of litigation.

An electronic filing structure can minimize these losses and risks. Like a physical filing structure, an electronic filing structure organizes electronic documents in a central location within an organization's network drive, making it easy for users to retrieve information and enhancing regulatory compliance.

This guide was created to help you develop and implement an electronic filing structure for your organization. It is the culmination of ideas from the author and experts in the field of efficient information management. Recommendations from this guideline can be incorporated into your organization's Records Management Policy and Procedures.



What is an electronic filing structure?

An electronic filing structure is used to organize electronic documents for efficient use and retrieval. It can be built on an individual's personal computer, an organization's network drives, within an email application or within an electronic records/document management system (ERDMS).

An electronic filing structure is not a mirror of an organization's classification structure, which is used to classify records by business function (into records series) so that a retention period can be applied to each record series. The two are related but not identical.

A well-constructed filing structure encourages its own use. For example, email attachments invariably get saved by the recipient into a folder of their choosing. This creates duplicate electronic copies of the same document in folders all over the network and on individual C: drives. By using the hyperlink feature in email instead, an organization's staff can link to a document on its network thus reducing the creation of duplicates and encouraging the use of the filing structure for storing and locating information.

2.

Why your organization needs an electronic filing structure

The goals of creating an electronic filing structure are to:

- Improve retrieval of electronic information
- Gain control of existing electronic document and record generation
- Reduce arbitrary decision-making when saving a document
- Set the stage for the deployment of an electronic records/document management system (ERDMS)

3.

Glossary of Terms

The following definitions are given for terms used in this guideline:

Document:

Recorded information or object in any form that can be treated as a unit and filed. This includes traditional paper letters, memos and reports as well as electronic formats such as word processing documents, spreadsheets, emails and databases. Documents become records when they meet the definition of "record" below.

Record:

"Information created, received and maintained as evidence and information by an organization or person, in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business."¹

Filing Method:

A method or system of organizing, storing and identifying documents and records to enable their retrieval, use, and disposition. Can be either paper or electronic.

Filing:

The physical process of placing documents and records in the appropriate location and order within a paper or electronic filing system.

Folder:

A set of related documents and records (regardless of format) organized and kept together. On the computer this is a location where related electronic documents can be filed and organized.

Shared Network Drive:

Electronic storage location on a network accessible to a defined group of users.



4.

Assumptions

This guideline was created under the following assumptions:

1. Employee teams benefit by keeping information on network drives.
2. This project of creating electronic filing structures has senior-level corporate support.
3. An electronic filing structure will apply to all electronic documents not just those considered records. The term “electronic documents” will be used in this guideline to refer to all electronic files regardless of format.
4. An electronic filing structure can be used with or without an electronic records/document management system.
5. Records management policies for paper and electronic documents will be applied consistently across the organization.

This guideline does not deal with:

1. Authentication and audit of electronic documents
2. The metadata associated with electronic documents
3. FOIP, PIPEDA and other privacy issues
4. Vital records
5. Changing or improving workflow
6. An annual audit / clean-up / revision of the created electronic filing structure
7. Revisions to the Classification and Retention Schedule

5.

Tools

A number of tools are required for implementing the steps outlined in this guideline. It is assumed that your organization already has these tools in place.

- Records Management Policy and Procedures
- Classification and Retention Schedule
- Copy of the existing electronic folder layout
- File plan for paper documents

6.

Who to Involve

The implementation steps outlined in this guideline are designed for the use of employee teams. A team may consist of members of a department, members of a project team, or committee members.

Each team should be responsible for at least one business function of the organization. For example, one employee team from the Human Resources department may be responsible for recruitment while another employee team responsible for employee training may include employees from the HR department as well as employees from the Operations department.

Keep in mind that individual employees may belong to one or more employee teams.



Refer to the Classification and Retention Schedule to identify the various business functions of your organization. Based on the business functions, determine the types of employee teams within your organization.

We suggest you work through the implementation steps with one employee team at a time. Each implementation group should consist of an employee team, a Records Management (RM) liaison and an Information Technology (IT) representative. The electronic filing structure of the organization is built by each implementation group completing their piece of the structure.

Remember to communicate constantly with the implementation group. Also communicate with the whole organization as each employee team successfully completes their piece of the electronic filing structure.



