

Achieving Your Business Goals Setting-up an Effective Filing System

The importance of records management and security cannot be too highly stressed. A well-planned system contributes significantly to efficiency of operation and increase productivity as well as boosting organisation's image. Whether records are stored in a computer or in a steel cabinet, they have to be readily accessible and secured/protected from unauthorised access.

You would be required to make a study of your system. Conducting such a study is no more than taking an inventory of the records in your files/system.

Some of the basic questions you should consider asking are:

- What are the records
- Where should they be filed/stored
- Who uses the records
- How often are they used/accessed
- How are they used/accessed
- How are the records referred to
- What is the size of each record
- How many of each record are filed
- Who else has copies of the same record

Also check if your filing system shows any of the following symptoms:

- You can not find the information you need, it is difficult to obtain due to your system or lack of one
- You are repeatedly having to expand your file system capacity
- You are maintaining duplicate files of the same information
- You are filing material to protect the function and not because of information or legal requirements
- You are using your filing system or equipment for non-records storage
- Your file folders are too full for easy access
- Your filing drawers or shelves are too full for easy access
- You are not finding the information you require in the first place you look

With all your findings above, your analysis is complete - your records inventory reveals the strengths and weaknesses of your records management/filing system.

Once you have analysed your records inventory, you should determine:

- Best arrangement of the records
- Type of media to be filed (paper, microfilm, sepia, tape etc)
- Proper equipment for adequate storage and retrieval
- Proper systems to complement the equipment
- The required record retention schedule and facility

BASIC FILING PROCEDURE

- **Inspecting**
Each document is inspected to see that it has been released. If not, it should be returned to the interested party.
- **Marking**
Determine under what name or caption the paper is to be filed
- **Follow-up and Cross-reference**
If the letter is marked for follow-up, then a record should be made and placed in the follow-up file. If there is more than one place in which to file the document, make a cross-reference.
- **Sorting**
Sorting is the preliminary arrangement of papers according to the first filing unit of the name or number. This is the last step prior to actual filing. Sorting also makes documents easy to find if they are needed while out of the file. Documents should be arranged in sequence so they can be placed in the proper folders quickly, without moving back and forth
- **Filing**
Filing is the actual placing of documents in folders in a pre-determined plan. Torn papers should be mended before they are filed. Raise the folders slightly in the file drawer when placing papers in them so the papers will go entirely to the bottom of the folder.
- Check the caption of the document and folder as a precaution against misfiling.
- All documents should be placed with the tops to the left as you face the folder. Never overcrowd folders. Break them down by date, name or subject using additional folders.

METHODS OF FILING

- Alphabetical
- Numeric
- Geographic
- Subject
- Chronologic

All of these methods have pros and cons and you must decide which one would be best for you.

ALPHABETIC FILING

Alphabetic systems group documents together by letters of the name from A - Z. These systems can be used for any volume of records.

There are a number of protocols or rules for filing alphabetically that must be committed to memory:

- The alphabetical sequence must be strictly adhered to ability comes before able and Mic before Micheal
- Files or entries are sequenced letter by letter:

Dun
Dunn
Dunstable

- Indefinite and definite articles (a, the) are ignored in entry titles
- Abbreviations are filed as written: Messrs Smith and Williams
- Abbreviated names like BBC, ITV etc are filed according to their abbreviated letter sequence
- St is filed as Saint and foreign versions like San or Sainte are filed as spelled. Some filing systems treat Mc, Mac or M' as different versions of 'Mac' and file them according to their individual letter sequence; others trim them all as 'Mac'.
- Entries which are shorter come first:
 - Elizabeth
 - Elizabeth I
 - Elizabeth I, Queen of England
- Personal names are normally filed surname first:

Ademuyiwa, Sir Luke
Ademuyiwa, Tony
Ademuyiwa, Dr John

- Titles like Mr, Mrs, Dr, Prof, Sit etc are ignored, save for forming part of the entry after the initial surname shown.
- Where the same word occurs as a name, then the convention is to enter the forename followed by the surname, followed by the corporate name and then the name as the subject:

Heather
Heather, Arnold
Heather, Products Limited
Heather, British Species

Advantages:

Its advantages include the fact that it gives direct reference and also groups common and/or family names together. It enables files to be read and accessed quickly and is also readily expandable.

