UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
ARCHIVES AND RECORDS MANAGEMENT SERVICES

Electronic Records Management: Naming Convention Tips and Examples

When organizing files within your office's shared drive system it is important to establish standardized naming conventions in order to ensure quick access to electronic records. All files in a shared drive should be easy to search, file names should all be unique, and file names should be agreed upon by all record creators and record users. The following tips will help maintain a well-organized shared drive system.

These guidelines are taken directly from the UofT's Enterprise Applications and Solutions Integration (EASI) Information Technology Services Resource page on Naming Conventions. Please refer to EASI's complete tip sheet for more information.

Here are some common elements in file naming:

- Date of creation (2015-11-30, Nov302015)
- Associated work group or committee (SearchComm, OrientationComm)
- Content of file (Minutes, Agenda)
- Individual (person's name)
- Versions, using a leading '0' (v01, draft01)[1]

Guidelines

1. Keep file names short, but meaningful

   - Long file names mean long file paths and long URLs which increase the likelihood of error, are more difficult to remember and recognise, and are more difficult to transmit in emails as they often 'break'. Most electronic systems also have a character limitation for URLs.
   - Avoid using initialisms, abbreviations and codes that may not be commonly understood.

2. Avoid unnecessary repetition and redundancy in file names and file paths. For example, if the file is a PowerPoint presentation, you don't need the word "presentation" in the filename.

3. Use the underscore (_) as element delimiter. Do not use spaces or other characters such as: ! # $ % & ' @ ^ ` ~ + , . ; =) (

   - The underscore (_) is a quasi-standard for field delimiting and is the most visually ergonomic character. Some search tools do not work with spaces and should be especially avoided for internet files.

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[1] If using an electronic document management system, do not put versions in the file name unless you need to maintain each version of a record as a separate record.

- Some standards recommend using capital letters to delimit words, not spaces or underscores (eg. FileWithNoSpaces.docx) however this will not be searchable.

4. Use the hyphen (-) to delimit words within an element or capitalize the first letter of each word within an element.

  - Spaces are poor visual delimiters and some search tools do not work with spaces. The hyphen (-) is a common word delimiter. Alternatively, capitalizing the words within an element is an efficient method of differentiating words but is harder to read and may not be searchable

5. When including a number in a file name always give it as a two-digit number, i.e. 01-99, unless it is a year or another number with more than two digits.

6. If using a date in the file name always state the date 'back to front', and use four digit years, two digit months and two digit days: YYYYMMDD or YYYYMM or YYYY or YYYY-YYYY. This will ensure that files are sorted in proper chronological order with the most significant dates appearing first. The date should typically go at the start of the file name.

  - Only use dates in a file name for things that need to be tracked by date, such as meetings, reports and other recurring events. **Do not use dates as versioning in electronic document management systems.**

7. When including a personal name in a file name give the family name first followed by the initials.

  - The family name is the standard reference for retrieving records. Having the family name first will ensure that files are sorted in proper alphabetical order.

8. Order the elements in a file name in the most appropriate way to retrieve the record. This will depend on the way you work.

  - For example, if you work with student records you may want to use lastname-firstname_studentID_documentType since you are more likely to browse by name

  - If you are organizing meeting agendas or minutes you may want to start with the date. Example: 2015-11-30_SearchComm_Mins_v01.doc

9. If using an electronic document management system, do not put versions in the file name unless you need to maintain each version of a record as a separate record.

  - Versioning will be maintained within the electronic document management system. The whole point of electronic document management is that you no longer have to maintain multiple versions of a file to show its history. You can easily go back to a specific version or date and view the state of the file at that time. For this reason you no longer need to put dates or version numbers in the filename.

- The filename remains the same for the life of the document. It will not change when you upload new versions, so if you hardcode a version number or a date in the name, it may become out of date the next time an update is made.

10. Avoid putting personal or confidential information in a filename (where possible), such as JSmith_termination.docx. Administrators or unauthorized users may be able to view file names. This can sometimes conflict with guideline 1 which is to keep names meaningful, so the right balance needs to be determined for the organization. Perhaps some aspects could be flagged as a property instead of directly in the name so they are less evident.