File Structures

The following fact sheet provides basic information about file structures – what they are and why they are needed.

What is a file structure?

A file structure - also known as a 'records classification system' or 'file plan' - is an essential business tool for organizing records, regardless of format.

File structures:
- make it easy for users to file, locate, and retrieve the records they need
- group related records together so that a 'complete' record of the business activity or case is available
- remove the need for individual or ad hoc decisions on managing records
- help prevent the proliferation of duplicates and unmanaged records
- support the creation and capture of reliable records
- reflect the business activity
- make it possible to apply records management rules, such as retention periods, access rules, and disposal actions, to appropriate groups or series of records.

What are some key elements of a good file structure?

Above all else, file structures should be **usable**! There are different approaches and methods possible but, in most cases, the recommended approach is a **function-based** file structure. Instead of organizing records by what they are *about* (subject-based) or by *who* created them (organization-based), function-based file structures organize records according to the business functions and activities that a program area does to fulfil its mandate or key operational goals. These are the activities and processes that are familiar to staff, so this makes filing and locating records a logical extension of their work.
- This approach keeps related records of an activity together, and allows them to be retained and disposed of as a group, in line with basic principles for managing records.
- Function-based file structures are stable and long-lasting. Although subjects and organizational structures may change, the core activities generally stay the same over time.

An important feature of the file structure is that it is **hierarchical**. It associates the records (located at the lowest level) with the particular business process belonging to a broader activity or set of activities carried out as part of the organization's function. This means that users of the system can navigate the structure in order to file records or access them, because they understand the business processes and the records they create and use.

Users can still create shortcuts and favourites, and use the search engine to help facilitate their work.

The hierarchy allows records management rules (for retention, disposition, control of access, and other purposes) to be applied at the highest level possible and inherited by all levels below, with exceptions only where needed. This is a basic principle for records management which streamlines the application of rules and enables more systematic, routine management of the records.

Fig. 1 – hierarchal map of file structure

File structure approaches may also be combined to best suit the **business context**. For example, many of the Minister and Deputy Minister office file systems have sections in their structure that are organized by the divisions and branches within their department. The top-level of the structure might be "department administration" or "programs" and it makes sense to arrange the sub-folders according to the organizational units as they all have distinct functions and activities.

No matter the style of method adopted, good file structures require ongoing maintenance. Ensure that:

1. The structure is documented, and that processes and procedures for using it are well described.

2. There is active and sustained responsibility. It can be assigned to a single person or it can be a group effort, but it requires regular upkeep and management.

3. All staff are using the file structure. Participation from everyone is key to having a robust system that works for all involved. Records management does take time and effort, but there is demonstrable value in making sure that records are accessible, trustworthy, and reliable.

How are records organized within the structure?

There are different ways to add control to the records within a structure, for example:

Block-numbering system. This is an effective way to represent each function and activity in the file structure. These numbers will mirror the hierarchical framework, and can be used as a convenient shorthand when filing or referring to the location of records in the structure.   The range of numbers needs to be large enough to incorporate all of the subdivisions and allow for expansion over time. Once established, the numbers do not change year to year and remain attached to the same function/activity over time.

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900-999   MANITOBA GOVERNMENT
          (Records advisory services to government bodies)
          900    General
          905    Records Advisory Services Tracking
          910    Routine Advice
                 Aboriginal and Northern Affairs – May 2016 ....closed
                 for subsequent file: see Indigenous and Municipal Relations
                 Addictions Foundation of Manitoba
                 Advanced Education   2001- 2013………………….closed
                 for previous file see: Education
                    - for subsequent files see: Education and Advanced Learning
                 Agriculture May 2016 –
                 for previous file see: Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives
                 Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives - May 2016....closed
                 for previous file see: Agriculture and Food
                 Assiniboine Community College
                 Centre culturel franco-manitobain
                 Children and Youth Opportunities   2011/12 – May 2016………closed
                 Civil Service Commission
                 Communities Economic Development Fund (CEDF)
                 Companies Office
                 Conservation 2000 – 2011 .......................................................closed
                    - for subsequent file see: Conservation & Water Stewardship
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Fig. 2 - Excerpt from the Government Records Office's file key

Numeric filing system. File systems that use numbers must ensure that each number is unique and is never re-used. Generally these types of systems assign the identifying number when the file opens. Numeric systems work most effectively when files are organized in sequential order, confidentiality is imperative, the number of files is large, and when the system is supported by a file key (tracking system or database) that enables multiple access points.

