

Records Management Basics

Four Steps to Better Files

1. Understand the Scope of the Problem
2. Conduct a Records Inventory
3. Develop a File Plan
4. Develop Recordkeeping Requirements

Step 1. Understanding the Scope of the Problem

1. What types of records do you create? Examples include client files, project files, personnel files, contract files.
2. Why are these records created and maintained? There are a number of valid reasons for creating files such as statute, regulation, management reporting, and program administration. There are also less valid reasons such as reference or personal convenience. Concentrate your attention on the files that directly support the Department's mission.
3. Who is responsible for these records? Generally there should only be one "custodian" of each type of record.
4. Where are these records located?
5. Take this information and develop a matrix that lists all the types of records, the person responsible for each type of record, and the location of the records. This matrix provides you with a framework for understanding and controlling your files.

Step 2. Conducting a Records Inventory

1. Physically inspect all your files and record essential information. This is the most time-consuming step. Look for records in all media types including paper, audio/visual, and electronic. Divide what you find into four categories: 1) personal papers; 2) reference materials; 3) other non-records (such as stocks of publications) and 4) records or potential records (such as working files). For the first three groups, record only the following information: owner, location and physical size. For records and potential records, collect the following information: Office/Program, location, title, date span, description, arrangement, media type, physical size, annual rate of accumulation, file break (when is file closed), legal requirements, vital records (necessary for disaster recovery), finding aids (indexes or lists), restrictions (confidentiality), related records. Use an inventory form to collect this information.
2. Identify duplicate, fragmented and related records. To the extent possible, fragmented files should be combined to create complete files and duplicate files should be eliminated.
3. Match the files to existing records schedules. Contact your Records Officer for assistance in identifying schedules for all your files and for creating schedules for any files without schedules.

Step 3. Develop a File Plan

A file plan is more than a list of files. It is also a set of policies and procedures regarding the naming, arrangement, location and custody of files. A file plan doesn't need to be complicated. To the extent possible, let the files structure themselves according to how and why the files are created and accessed. The plan, however, should be designed to avoid the following BAD characteristics: records, non-records

and personal papers filed together; multiple types of records in the same file; active and inactive records in the same file.

1. Establish a list of file subjects and keep it up to date. Make the subjects broad enough so that you don't end up with a new file for every document.

2. Establish an arrangement scheme for files. There is no one correct arrangement scheme for records.

The basic types are: chronological, numeric, alphabetical, alpha-numeric. When choosing an arrangement consider the following: How will the records be used? What characteristics do staff use to refer to the records? How are the records requested? Will the records be indexed?

Step 4. Developing Recordkeeping Requirements

Establishing recordkeeping requirements helps ensure that you create and maintain adequate and proper documentation of program activities. Some recordkeeping requirements come from legislation. Some are less well-defined. Some questions to be addressed by recordkeeping requirements are: What types of documents must be included in particular subject files? Is it necessary to retain drafts of particular documents? When and how should telephone calls and meetings be documented? Should documentation be divided between an "official" file and a "working" file? Development of recordkeeping requirements is best accomplished by work groups of program, administrative, program management, legal, fiscal, and audit staff.