Implementation

The following implementation steps are recommended for working with each implementation group:

- a) Assemble the tools listed in heading 5.
- b) Gather the implementation group, including the employee team, the RM liaison and the IT representative. Items (c) through (e) are the introductory meeting for this implementation group.

- c) Review the tools:
 - Briefly review the *Records Management Policies and Procedures*. If the employee team is unfamiliar with this document consider holding a separate training session. At a minimum the disposition procedure and the litigation hold procedure should be reviewed as they will influence the design of the filing structure.
 - Confirm the business functions that apply to this employee team by referring to the *Classification and Retention Schedule*. Remember that not necessarily all record types in a class code (or record series) are the responsibility of a single department. The focus of the electronic filing structure should be documents or records that are evidence of the business activities of the employee team; hold a quick review of the team's workflow, if necessary.
 - Review the *existing folder layout*. Determine if a rough inventory or survey of the existing documents or record types is necessary. Pay particular attention to documents that don't seem to have a home.
 - Review the *file plan for paper documents* and discuss what works and what doesn't. Record these points for reference when drafting the electronic filing structure.
- d) Review the goals (heading 2) and clarify as necessary. Remember that the primary



goal is to ensure everyone on the employee team can efficiently retrieve the right information at the right time.

- e) Set a timeline and get commitment for participation in the following discussions:
- Determine a filing method and naming conventions for folders and documents
 - Draft a filing structure
 - Determine how and where to file work-in-progress documents
 - Determine security and access requirements
 - Revise the filing structure
 - Move existing documents into the draft filing structure
 - Develop a checklist for new team members
 - Perform a reality check
 - Go “live” with the filing structure for a limited period
 - Finalize the electronic filing structure and the checklist for new team members
- f) Execute the steps in item (e) above.
- g) AFTER the electronic filing structure has been finalized, identify a team member who will be responsible for the on-going maintenance of the electronic filing structure and the checklist for new team members. This person will be responsible for creating new folders within the filing structure. (If desired, the IT

representative could restrict the creation of folders within the new filing structure to this person alone.) Pledge to support, coordinate and cooperate with this person.

- h) Celebrate!

Filing Method

If your organization already has a file plan for paper documents, including a standard filing method, your electronic documents could follow the same filing method.

If not, there are three primary ways to arrange files depending on the kind of information to be filed ²:

- Alphabetic filing is a filing structure based on arranging documents in order from A to Z. It is used when documents are retrieved by names of people, organizations, projects, publications, or products.
- Numeric filing is a filing structure based on numbers associated with the document. It is used when documents are assigned numbers by a system (examples: purchase orders, invoices, cheques), there is a large volume of documents, the code number associated with the documents have intrinsic meaning, or the documents must be protected from unauthorized access. For example, personnel records could be protected from unauthorized access by filing by employee number rather than employee name.



- Subject filing is a filing structure used for documents related by subject matter. The documents are again arranged in order from A to Z by subject. This method is used when the subject range is broad, such as research data, strategic plans, catalogues, or inventory lists. It is used when a group of documents cannot be filed by any other single feature.

Each implementation team will need to determine the best filing method for their document types. Different filing methods may apply to different document types used by a single employee team. Determine how records are retrieved and accessed. The goal is to reduce the amount of arbitrary decision-making required to file a document. In other words, the structure should make it obvious where a document should be filed. Organize rationally.

Naming Conventions for Electronic Folders and Records

Folder titles and documents names should be accurate, brief, and concise. They should have only one interpretation. Folder titles should describe the content of the folder and not be too broad or too specific. Combine elements of the folder title so the most useful retrieval information appears first.

Consider the document content when determining the document name. Avoid repeating the folder title in the document name.

Be consistent with numbers, dates, and upper case versus lower case. If a date is going to be part of the folder title or document name, decide on a standard date format for the team. The date format yyyy-mm-dd (with or without the dashes) will ensure similarly named documents are always sorted chronologically.

Consider including the document name (and any other pertinent information) in the document footer so printed versions of the electronic document can be retrieved more easily.

Folder title examples:

Good	Poor
Payables 2007 Receivables 2007	Payables, Receivables, Support Docs
Finance Director - Presentations	Louises's speeches
Scheduled Maintenance 2007 Government Inspections 2007	Maintenance & Inspection

Document examples:

Good	Poor
Smith, Maggie - Contract Laker, Jim - Vacation Schedule 2007	Contract for Maggie Smith Vacation - Jim Laker
Pluto project statistics 2007-02 Pluto project statistics 2007-01 (these document names will sort chronologically)	Pluto project stats February 2007 Pluto project stats January 2007



Drafting a Filing Structure

Review the existing folder layout. Consider keeping those folder layouts that are working well. Some folder layouts may only require minor adjustments.

