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NAMING CONVENTIONS FOR DIGITAL DOCUMENTS

Introduction

The amount of records being created today is growing at a rapid rate. As a result, it is increasingly important to name files and folders consistently to aid users in retrieving and using records.

A good records foundation for any organization is to have a consistent agency-wide file naming policy. Adhering to a policy makes naming records simpler, and staff will not have to reconsider the naming process each time a new digital document is created. Consistent naming policies or conventions aid users in locating and accessing information in a timely manner, and improves storage costs by eliminating multiple copies, files, or file paths.

If you currently use a folder structure in your file system which replicates your agency-wide file plan, then the names of folders (paper or digital) should correspond to and/or incorporate the titles used in your agency's file plan.

Incorporating your agency's Records Retention Schedule is an important element of any agency wide file plan. Digital documents and file paths should correlate with the appropriate retention schedule. Agency schedules include elements identifying the department number and agency ID, which are incorporated into the Records Retention Schedule numbering system. If you are not familiar with your Records Retention Schedule, contact your agency Records Officer or refer to the Records and Information Management Service [webpage](#).

File Names

The name of any record is its' principal identifier. In the world of digital records, the record's file name places the record in context with other records, associated record series and records retention schedules.

File names should contain enough information in order to be understood in any situation. Common situations which occur are when a file is out of context, separated from its' parent folder, or misfiled. In order to mitigate this, the information contained in the file name needs to contain a clear understanding of the documents' purpose.

To help underscore the importance of digital file naming, it is interesting to note that managers spend an average of four weeks each year searching for or waiting on misfiled, mislabeled, untracked, or lost records. Naming digital files consistently allows for system searches to find misfiled or lost digital records.

Consistently named records also helps your agency meet any legal requirements you have. Legally, records must be created, maintained, preserved, stored, transferred, destroyed or disposed of and otherwise managed according to your approved retention schedules (AS 40.21.110). This means your records must be trustworthy and complete, legally admissible in court, and easily accessible and durable as long as their retention requires. Consistently named digital documents are easier to access and manage, aiding in meeting these requirements.

Developing a File Naming Policy

The following should be considered when developing a file naming policy:

- **Access and ease of use.** A simple policy will help staff members easily and logically name records and help ensure that records are accessible to staff members and/or to the public. Simple, straightforward policies will be used more regularly, yielding consistently named records which are easy to access and organize.
- **Ease of administration.** The policy should work with your computer infrastructure in order to manage records and records series, gather metadata, and perform other administrative tasks easily and in compliance with all legal requirements. For example, if all the records in a specific record series are easily identifiable by file name, they will be easier to gather and manage.
- **Uniqueness.** To avoid file names conflicting when they are moved from one location to another, each record's file name should be unique. Having multiple files with the same name is confusing with the additional danger of files automatically overwriting another file with the same name. How your agency arrives at unique file names will require careful thought and testing. Once you have developed a system, it is important to standardize and adhere to it.
- **Version control.** Before a final document is completed resulting in a record, working copies are often created. As the working copies are updated or revised, they should be retained with different version numbers to differentiate the documents and show the progression of the working records. Version numbers are commonly placed at the end of the file title, and should indicate if it is the finalized record. Sometimes current and obsolete drafts are put in different digital file folders without altering the file's name. Ensure each document file title is unique and includes the version number in order to avoid conflicts in naming documents.

- **Scalability.** Consider how scalable your file naming policy needs to be and how many characters you need to allot for future growth. For example, if you want to include the project number, don't limit your project numbers to two digits, or you can only have ninety-nine projects (i.e., Project#01)—look at your projected document growth and allow enough digits for future expansion (i.e., Project#0001).
- **Metadata.** Metadata is the Data describing the context, content and structure of records and their management through time. You will need to decide what metadata to collect and include in file names. This will help ensure the long-term usefulness of your records and help you meet legal requirements for accessibility (for public records) and accountability, as well as protect confidential records.
- **Relationship to paper records and other formats.** Determine how the names of your digital records and files relate to the names of paper files you have stored. Since digital records may be part of records series which include paper records, your file naming policy for digital records should logically coincide with your paper records naming system. . For example, a letter published on a website might be part of a records series including additional paper documents in a file folder. By ensuring that the names of digital and paper records align, you can more easily manage the records series regardless of the record format.
- **File Name information order.** Order the pieces of information or elements being used to create the file name in the most logical order based on retrieval methods. For example, if the records are retrieved according to their date, the date element should appear first.
- **Exceptions.** There may be exceptions to file naming conventions, particularly if batch scanning processes are used. Batch scanning is the process of scanning multiple documents in a single operation; this process typically relies on a computer program that sets parameters on the file names allowed. If this is the case, you may want to develop a folder hierarchy and apply the rules outlined in this guidance to folder names.