> *For example, Manitoba Health assigns a unique 9-digit Manitoba Personal Health Number to every individual that has health coverage in the province. The number attached to a person remains the same even though other information (i.e. address or name) may change.*
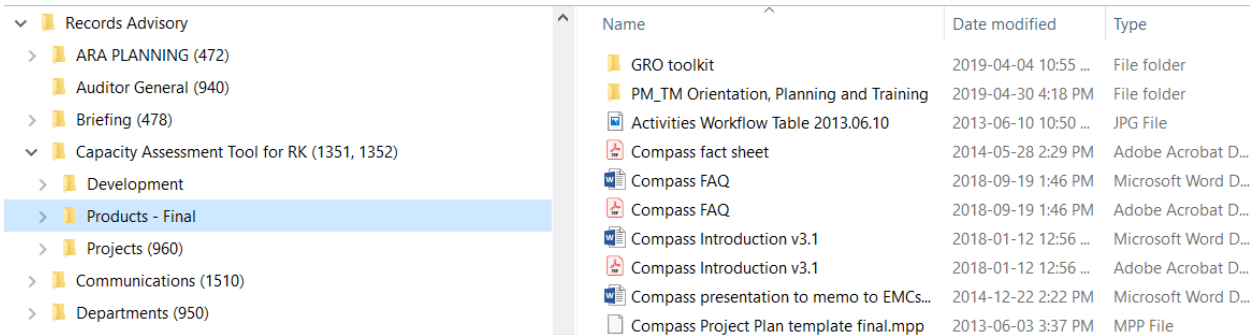
Alpha-numeric filing system. These types of systems are appropriate when the file titles need to provide additional information about location, year, or type of file. For example, court records have an alpha-numeric code attached to every court file:

Example: SC96-01-12345

SC: Court Division. See Court Division Codes;
96: Year the file was registered.
01: Court Location. See Court Location Codes
12345: Sequential file
number.

Fig. 4 – description of Court Registry file numbers, https://bit.ly/2LGKtVf

Alphabetical systems are best suited to small filing systems with little change over time. Subject-based alphabetical systems require strict protocols for control and naming, well-established, agreed-upon practices, and a robust file key with scope notes to provide contextual information about each file grouping. Without these controls, the risks include an inability to locate records and an ad hoc filing system that users cannot trust. Alphabetical systems are most effective when used as a way to organize sub-sections of a larger function/activity-based filing system or for uniform case files or client files that are best kept and accessed alphabetically.

Fig. 5 – Screenshot of Government Records Office's shared drive file structure

Why are they needed?

For users - file structures make it easy to find records and easy to file records.

For management - file structures facilitate control of evidence; enable strategic decision-making about groups of records-rather than individual documents; and support the execution of records management actions.

For government - file structures reduce the time it takes to find requested records; reduce costs associated with unmanaged accumulation; and improve work flow. Organized records and information are an important facet of system transformation and migration to specialized business applications.

Functioning and documented file structures directly relate to multiple requirements in the Records and Information Framework.

File structures are particularly useful when:
- organizations are using shared drives or collaboration tools (i.e. SharePoint)
- there are hybrid systems in place (the complete file is in multiple locations and/or formats; for example a filing cabinet and a shared drive), and the structure can help to unify the files
- program areas are preparing for migration to new applications.

For more information, contact the Government Records Office.

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