Check the number of sub-folder levels that must be navigated in order to retrieve information. Aim to reduce the number of mouse clicks required to open a succession of folders in order to locate a desired document. One rule of thumb is aim for a maximum of three sub-folder levels.

Don't mix primary folder titles with subordinate titles at the same level; for example "Fleet" and "Vehicle Registration" would not be at the same folder level. Instead, "Vehicle Registration" should be included within the "Fleet" folder.

Filing Structure Example	
1	Newsletters
2	Engineering Today
3	2005
	2006
	2007
2	Global Marketing Trends
3	2006
	2007
2	Leadership Review
3	2006
	2007
	2008
1	Jupiter Plant Expansion
2	2006
	2007
3	Equipment Testing
	Monthly Progress Reports
2	2008

Work-in-Progress Documents

Determine where to keep work-in-progress documents. If more than one person is working with these documents it makes sense to store these documents on the network so other team members can access them. Often the WIP folder is a sub-folder within a project folder.

Is version control important? If so, consider how to indicate this in the document name. Be consistent with the format for version numbers; for example, use "v1" or "ver1" but don't use both formats. Version numbers can be useful for keeping track of e-mail attachments.

Security of Sensitive Information

Consider how the security and access requirements might affect the filing structure. This is where the counsel and expertise of the IT representative is required. Access restrictions can be applied by employee teams or groups. Electronic security of the team's documents will be set up by the IT department.

Disposing of Documents and Records

The reason for purging electronic documents is not space shortage but the need to improve productivity.



Just like paper documents electronic documents shouldn't be kept forever either, so keep in mind the retention schedule when creating the electronic filing structure. Do not keep everything "just in case".

Refer to the retention period specified in the Classification and Retention Schedule for the documents generated by the business function or activity. Consider how the retention period might affect the filing structure. For instance, if records are disposed of based on the year they were generated then they should be filed by year. One example is Accounts Payable invoices that may have a retention period of Current+6 years; in this case the filing structure should contain invoice folders for each year.

Checklist for New Team Members

Develop a checklist that will help new team members file documents into the correct folders. Ask a colleague from another employee team (who has some basic knowledge of your team's activities) to test the checklist. Revise the checklist accordingly.

Once the electronic filing structure is "live" check if it is actually working by obtaining feedback from a new team member. Is the new member able to efficiently find the documents they require to do their job?

Reality Check

- Is the filing structure easy to understand? Is it "simple" to use?
- Is the terminology consistent?
- Are the folder titles mutually exclusive?
- Do all the existing documents have a logical place in the filing structure?
- Are any folders empty? Should the empty folders be eliminated?
- Does the electronic filing structure coordinate with the paper filing system?
- Did the checklist for new team members pass the test?
- Could retention be applied at a folder level (i.e. without separating the documents within the folder)? (Refer to the record series within the Classification and Retention Schedule.)

Adjust the draft filing structure accordingly.

Testing the Draft Filing Structure

Ask the employee team to use the newly drafted filing structure for a week. (Each implementation group could determine a test period that works best for them.) Ask them to note the types of documents they use that don't fit into the structure and where they think folders need to be added, re-named or removed.



8.

Ongoing maintenance

Managing an electronic filing structure is an ongoing process. As new projects are started and new records are created the filing structure will need to change. As some folders grow they may get too large and will need to be divided. Eventually some folders may need to be eliminated or combined with others. The goal is to maintain an electronic filing structure that meets the needs of the employee teams and their requirement to find the right information at the right time.

9.

Conclusion

Creating an electronic filing structure is a project that requires time and commitment to change. It needs to be planned carefully and thoughtfully by a dedicated group of people who are open to ideas, communicate effectively, and are willing to take ownership for their areas of responsibility within the project. As experts in this field with many years of experience across all industries, TAB is ready to answer any questions you may have about electronic filing structures or help you plan and implement your own electronic filing structure project. So don't hesitate to call your TAB representative or TAB Consulting in Calgary, Alberta at (403) 219-0711.

Sources

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