

Filing systems - Best practice Guide

Introduction

Records creation results directly from the transaction of business. In most cases the way in which people and organisations do business results naturally in the creation of records; in other cases a record must be deliberately created because conducting the transaction, by itself, does not generate the record.

Records that will meet accountability requirements and other needs of an organisation cannot be created or managed without an adequate record keeping system. Records management practices, and in particular records creation, must be systematised through policies, procedures and the application of best practice.

Appropriate controls should be built into filing systems to capture and identify accurately information required by an organisation.

Definition of a file

A file refers to the physical unit of information contained within a paper or electronic folder. Records are held in files to enhance accessibility and identification.

Purpose of a file

Files are created and included in a filing system to provide formal evidence of the business transactions of an organisation. Their purpose is to capture, maintain and provide access to evidence of transactions over time in accordance with accountability and business practices. The establishment of a coherent filing system provides for faster and systematic filing, faster retrieval of information, greater protection of information, and increased administrative stability, continuity and efficiency.

Requirements of a good filing system

- The system should be kept simple to reduce errors and to facilitate all employees use of the system. It should, therefore, be designed for the normal requirements of the organisation and not for remote or exceptional possibilities.
- Files should contain information which is linked to the activities and functions which they document.
- The system should have a structured numeric or alphanumeric referencing system in which each element equates with a function of the file title to a maximum of four elements. Types of file referencing systems include:
 - alphabetical
 - numerical
 - alpha-numeric (for example, AB 12 / 1)
 - keyword

The most common of these systems is the alphanumeric. An attraction of this is that the letters can indicate the function or business process covered by the files.

Suitability:

The system should meet the individual users/departments needs.

Good Maintenance:

In order to maintain a filing system the following are required:

- A good follow-up system (e.g. tracer cards).
- Adequate security.
- A definite "weeding" policy.
- Proper control of record creation and filing additions.
- Secure and adequate storage for archived material.

Adaptability:

The system should be sufficiently flexible to meet the future needs of the organisation.

Accessibility:

The system must enable the user to classify records in any desired manner and to retrieve them with certainty and without delay.

Accountability:

There should be an in-built audit mechanism whereby failure to adhere to established practices and procedures is identified and rectified.

Filing systems can fail to operate effectively for a number of reasons such as overloading, duplication, lack of cross-referencing, obsolete correspondence, absence of a tracer system, inappropriate equipment, lengthy retrieval times, filing backlogs and an overall ad hoc approach to review and storage.

Opening a file:

Before opening a file:

- Determine that there is a need to open a file, for example, files should not be opened for the storage of non-record material; then
- Ensure that a file with the same or similar subject does not already exist in the Department. Duplicate files should not be opened.

When a file is opened, it should be given:

- A unique reference ID in the series;
- A unique file title – plain simple language should be used in the file title. The intended title should not overlap with an existing file title. Ambiguous words – such as miscellaneous, general, correspondence, and issues – should be avoided, as their use inevitably results in large untidy catchall files being created.

The quality of individual records can suffer for a number of reasons and the following measures should be observed in maintaining the system:

- Files should not be overloaded with documents. Avoid unnecessary bulk by removing and destroying earlier drafts and duplicate copies of documents. Duplication should be kept to a minimum. Only one copy of any piece of information should normally be placed on any one file. Avoid copying the same papers onto several different files.
- Documents should be properly secured i.e.
 - Ensure documents are attached to file cover by way of treasury tag or other assembly device
 - Do not file in sub-standard cabinets or other storage equipment,
 - Avoid retaining files on desks or other open areas for an unnecessary length of time
 - Ensure storage conditions are adequate i.e. avoid damp, poorly heated and unsecured areas

File size:

Files should not exceed 5 CMS in width or 250 pages. Ideally, all files should be reviewed at intervals to ensure that they are kept within the recommended width. Records should only be added to the latest volume. If the file exceeds the approved width, it will be necessary to remove the oldest records and place them in a properly indexed transfer case or other storage method for on-site storage. When this process is carried out it is imperative that the file index is amended to show date of transfer to storage as well as the transfer case number.

When a new file is opened, careful thought should be given to the file title and its reference number having regard to the file classification system in use. For example, if the file classification system is service area based the file should be assigned to the appropriate service area and the file index updated accordingly and immediately.

File security:

Maintaining record security is an important element in good records management practice. The fact that we are now operating in a more open structure having regard to Freedom of Information legislation, as well as striving for a quality service, does not dilute the importance of ensuring record security.

Security considerations should inform us in our choice of, inter alia, layout and design of storage areas, storage equipment and systems. In file system design, regard should be given to the need to protect the records from theft, invasion of privacy or damage from fire and flood.

Documentation

Documentation describing the file system should include and clearly state the authority for the system's functions, such as referencing and indexing, and maintenance of the system.

The following information should be documented when a file is created:

- file reference
- file title
- Where it can be anticipated, disposal action and date. Where this action cannot be anticipated, mechanisms must be in place to ensure that this action takes place when the file is closed

Create a file guide with a description of your filing system and instructions for the user so new personnel can continue to use the filing system easily. This will also avoid the arbitrary creation of new file folders.

Review

File creation systems should be monitored regularly and reviewed at least once every two years to ensure that they continue to operate effectively and efficiently, to meet the needs of users, and to satisfy documentation requirements.

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