Best Practices for File Naming & Organization

Purpose

The purpose of this guidance is to recommend standardized practices for file management to enhance consistency, organization, and efficiency. Adopting uniform naming conventions and file structures helps facilitate easier retrieval of files, streamlines collaboration, reduces errors, and ensures compliance with relevant standards.

This document is intended to be used as a guide for developing and implementing consistent file naming and file structuring standards, applicable to all electronic records. While it may not be universally applicable to every office, it provides a framework that can be adapted to various office environments, including shared drives and Teams files.

Best Practices for File Naming

1. Avoid using special characters in a file name (&!@#%$)

By using simple, alphanumeric characters and common symbols like hyphens (-), you make it easier to search for and retrieve records. Special characters can interfere with search functions and cause unexpected behaviors, as different software interprets them differently. This is especially true when moving files between systems. Underscores (_) were once a common best practice for separating words in file names, but many systems now interpret them as regular characters rather than word separators, making them less effective for searches.

2. Be concise but descriptive

Short, clear names make it easier to manage, search, and identify records, reducing the risk of errors and ensuring consistency. Avoid vague names like: "Others", "Document1", "AA", "Brian Misc" or "Untitled" - such titles impede efficient records retrieval. Yet, while being descriptive is important, try to keep names concise, avoiding overly long names that may become unmanageable.

When using acronyms and abbreviations, agree upon and stick to a common set which are well understood by everyone who will need to access the files. Made-up acronyms can lead to errors and confusion.

3. Keep dates and format consistent

If including dates, use a consistent format. Best practices are to use a "YYYYMMDD" or "YYYY-MM-DD" format to aid sorting and retrieval of files. In use, this looks like "20240829" or "2024-08-29."

Other date formats, such as "MMDDYYYY" or "MM-DD-YYYY," are also acceptable, but be sure to always apply the same format for dates across all file names to maintain clarity and sorting order. Keep it consistent.

4. Include version numbers

Include version numbers if multiple versions of a record are needed. Specifying the version can help you quickly identify the most accurate version of the document. Using designations such as

"v1", "v2", "v3" rather than words such as "update" or "new" avoids confusion. For example, "Public-Records-Training-v2.pptx" is clearer than "Public-Records-Training-NewVersion.pptx."

5. Identify drafts and final versions

Use a standard convention to identify drafts. A best practice is to insert "DRAFT" clearly in the file name, typically at the end (Public-Records-Training-DRAFT.pptx). Ensure the term "draft" is clear and recognizable, avoiding abbreviations or alternative spelling (dft, dr, D).

For finalized documents, include a date to indicate when the document was finalized (e.g., Public-Records-Training-20240430.pptx). If the nature of the document requires formal agreement from involved parties, include 'signed' at the end of the name when appropriate (e.g., Public-Records-Request-Form-signed.pdf).

Example of Poor File Naming Practices
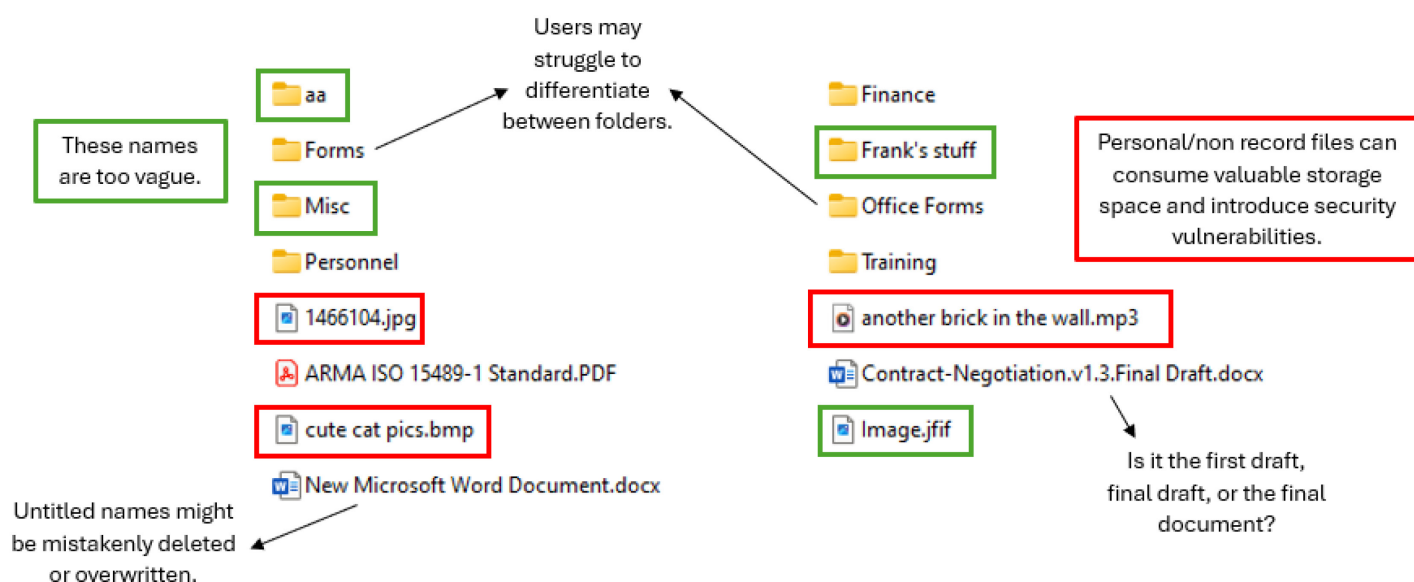
## Best Practices for File Structure Creation

