Guideline

Creating and Maintaining a Folder Structure

This guideline is designed to assist your unit to better organize its files. It is not intended to cause you to change your entire way of working. Folder structures should be tailored to best suit your working methods. Ultimately, what matters most is agreement on which standards to adopt, and consistently using them.

Why do we need to be concerned about folder structures?

Standardizing and maintaining a structured folder system for your files will:

- assure that users can readily retrieve information they need;
- allow users to remove non-record information on a regular basis thereby reducing issues associated with uncontrolled data storage growth; and
- streamline the file purging process according to University requirements for records disposal.

How to Begin

Document Current Practices

Create documentation in the form of a file plan, a comprehensive outline explaining file organization including the current folder structure of your unit, file locations, file transfer/workflow procedures, file retention and disposition guidelines, and other directives that provide guidance for effective management of your records.

Develop an Organized Folder Structure

The process of developing a practical and easily understood folder structure / file plan for your unit can be accomplished without too much difficulty.

As much as possible, your unit should organize its shared folder structure areas according to its designated core activities and in line with the unique types of work conducted by the unit. For example, a unit whose work is primarily project-based may need a folder structure primarily based on project titles, and a unit whose work functions on a calendar or fiscal year may need a folder structure primarily based on that twelve-month cycle.

Incorporated into your folder structure should be a way to facilitate the regular process of purging files. Some files must be retained for a pre-determined number of years past the date of file creation while other files must be retained for a pre-determined number of years past the date that some specific work is completed (e.g. research grant, construction project). In some instances, files must be retained until they are superseded (e.g. equipment manuals, contracts, policies) or until some unpredictable date occurs (e.g. departure of an employee). To help

determine how long your office must retain files refer to the <u>record retention schedules</u>[*] found on the Queen's University Archives website.

This means that somewhere within your unit's folder structure, folders should have dates in their titles indicating specified years (e.g. 2010, FY09, AY08). Where this time component factors in will vary depending on the type of work your unit most often engages in. For example, units engaging in accounting or budgeting work may indicate the year on a high level of their structure, whereas a unit focused more on project based work may have the time indicated in a lower sub-folder.

After looking at their current folder structure, some units will determine that they are fairly well-organized already. If this is the case, substantial changes will most likely be unnecessary.

Document Organized Folder Structure

Whether you have few changes to make to your unit's folder structure or considerable changes, your unit should document your updated organized shared folder structure in your file plan. Included in this documentation should be a hierarchical structure of folders both physical and digital, clear descriptions of what will be held in each folder (including example documents and major record types), as well as how the time component is included in the folder structure. This will allow for regular and effective purging of eligible record and non-record materials.

How to Proceed

To establish your unit's folder structure / file plan, you can complete the following steps:

1. Review the current folder structures used by your unit to manage various files. Identify the folders most current and most important to the work your unit engages in. Create a list of these folders and where they "reside" in the file system or other systems your unit uses to manage your work. This list should include all locations where your records reside including local storage, remote storage/servers, shared drives, or cloud storage, especially if your unit uses multiple instances of any of these solutions.

2. Identify the types of work your unit engages in. You can refer to any formal documentation of your unit's core activities and/or your general knowledge of your unit. For example, your list may say 'Our unit engages in work that is Accounting-based, Administrative-based, Budgeting-based, Business Process-Support-based, Grant-based, Payroll-based, Procurement-based, or Project-based'

3. Review your current folder structure identified in Step 1. Based on your answers to Step 2, ask the following questions:

- How does our current folder structure support our unit's type of work?
- How do we include the date stamp component in our structure?
- Can our current structure be easily modified to more clearly reflect the type of work our unit does?

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[*] http://archives.queensu.ca/records-retention-schedules

4. Your answers to the above questions will shape your next steps.

- If you determine that your unit's folder structure is in need of a major overhaul, contact the Records Management and Privacy Office to discuss developing a more effective structure.
- If you determine that your unit's folder structure is satisfactory with only a few minor changes, you can move on to step 5.

5. Create documentation that shows how your new (or existing) folder structure is organized and provides clear descriptions of what will be held in each folder (including example documents and major record types). Be sure the time stamp component is included in the folder structure. If the decision-making process and the final results are recorded, they can be more easily passed on to workers in your office as reference material and more importantly used in training during the onboarding process.

TIP: Sub-folders can be created on an as-needed basis. As sub-folders are created, make sure to create folder titles that are concise and clear about what will be included in the folder. This can eliminate redundancies in filenames and make it easier for anyone looking for files.

In Conclusion

No matter what folder structures your unit elects to implement, only if all employees within your unit (current and future) use these standards consistently in the regular course of business can your folder structures be effective and useful. If you would like assistance in establishing your folder structures contact the Records Management and Privacy Office: recordsmanagement@queensu.ca