Developing File Names

The following should be included in all file naming policies to help keep naming conventions consistent:

- Use only alpha-numeric characters. Avoid using special characters. Special characters are often reserved for use by the operating system.
- Do not use spaces. Either use underscores (_) and dashes (-) to represent spaces, or do not use any underscores, dashes or spaces. Spaces are often reserved for operating system functions and might be misread.
- Use capital letters to separate words when possible, not spaces or underscores.
- Do not use "stop words", such as *if, but, so, for, etc.*
- Use leading zeros with the numbers 0-9 to facilitate proper sorting and numeric order, i.e. *Procedures_v01, Procedures_v11.*
- Dates should follow the ISO 8601 standard of YYYY_MM_DD or YYYYMMDD. Variations include YYYY, YYYY-MM, YYYY-YYYY. This maintains chronological order. If dates of creation, closure or termination are used and are used as cut off dates in your retention schedule, then disposing of the records will be easier.
- Keep file names as short as possible and always include the file extension preceded with a period (Ex: .jpg or .doc).

File names should be simple and easy to understand, and may include some of the following conventions:

- Version number (e.g., version 1 [v1, vers1, v01])
- Date of creation (e.g., April 14, 2010 [20100414, 2010_04_14])
- Name of creator (e.g., Edward N. Johnson [JohnsonEN, ENJ, ejohnson])
- Description of content (e.g., media kit [medkit, mk])
- Name of intended audience (e.g., general public [pub])
- Name of group associated with the record (e.g., Committee ABC [CommABC])
- Release date (e.g., released on March 24, 2008 at 10:30 a.m. eastern time [20080324_1030ET])
- Publication date (e.g., published on December 31, 2009 [pub20091231])
- Project number (e.g., project number 625 [PN625])
- Department number (e.g., Department 126 [Dept126])
- Records series (e.g., Series2036)

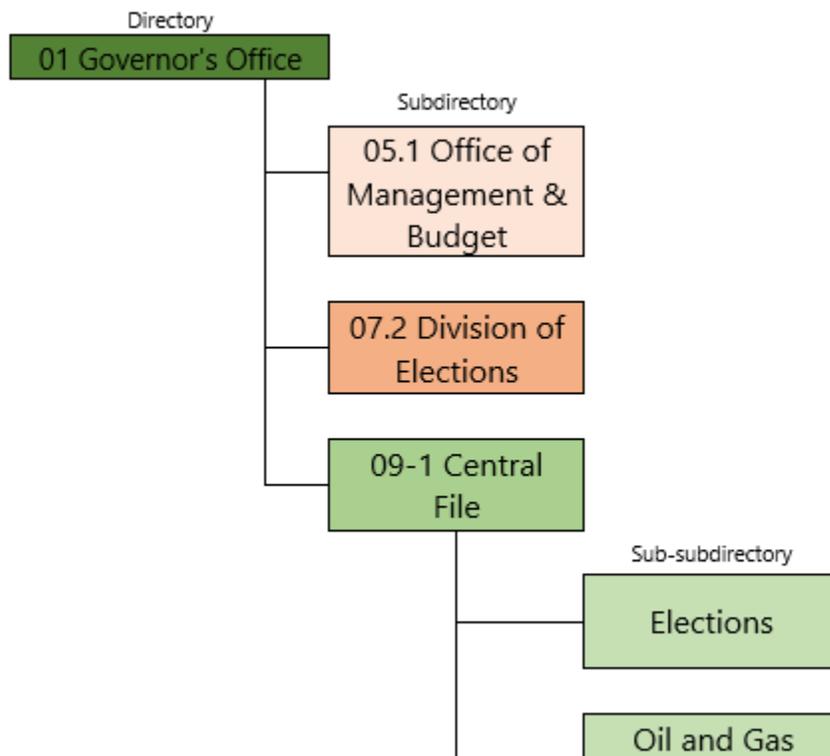
Transferring Records to the State Archives

When transferring digital records to the Alaska State Archives, they must be associated with the corresponding Records Retention Schedule and record series. If you are unfamiliar with your agency's Records Retention Schedule, contact your agency Records Officer or refer to the Records and Information Management Service [webpage](#).

