Electronic File Organization Tips

This guide offers tips that are helpful when organizing electronic files and records. Keep in mind that:

- Efficient management of electronic records begins with accurate file-naming. A file name should be clear and understandable to those who will use the files.
- Once a record is created, the file can be lost or misfiled due to disorganization. While search functions are getting better and better, proper organization from the beginning is the best way to ensure current and future office personnel can find records when needed.
- Many organizations utilize a network server to store files so that they are accessible from multiple locations by various personnel. This requires that file names and folder structures make sense to more than just the creator.

Common File Naming Conventions	
Avoid Special Characters	. \ / : * ? " < > | [ ] & $, The characters listed above are frequently used for specific tasks in an electronic environment.
	A forward slash is used to identify folder levels in Microsoft products, while Mac operating systems use the colon.
	Periods have a specific function in a file name, which is to tell the computer program where the file-name extension begins, such as .jpg and .doc. Using them in a file name could result in lost files or errors. An underscore or space can be used instead.
Be Concise	Generally about 25 characters is a sufficient length to capture enough descriptive information for naming a record.
	The acceptable length of file names may be different among operating systems and software. Some systems allow up to 256 characters, while others allow far fewer.
	Avoid using words such as "a", "and', "of", "the" and "to" unless they contribute to the meaning of the file name.
	Use standard and appropriate abbreviations, when possible, to simplify the file name as long as other personnel will still know what the word is. The GPO STYLE MANUAL provides a useful list of common abbreviations.
Use Descriptive Information	Include all necessary descriptive information in the file name, independent of where it is stored. Files are frequently copied to other folders, downloaded, and emailed. It is important to ensure that the file name, independent of the folder where the original file lives, is sufficiently descriptive.
Record Retention	Records should be maintained according to the organization record retention schedule.
	The purpose of organizing an agency's electronic records is to enable accessibility not only by current users, but by future users as well. Records retention schedules are applied to electronic records just as they are to paper records.
Dates	Having a relevant date associated with the file is essential. One way to prevent confusion is to embed the relevant date (the date that the file was created or revised) in the file name itself. Though many operating systems store this information with the file, as users move the file among folders and computers and as the file is re-saved as

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	revisions are made, those dates change.

Avoid naming a file with dates that do not make sense in relation to its original date of creation. |
| | For some types of records, it is useful to have the date at the beginning of the file name, while others might prefer it at the end. Either way, it is a useful sorting tool when the files are organized. Be sure to keep it consistent within that record type. |
| | If sorting a file chronologically is necessary for a particular record type, the date in a file name should use the international date format, which specifies numeric representations of date and time to be used in electronic format (ISO 8601).

The international standard date notation is: YYYY_MM_DD or YYYYMMDD, where YYYY is the year, MM is the month of the year between 01 (January) and 12 (December), and DD is the day of the month between 01 and 31. For example, January 31, 2013 is written as 2013_01_31 or 20130131.

This format allows ease of sorting and comparing files by date and prevents confusion with other date formats (especially in other formats that use just two digits for the year). |
	Other date formats can be used when a record will not be sorted by date or if another method will be used to organize records chronologically (e.g., file folder names by date or event).
Drafts and Revisions	To more easily manage drafts and revisions, include a version number on these documents. A file will frequently have multiple versions, especially when it is created by a workgroup.
	An easy way to do this is to use the letter v to represent version number. Then, v01, v02, v03 can be added as needed to a file and the main file name can stay the same. This is more effective than other terms, such as: update, new, old, etc.
	The term FINAL can also be used to indicate the final version of a record. This can be helpful to quickly identify the official version.
Be Consistent	The most important rule of file-naming is to be consistent. Some choices will need to be made about organization that affects the entire Program - where to include the date, what abbreviations to use, etc. Regardless of what the group decides, it is only effective if everyone follows the rules consistently.
Exceptions	There will be exceptions. Remember that these tips will not apply absolutely to every situation; it should be used as a guide to encourage the development of consistent folder and file-naming practices.

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When an electronic folder hierarchy is shared between multiple personnel, things can get messy quickly because everyone thinks about organizing and finding files in different ways. When a filing structure is well designed it will allow personnel to access records more effectively.

Electronic Folder Structure	
Organized File Structure	Support records management by providing an understandable and accessible location for all records which encourages users to work within it.
	Reduces the risk of critical information being lost within a file system.
	Motivates users to move records out of personal drives or email accounts where it may be deleted without anyone knowing it existed.
Limitations	A filing system does not prevent users from placing records in the wrong folder if they have access to it. A filing structure will only be effective if users are able to use it. Poorly constructed filing structure will only discourage personnel from using it and exacerbate records management issues.
Keep it Simple	The capture and management of electronic records into a file system, usually organized in a series of folders, requires careful planning and structure. Design a file structure hierarchy to ensure that it doesn't become too hard to find information in the hierarchy or ineffective because there are too many records in each folder. A filing structure may be modeled on the functions of an organization and may also use subject themes for parts of the structure.
Folder Naming Conventions	Folder naming conventions provide all information within the system with a coherent context and logical frame of reference.
	Name electronic folders for "find-ability." A record that can't be found and easily identified is a useless file. Folder names should contain information that leads to easy retrieval and identification. But don't overdo it - avoid extra-long folder names. File name elements should be ordered from general to specific detail of importance as much as possible.
	Assume that you'll forget what's in the folder immediately after you create the file name when you name it. Try to use a name that will be descriptive to other people as well as yourself.
Use Title Case	Use capital letters for the principal words for filenames.

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Definitions	
Archive Folder	A repository for maintaining records.
Electronic Record	Machine-readable record that requires hardware and software to be accessed and read. Includes documents such as spreadsheets, databases, images, video and audio recordings. Because electronic records rely on technology to be accessible, they require active management if you plan on being able to read them more than five years from now.
File System	A method for storing and organizing electronic files and the data they contain to make it easy to find and access them.
Folder	A type of aggregation or container within a file system used to store records (and other folders). It is the principle building block of a filing structure.
Record	Information or data on a particular subject, in any medium, that is created or received in the normal course of business, that is preserved, either temporarily or permanently, because it provides objective evidence of OWM policies, procedures, activities, and decisions and have technical, administrative, historical, and/or legal value.
Record Management	The practice of formally managing records in a file system (electronic or paper) including classifying, capturing, storing, and disposal.
Shared Drive	A specialization of an operating system file system, comprising of a shared device (e.g., hard disk or server space) used by multiple users and accessed over either a local area network or a wider area network connection.

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