



Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers

ACARM Records Management Guides

4 Records Creation

This Guide describes the framework in which records are created and examines the procedures for developing file classification systems (file plans).

Creation Framework

Evidence

Records should be created when there is a need to remember the details of an event, decision or action such that anyone needing recourse to the facts, whether or not they were party to the original matter, can rely on and acknowledge that the representation is accurate. The key word in records creation is evidence - they should provide credible and authoritative evidence to protect the rights of the organisation, its staff and anyone else affected by its activity. They are crucial, for example, in internal and external audits. Thus records should be created to:

- Provide evidence of policy
- Provide evidence of decisions
- Provide evidence of actions/activity
- Comply with relevant rules, regulations and legislation and provide evidence of such compliance
- Inform colleagues of what has been done or decided
- Act as a reminder of how something has been done
- Track progress of a project or process

Records should support the organisation's business needs so staff can do their work consistently in full knowledge of the processes, decisions and actions that inform, lead to and initiate that business. They should also provide an institutional memory so that time and distance do not affect access to and availability of the corporate knowledge resource.

Records are sometimes created unnecessarily. This happens when:

- There is no need for evidence that something has been done
- A record duplicates evidence or information in one or more other records
- A redundant duplicate of a record is created (for example via a multi-part form such as a receipt)

Context

In addition to their content, it is important that records are kept in context and the best way to achieve this is to file them. Record creators file records because they need to see and use them in context together with other records relating to the same matter. The records may also need to be shared with colleagues. Once record quantities pass a critical mass, they cannot be found efficiently if they are kept in a big heap or saved electronically into a single folder.

Records are also filed because the filing system provides the record with some of the necessary characteristics for it to be regarded as authentic and reliable. Whatever the format of the records, they should be saved into a proper record keeping system. This includes emails. Most email applications are not good recordkeeping systems so it is advisable to either save important email to folders with other electronic records or to print it out, and place it on a relevant file.

Metadata

For all records, regardless of format, creation consists of both compiling the necessary facts or details and assigning its place in the system by means of a reference, file title or tagging (which can be automated for electronic records). Some of the facts and details will be in the content of the record while others can be captured in the system. These other details are called metadata - additional information about the record that is needed to validate and understand the record and its context.

Metadata will include information such as name of creator, dates, subject matter, perhaps the disposal date, and so on. It is also important to create and/or capture metadata associated with the format of the record. Traditionally, in order to manage paper records it has not been necessary to capture such information, although it becomes more important as they become semi- or non-current. For electronic records, however, you need to know the format of the record in order to be able to read it – in fact you need the programme itself as the record cannot otherwise be accessed.

Characteristics

Records need to be adequate to document an organisation's work and decision-making, to provide accountability and to protect it and its stakeholders. In order to be considered adequate a record needs a number of characteristics:

- It can be trusted as an accurate and complete account of the policy, actions or decisions it documents
- It has been created by an individual or individuals with first hand knowledge or experience of the matter that is being recorded or by equipment or systems routinely used to record such transactions or activities
- It has been created at the time of the matter being recorded or soon after as part of or as a by-product of the activity it documents
- It is authoritative in that it comes from a recognisable and dependable source and is the primary source for evidence of the action, policy or decision it documents
- It is credible and its validity can be depended upon
- It is authentic and can be proven to be what it alleges to be
- It has been created, sent or received by the person or organisation that alleges to have done so at the time or date alleged
- It has integrity and can be proven to have been protected from unauthorised alterations
- It can be located, retrieved, accessed and understood both alone and together with other related records
- It is concise, containing no unnecessary or repetitive detail

File plan

Terminology

There are a number of related terms that are applied to active record keeping systems. The term 'file plan' or 'corporate file plan' refers to a written schema that classifies records in some way (usually according to business function) across the whole organisation. This does not necessarily reflect the physical or electronic storage of the records. The term 'classification scheme' or 'business classification scheme' is similar to file plan in that it is also a written schema that classifies records – but the basis of the classification will vary more and might be subject, person or project based. 'Filing system' is a term that encompasses both classification and the records. Thus a filing system is a framework which:

- Physically holds them (for example filing cabinets with file folders or a computer with software and document folders)
- Provides a classification scheme to group or link related records
- Reflects or maps the work of the creating business unit

- Has rules and conventions for accepting records into the system, as well as for removal of records
- Contains records

Purpose

The main purposes of a file plan may be summarised as being:

- Providing links between records that originate from the same activity or from related activities
- Determining where a record should be placed in a larger aggregation of records
- Assisting users in retrieving records
- Assisting users in interpreting records
- Assigning and controlling retention periods
- Assigning and controlling access rights and security markings

A corporate filing system should form the basis of an organisation's information resource. A standardised file classification system has the following advantages:

- ensures a clear record exists of how various series of records were created, by whom they were created, when they were created and for what purpose - this is important in meeting the demands of business efficiency and transparency, and also in providing contextual information for future researchers
- systematic and economical storage of records
- timely retrieval of records
- ready identification of records for review and disposal
- prevents the duplication of information

A file plan is recommended by ISO 15489 (the international standard on Records Management). It is a full representation of the business of an organisation. As such, it is a useful method of organising information for purposes such as:

- Retrieval
- Storage
- More involved processes of records management, such as disposal scheduling

Some systems (including many proprietary document management systems, shared drive directories in either an 'explorer' or other folder view) can be used to manage documents effectively but without the disciplines of a proper file plan based on business classification. This is insufficiently robust for the management of formal records of business activity.