Ways to incorporate the records retention schedule and record series numbers include building them into the file structure or incorporating them into the document name. For example, a document name may include the retention schedule number (01-09.1) and record series number (001.1) with a unique subject title and date:

01-09-1_001-1_Oil&GasSubjectFiles_2003-2004

If file structures are transferred to the State Archives, they should reflect the retention schedule number and record series number.



Digital File Names vs. File Paths

A *file name* is the name of the file as it stands alone. The *file path* shows the location of the digital file, or its directory structure.

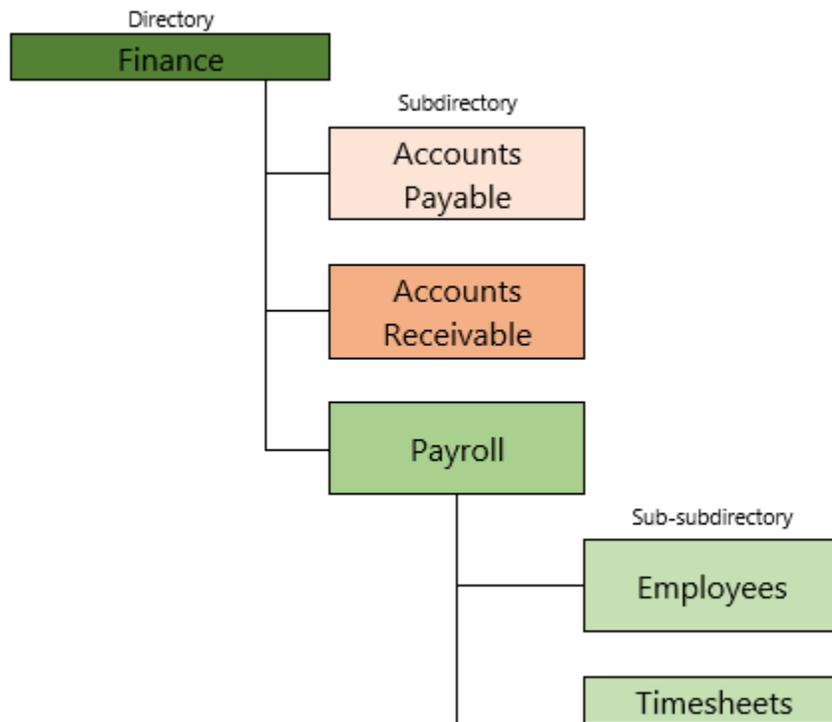
A file name and its path should uniquely identify the record from all other files in the computer system. In other words, no two files should have the same name and path. The file path may include a hierarchy of directories and subdirectories, and begins by identifying the drive. In standard desktop applications, the entire path and file name are treated as the name of an item. If the complete name is longer than 255 characters, the system will truncate it, and important sections of the name may be lost.

Examples:

File Name: DoeJ_2015_08_15

File Path: O:\Finance\Payroll\Timesheets\

File Hierarchy:



Examples

Use This	Not This
2006-03-24_Agenda	March 24, 2006 Agenda
20080924Minutes	Minutes-Sept. 24, 2008
OfficeProcedures-v01	Office Procedures v1
SmithB_AwardCeremony	Award Ceremony, B. Smith
2008_AnnualFinancialStatement	2008 \$\$\$
2007-12_ECM_Minutes_d	Draft Minutes December
20040630Agenda	Agenda 1Feb2005
EmpFINCttee	the_employment_and_finance_committee
BudgetReportDraft	DraftFinancePlan
FinPlanFinal	FinalBudgetReport
BrownSR20041201	SamRBrown20041201
ThomasA20031205	LetterAThomas
Budget2006-2007	Budget2006/2007
01-09_1_001_1_Subject_files_2003-2004	Office of the Governor Subject files 03/04
11-358_1_003_Board_Game_19711116Minutes	Board of Game Files Minutes Nov. 16, 1971
183200_01_Air_Quality_Studies_20111007	October 7, 2011 Air Quality Studies

Additional Resources

Best Practices for File-Naming. May 7, 2008, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.

Folder Hierarchy Best Practices for Digital Asset Management, by Edward Smith, August 8, 2011; DAM Learning Center—Digital Asset Management Best Practices and Inspiration.

Electronic Records Management Guidelines File Naming, Minnesota State Archives, Minnesota Historical Society, March 1, 2012, Version 5.