1. Organize by functional areas or project/category

Start by creating top folders for each key category, such as financial, personnel, or project related records. This helps keep related records together. You can look at the retention schedule for inspiration for main categories. Consider that these folders may be accessed by employees from various departments, which helps prevent duplicate files.

2. Use a combination hierarchical/functional file structure

A hierarchical/functional file structure can be used to organize records based on their placement and function within an organization. Folders are first created for the division, department, or business unit. Inside those folders are subfolders for each major type of record (as are found on the records retention schedule). To facilitate easier cleanup with retention schedules, you can

include the retention period in the file name. If necessary, further subfolders may be created for specific groups of records of that type. See example below:
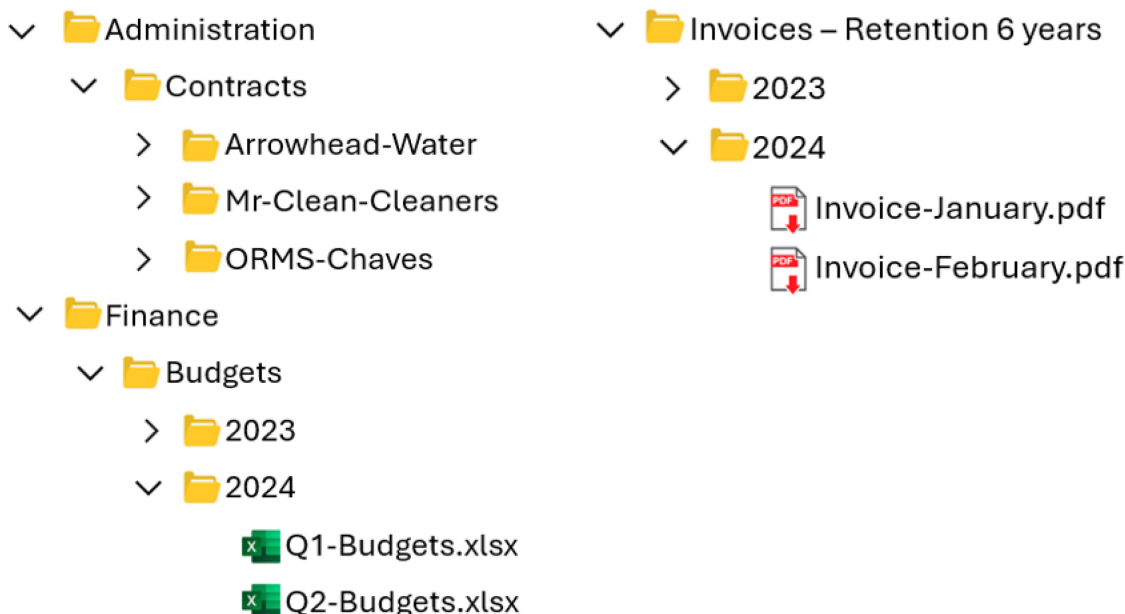
3. Avoid complex paths

Aim to limit folder structures to 3-4 levels at most. Complex paths can be difficult to navigate and remember, and the names can get cut off when viewing. For example:

Good: Finance/Accounts-Payable-Records/2022/January

Poor: Finance/2022/Accounts-Payable-Records/Reports/I-Semester-Reports/January

4. Regular Maintenance

Any file directory needs regular maintenance to ensure it continues to serve its purpose. Annual records cleanup days are a good practice to identify what is past retention and can be destroyed. This ensures compliance with legal requirements regarding records retention and helps prevent clutter. Similarly, file plans and procedures around them should be reviewed annually for any necessary updates or changes.

An important reminder: creating duplicates of documents or files can lead to inconsistency and confusion over which record is "official" as well as complicate legal compliance. Be mindful of these risks and avoid duplication whenever possible. Working out of shared workspaces and sharing the same drafts are good practice to avoid unnecessary duplication.

Additional Resources

Records Management Guidance https://sos.oregon.gov/archives/Pages/records-guidance.aspx

Records Retention Schedules
https://sos.oregon.gov/archives/Pages/records_retention_schedule.aspx