A file plan should not be tied to organisational structure – which is all too often prone to change or modification. For long-term viability, it should be organised

according to more stable or independent criteria, such as the functions of an organisation.

Design

Three important considerations should underpin the design of the file plan:

Simplicity the file plan must reflect functions, activities and tasks that are easily recognisable by users (this usually means that it must align itself with business processes as set out in corporate documents such as visions, policy statements, business plans, aims and objectives). The bottom line is that in (as far as possible) every case it must be obvious into which file or folder a document should be placed.

Consistency the file plan must have rules and guidelines that ensure all staff/users follow the same procedures. Inconsistencies typically manifest themselves as duplicate files/folders, documents on the same activity being separated, and mis-naming of documents.

Flexibility the file plan must be adaptable. It must be designed so that new files and folders can be fitted in as and when required, while still adhering to the *function-activity-task* principle.

The focus throughout compilation of the plan should be on functions and activities. Generic terms such as “Committees”, “Procedures” and “Minutes” must be avoided, particularly at the top two levels. The view is that, if someone is looking for committee minutes or papers, the search relates to a committee on a specific function or subject.

The design should be based on the simple framework of:



Function: The largest unit of business process/procedure in the organisation; major responsibilities, managed by the organisation to fulfil its goals; high level aggregate of activities

Activity: The major pieces of work performed by the organisation to accomplish each of its functions; several activities are often associated with each function

Task: The smallest unit of business activity; tasks, not subjects or record types

These definitions depend largely on the way the organisation is structured and, to a certain extent, its traditions and culture. It is not easy to get everyone to agree on these levels and indeed, in some cases, on the definitions themselves.

Functions can be seen as those high level corporate undertakings that often feature in corporate plans and objectives. Apart from generic functions – such as human resources, finance, buildings/estates/accommodation, health and safety, press and public relations/marketing, records management – they are those functions for which the organisation was established. For example, a Ministry of Health may have major functions such as public health policy, hospital administration, research and development, hospital services, pharmaceutical services, etc. A police force will have functions such as crime prevention, crime investigation, traffic control, firearms licensing and control, and community safety.

Activities might be seen as those pieces of work that are typically undertaken by teams, units and sections within the functional department, division or group. For example, the human resources (HR) function will have the following activities:

- Recruitment
- Training
- Welfare
- Discipline

Tasks are typically undertaken by individuals or smaller teams and units. Using the same HR example, the recruitment activity may comprise the following tasks:

- Advertising
- Interviewing
- Examinations and tests

It is possible that one or two more level(s) may be required, although these should be kept to a minimum to avoid complex and confusing structures (where, for example, it becomes uncertain in which folder to place a document). Procedurally the Records Manager must control the top two levels of the plan; staff themselves should be in a position to allocate folders at subsequent levels but the records managers should be able to satisfy themselves that accepted file plan procedures are being properly followed.

Use

If individual units or sections of the organisation have folders with the same or similar titles in the file plan can the staff of those units/sections be sure that they have the complete story in “their” folders so that they are able to discharge their duties effectively? Indeed this highlights the corporate approach to the file plan – folders, records and documents do not belong to any individual, unit, section or department within the organisation. They are not “my” records or “our” records in “our” part of the file plan; they are

corporate records in the corporate file plan – available to everyone who needs them.

Naming conventions

The plan should incorporate a system of naming conventions so that records are described in a consistent manner over time. This will promote the efficient retrieval and disposal scheduling of records. The organisation should be able to issue lists of accepted terms for particular descriptions or wording, and may even wish to go as far as compiling a thesaurus. Using a device such as a controlled vocabulary can make it easier for people to find the information resources they want on networks and systems such as the Internet or internal documentation systems. For example, using a keyword such as “jobs” typically fails to retrieve items described as “vacancies”, recruitment opportunities”, “situations vacant”, etc.

Hybrid systems

Establishing and operating a hybrid system depends upon knowing what kinds of records are kept in paper and which in electronic format. The information survey (See leaflet number 3) will provide the information you need to assess which records are or should be kept in which media and where there is duplication across media. It is best to have the same, or at least a very similar, classification scheme for the paper and electronic records but in any case the scheme should reflect business functions and needs. A hybrid system also needs to be capable of cross-referencing related records in different media.

The **Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers (ACARM)** was founded in 1984 to promote professional development in the field of records and archives management throughout the Commonwealth. It provides a link for Commonwealth archivists, archival institutions and records managers which is especially important because of the common heritage of legal and administrative systems, and hence of record keeping practices, which the countries of the Commonwealth share.

ACARM shares practical solutions to the problems of managing records and archives, and disseminates professional and technical information through its *Newsletter*, listserv and website – www.acarm.org

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