Disadvantages:

By the same token, common names do not occur evenly throughout the alphabet. There are, for instance, more names beginning with S than with Q. As an alpha file grows - say to hundreds or thousands of names - identification and locations become more cumbersome. Items within a named file require some additional system of classification - letters to an account client may need to be numbered or filed chronologically, making cross-referencing laborious.

NUMERICAL FILING

Numerical filing refers to all systems in which documents are pre-numbered to distinguish them from each other or from alpha documents. Numerical systems can be as simple as numbering and filing from the lowest number to the highest. Files may be numbered from 1 to 1000 and major sections may occur at regular intervals (100, 200, 300). Sub-sections within a file may be introduced by the addition of a decimal point: 100.1, 235.64 etc

Advantages:

The greatest benefit of a numeric system is speed of filing and finding. It is twice as fast to file and find by number than by name. Even though a numeric file requires a cross index, it can increase production time by 40 to 50%.

Numeric systems provide both a positive identification of the record and a degree of confidentiality. This system is capable of infinite expansions and can cope with a very large number of sub-sections, sub-divisions and diverging branches of data.

Disadvantages:

In order for the numbers to convey readily what they mean, it is necessary for an index to be created, eg:

600 Technology

650 Business Practices

658 Management etc

This system is therefore more time-consuming to use than one in which each file is given an instantly identifiable name.

GEOGRAPHIC

Geographic filing systems operate generally by county or country and then alphabetically or numerically by account name or number. Reasons for this type of filing can be several. Since countries have differing laws and licenses, a commercial enterprise may have to consider these constraints as of primary importance.

Advantages:

Such a system enables statistics to be held in manageable and comparable units and also permits a large or 'macro' figure or total to be evaluated in terms of its 'micro' or component parts.

SUBJECT FILING

This is the arranging of material by given subject. It is filing by descriptive feature instead of by name or number. Such filing involves choosing a word or phrase to stand for each subject or to point out one phase of it.

A subject folder may contain any combination of correspondence, bulletins, clippings, pictures, statistics, trade journals and other printed information relating to the subject.

Subject filing is considered the most difficult of all methods of filing. It is a system which demands that the person installing such a system has a complete knowledge of the business. The greatest problem is knowing under which subject an item will be filed. Because a subject file is expensive to maintain, subject filing should be used only where necessary.

CHRONOLOGIC FILING

Chronologic filing is filing by date. This system is necessary to file items according to the day/date received - such as applications for permits or licenses or the dates when vehicles in a company fleet were services.

Advantages:

Particularly useful when actions need to be taken on a cyclical basis - like re-licensing cars

annually, good for cross-referencing - file on vehicle and re-licensing date records can be quickly matched.

Disadvantages:

This systems requires an index and explanatory back-up system. It is time-consuming to access data held in a manual filing system.

FILING TIPS

Space: A file drawer or shelf should be filled to no more than 90% of its capacity. Tightly packed files slow filing and finding to a crawl.

Index Guide: All active files should have a guide every 10 to 15 folders. Anything less means you are wasting time pushing and pulling folders back and forth, looking for the required record.

Folder Tabs

Folder tabs should be visible immediately upon opening the file. A well-run file must have folders of uniform size and tab styles. Mixing folder heights and tab positions can reduce the efficiency of a filing system.

Folder Tab Identification

Identification on the tabs should be typewritten. Handwritten labels or labels with the names crossed out and re-typed should never be permitted.

File Overload

Don't overload your files to hold more than its capacity. If more files are placed in a folder than it can hold, the tab will slump down and out of sight.

Cross Indexing

Make a reference in one file of related or helpful/additional data held in another file.

Noting Files In Use

A file borrowed without a record of who has it, when it was removed from the filing system etc, is a file lost! Make sure you have a 'file in use' set of slips to be filled out showing: user, date out, date due back etc.

Maintaining Security

Some files will certainly contain highly confidential data; make sure you control who may access what and keep a secure system for sensitive files.

Finally, effective records management system has a very large impact (overall efficiency) across a wide range of business goals, such as cost reduction, competitive advantage, customer service, and regulatory compliance. Your filing/document management methods can have a tremendous effect on the organization and productivity of your business. Is your system efficient?

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