Organizing Electronic Documents Successfully on a Shared Network Drive

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Date: Oct 6, 2009

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Creating an electronic structure is more than just determining a file hierarchy. It also involves establishing clear guidelines of how that data should be organized, saved, and maintained. Leading productivity specialist K.J. McCorry, author of Organize Your Work Day in No Time, shows you how to move toward that paper-less office.

To begin to create that paperless office, users have to trust finding and accessing data electronically. Without a sound file structure and guidelines on the shared or network drive, users will tend to keep a "backup" copy in paper. Although paper does have its uses for work purposes such as reading or processing, it is not the best format to archive and manage company data.

Creating an electronic structure is more than just determining a file hierarchy. It also involves establishing clear guidelines of how that data should be organized, saved, and maintained. When moving towards a paperless office, it becomes even more vital that file guidelines are established for all types of electronic records, regardless if it is a document, email, or instant message.

Determine Drive Location

The first consideration is to determine drive mapping on the network for storing company data. Some companies have one shared drive, often referred to as the "I" or "S" drive. Other companies have separate mapped drives for each primary department in the company. For example, Operations is mapped to "O" and Human Resources is mapped to "H". The advantage of having each major department mapped to a separate drive is that it is easy to set up permissions for only staff of that department to access that data. This can be essential for confidentiality purposes such as in the case of personnel and/or financial data. The other advantage of having a mapped drive per each department or area is to prevent users from making a mistake of filing data in the wrong department file that often have similar names of files.

Create a File Hierarchy

It is important to engage employees in the process of designing a file structure on the shared drive. This not only helps to create an effective system but encourages employees to actually use it. The first step is to determine a team that will develop the initial file hierarchy and guidelines. Depending on the size of the company, there could be file teams assigned per each department or, if a smaller organization, it could be one team for the entire company. It is important to have each area within a company and/or department represented. It is also important to have on the file team an employee who has been with the organization for a long time and has knowledge of past and historical records.

Once a team is formed, it should begin the process of developing a file hierarchy outline. The first level of the file hierarchy should relate to the company's organization chart—essentially a file folder for each major department and area of the company. If the organization has decided to have a drive mapped for each primary department, then the first level of files under that department would be those divisions or branches within that department.

The second level of folders can be sub-divisions of a department, primary areas of responsibility, or major projects of that department. Ideally, it is best not to have the first or second lines be longer than a screen page view in a standard monitor screen—usually between 30-40 file folders. Users can see the structure quickly without having to scroll down. Once these levels are established, it is recommended that the first and second line folders cannot be changed or added to without management consent. This forces users to think clearly and logically as to where a new folder should be located before arbitrarily just creating it.

The next step is determining sub-categorization for the third, fourth, etc. line folders. When determining how to subcategorize, consider first how users want to access information (see Figure 1). Which topic, name, or word is thought of when looking for that piece of data? For example, assume there is a primary category called Clients that contains all client information. Clients could be sub-filed by client name or by state or geographical region. It will depend on how the sales department is structured and how that information is accessed by the organization or the department. That could be alphabetically by name or it could be by state or region where Client Company is located.

Here are standard ways in which to sub-categorize:

- **By subject.** Documents are arranged by subject name or category, similar to topics in phone directories and in libraries.
- **By name/alphabetical.** Documents are alphabetically arranged by names. For example, this could be names of clients, suppliers, or employees.
- **Geographically.** Documents are arranged by geographic location, such as by continent, regional area, country, state, county, or city.
- **Numerically.** Documents are arranged by numerical order. This could be by an assigned job number, contract number, invoice number, project number, or an employee ID number.
- **Chronologically.** Documents are arranged by date order. This can be done by annual or fiscal year, by month, by quarter, or by date.

Figure 1 An example of file hierarchy structure and ways to sub-categorize for a shared drive network.

Establish Document-Naming Conventions

Establishing clear guidelines on document-naming conventions is also an integral part to the success of an electronic file system so users can easily distinguish the contents of a document simply by the name. Creating standard document-naming conventions for electronic documents is similar to using standard file names for paper files. By default, electronic files are listed in most directories in alphabetical or numerical order. It is best to code documents with the word or number that users will think of first when they want to access it, similar to determining sub-categories. For example, if you have a folder called Budgets and it is sub-filed by fiscal year, then the documents inside that sub-file might be first named by department or revision date.

Creating clear naming conventions is also essential in using search functions properly within Windows Explorer or other desktop search tools. Here are some tips:

- Avoid using vague descriptors such as "general" or "miscellaneous" in naming conventions. These words usually are so vague that it makes recognizing the type of document harder in the future.
- Avoid using only one word or descriptor in file names; this makes it difficult to find documents in the future because of limited information in the file name.
- The data in the naming conventions should also be separated by spaces, dashes, or underscores, depending on preference. If abbreviations are used, make sure it is clear in the guidelines what identifiers can or cannot be abbreviated.
- Consider adding guidelines on identifying versions of documents. With some files, the guidelines could specify the final part of the naming convention undesignated and flexible, so the user can add information based on the document type.

Record Retention

Records retention is an important requirement for any organization. Very few documents need to be kept in paper format for legal purposes. According to the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure and IRS guidelines, electronic documents are just as acceptable as paper. Most government entities have mandated that all paperless records should be maintained in a readable format such as PDF.

In most file guidelines, companies should have two different types of document retention. The first type of retention is mandated by the government. These are federal or state guidelines on document retention. There are general document retention requirements for all businesses. Then, depending on the type of industry and/or if the company is public, there are a host of other legal retention requirements. Industry-specific document retention guidelines can be obtained from the government agency that regulates the industry and/or the industry association.

The second type of retention would be company guidelines. Of course, this should at least be the minimum legal requirement, but often companies want to keep certain types of data longer than the specified legal requirement for historical purposes. As in the case with financial data, the legal requirement for corporations is seven years. However, most companies opt to keep some financial data longer than seven years, if not permanently, for historical purposes.

Once record retention has been researched and determined by the file team, it is recommended that the document retention be reviewed and approved by the company's legal counsel. If a lawsuit ensues, legal counsel will need to know what type of data and information is available.

File System Maintenance

As with any system, shared drive file systems must be maintained and managed. Often the number one failure to a shared electronic document file system is the lack of maintenance and/or accountability to the system once guidelines and structures have been created. Ideally, someone should be appointed to manage the electronic file structure. Often this responsibility is assigned to the IT or legal departments. This person should be responsible for updating the file guidelines annually. They should also be consulted when new systems and software are introduced to ensure that file guidelines and structures are applicable to the new system and format.

The file structure should be purged and re-organized on an annual basis, based on the file guidelines and document retention. When purging electronic documents, often users will see files that can't be identified to a recognized software or application. Users can refer to the online search tool File-Extensions to conduct a search on any file extension.

Summary

Having sound document management practices requires more than a file hierarchy structure. It is important to clarify document-naming conventions, record retention, and permissions as well as how to develop a maintenance process. Once these guidelines have been documented and approved by management, the staff should then undergo formal training on how to use the new system. Creating clarity of how to manage, organize, and file data is an essential step in becoming a paperless office. When it becomes easier to find data electronically versus paper, you know your organization has achieved a successful file structure and set of guidelines.