

Document Filing

◆ Overview:

My mother was always very fond of the saying “A place for everything and everything in its place”. I didn’t pay a great deal of attention and the time, and truth be told, I’m not that much better now. However, when it comes to storing information on a computer disk in the 21st century the old adage still applies. This paper discusses the basic principles of storing computerised files in a way which will enable them to be retrieved quickly and efficiently.

Before the days of computers a great deal of effort was expended in designing filing systems to hold vast quantities of paper. The problem of storage space is now greatly reduced, but the need for logical and structured organisation is, if anything, greater. Once again the basic principles apply. So:-

- Only file what you need to file (most of us tend to hoard, and since computer documents take so little physical space it becomes even easier).
- Separate (both in your mind and on your disk) documents with different requirements. One such separation would be temporary documents, working documents, filed documents and archived documents. No doubt there are others
- Define a naming standard and stick to it
- Define a structure for folders which is both logical and easy to navigate

Given we are talking about computerized systems here do not be ashamed to use the power and flexibility a computer to “enhance your filing and retrieval experience”. So you can use search software such as Google Desktop to find obscure stuff quickly. You can cross-file – file the same document in a number of places – although it is probably best not to go wild. You can consider scanning paper documents and storing the scanned document in the computerized filing system. Again, without overdoing it, links to folders can give the same view of invoice folders to the accountants as the sales department have.

While we are on the subject, the contents of your files are likely to be very important to you. Having them on a computer gives you the opportunity not available to the designers of paper-based filing systems – you can make your system resilient to fire, earth-quake, war, riot, and even, dare one say, (some) Acts of God. You just need to choose the right backup technology, and still more important, to use it.

◆ To get started:

You will need to think through the documents you or your organization work with, receive, and dispatch on a daily basis. Pick a sample, not too small, not too large. Where have they come from? What is their purpose? How will they need to be changed? What will happen to them? Where will they go? Why and for how long will they need to be kept. Define some keywords or categories for them. You could define a table to help you:-

Document	Source	Purpose	Change	Destination	Retention	Keyword	Keyword	Keyword	Action
Invoice	CrayTwinsLtd	Accounting	None	Accounts	7yrs	Cray	Invoice		Invoice Approval Process
Letter from Accountants re offshore accounts	Grabbit and Partners	Finance Director Information	None	FD	1yr	Grabbit	Letter	Offshore	FD
Sales Plan for Q2	Sales Director	Internal Planning	Updates by Sales Director and Team	Directors, Sales Division	3 yrs	SalesPlan			SD
Statement	Accounts	Accounting	None	TheCustomer Ltd	1yr	Statement	TheCustomer		None
Memo re site security during Newbury Spring Festival	Head of Site Security	Information	None	All staff via email and intranet	1 yr	Memo	SiteSecurity		None

Credit Note	CBA Ltd	Accounting	None	Accounts	7yrs	CBA	CreditNote		Credit Note Approval Process
Warning Letter re non-payment of account	Accounts	Legal	None	BadPayer Ltd	7 yrs	BadPayer	Legal	Accounts	Legal
Red Alert: Accident Waiting to Happen Plc	Operations Director	Information and Action	Hourly Update	Relevant Staff	2yrs	Accident	RedAlert		Information via Email/txt
A Prospect Ltd	Sales Director	Proposal	Internal Updates	Customer	3yrs	Prospect	Proposal		Review/Update
Invoice	MyCo Lyd	Invoice	None	TheCustomer Ltd	7yrs	TheCustomer	Invoice		Accounts

Identify a part of your computer filestore to hold your documents. If you are the only user of your computer, the MyDocuments folder might be a good place to start; if you are designing a company's system a network shared drive would be more appropriate.

In that directory create folders to represent the following:

- *Temporary files*, perhaps called 'Temp'. This is a place to store anything you need to save but only need for a short while. Make it a rule never to put anything here that you can't get again. Clear the space out every so often.
- *Working Files*; perhaps called 'Working' or 'Current'. This is the place for things you are actively working on and changing. It is like the draw beside your desk. When working on a file save it frequently and change the name each time. That way you will have protection against accidentally deleting text as well against the occasional file corruption that can occur. So ABC_Ltd_SalesProposal_021.doc becomes ABC_Sales_Proposal_022.doc next time it is saved. When you complete the document and are happy with it you will move it to your Filing Cabinet, and you can delete the old copies
- *Filing Cabinet*; perhaps called 'Filing' or 'Cabinet'. This is for files which are being referred to but not actively updated (if you need to update, take a copy and work as described above, creating a new version with a different date or version number). This is best considered as being like the filing cabinet in your office.
- *Archive*; perhaps called 'Archive' or 'History'. This is for documents you are unlikely to need to refer to often but are kept for the record, or for possible need in the future. It is the box of papers in the loft or archive storage facility.

Now would be a good time to make sure that your backup systems are working as you expect.

Then working from your table you might start to design your initial filing system folder structure, continuing to work from the example, as follows:

```

Archive
  Accounts
    SalesInvoices
    PurchaseCreditNotes
    PurchaseInvoices
    WarningLetters
  Customers
    AProspect
      Proposals
    AccidentWaitingToHappen
    RedAlerts
    BadPayer
      WarningLetters
    TheCustomer
      Invoices
  Operations
    RedAlerts
  Suppliers
    CBA
      CreditNotes
  
```

CrayTwins
 Invoices
Sales
Filing
 Accounts
 SalesInvoices
 PurchaseCreditNotes
 PurchaseInvoices
 Statements
 WarningLetters
 Customers
 AProspect
 Proposals
 AccidentWaitingToHappen
 RedAlerts
 BadPayer
 WarningLetters
 TheCustomer
 Invoices
 Statements
Operations
 RedAlerts
Suppliers
 CBA
 CreditNotes
 CrayTwins
 Invoices
Sales
Working
 Administration
 SiteSecurity
 Memos
Finance
 Letters
Sales
 Plans
Temporary

Taking this structure you could derive a final filing structure based on the following principles:

- Use a similar substructure under Archive, Filing and Working
- Use a similar structures under Suppliers, Customers etc.
- Removal of short-term items from Filings and Archive as appropriate

Hopefully these ideas are useful, although the precise details will depend on your own needs. Define your own structure.

Here are some other ideas you might want to consider using:

- Include a file in each folder to describe the contents of that folder. A name such as '!README.txt' make it clear what is going on and the '!' will ensure it gets to appear near the front of an alphabetically sorted list.
- While the operating system maintains dates on files these can get changed either accidentally when copying file or when the file is opened. Consider including the date in the file name. Prefixing the file name so it becomes '060410ElectricityBill.doc' tells you the content of the file, the date, and allows an alphabetical sort to list all such bills in the right order.
- Give some thought to the way in which you handle files which occur regularly. For example, if you hold a sales review meeting each month you might have files called 0601_Sales_Review_Minutes.doc, 0602_Sales_Review_Minutes.doc and so on. That way you can see at a glance whether you have the complete set, and you can easily locate the document you want. You can vary this to suit your needs, so if the meeting was weekly you could still use 0601,0602 etc but in this case the numbers refer to year and week number; or you could use the date as described above.

◆ **You need to:**

- ◆ Understand and define your needs from a filing system
- ◆ Define the way you expect it to work
- ◆ Set up the basic structures
- ◆ Ensure your backup systems are working
- ◆ Communicate the way the system should be used
- ◆ Use it
- ◆ Review and refine it in the light of experience
- ◆ Keep it tidy

- *Disclaimer: All reasonable care has been used in the production of this document but ITSolve Ltd can take no responsibility for the consequences of following the steps outlined here. If you are in any doubt about any of the procedures outlined above you should take advice from your IT service provider.*