Contents

Paper-based records

Paper-based records are one of the most common ways of dealing with information.

Examples of paper-based records include:

- reports
- magazines, journals and newspapers
- project files
- contracts
- minutes of meetings
- business letters
- email messages and memos
- faxes
- forms
- diaries and other note-taking methods.

Example: paper-based records

Rosanna runs her own small business. As she is the only employee, she is responsible for all the paperwork required to keep the business operating. Once a month she pays her electricity and phone bills at the post office. The post office stamps the bills 'paid' and gives her a receipt. She files the original copies in her filing cabinet so she can refer to them later for bookkeeping and tax purposes.

When Rosanna sends completed work to her customers with a courier, the courier signs Rosanna's register for each parcel they collect. If there are problems with missing parcels then Rosanna has a record.

Rosanna stores all the correspondence she receives. She even prints out some emails she wants to read later. There is a software database that she uses to record all of her customer information, as well as recording all the correspondence, emails and faxes sent to them.

At the end of each month, Rosanna completes an activity statement form for the government detailing the GST (goods and services tax) that she has collected. This form must be sent to the tax office and a copy stored in her files. To complete the GST form, she refers back to the information in her records. These are all kept in the computer database, with a hard copy kept in the filing cabinet in case of computer problems.

Archived records

The amount of information that must be kept by a business can be immense, particularly if gathering information is one of its main activities. For example, the public records office in each state and territory collects and stores millions of records annually. They have huge warehouses (archives) to store all their records and sophisticated systems to keep track of them. Here are some of the main reasons an organisation will archive records.

When to archive records
• When there is no more space in day-to-day storage areas. • When records are not used due to their age, but must be kept for legislative or organisational reasons.

Retrieve archived records

When a record is archived, it is important to know how to retrieve it. Some businesses simply write the reference names and/or numbers on the box that contains the records. This allows anyone looking for a particular record to find it easily, as long as the information is stored in the right box and boxes are stored in a particular order such as chronologically, alphabetically or geographically. Other organisations use this system to keep track of their records but also record the archived information in their index or database to show people the exact location of the information. Information stored electronically also requires archiving. Hard drives in computers eventually fill up with records, documents and other information. Often, much of this is not needed for daily activities.

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Information sources

Information comes from many different sources. If it is your job to collect workplace information, you need to know where to find it so that you can collect it and pass it on promptly to the relevant people.

Information sources vary from workplace to workplace. Every organisation does things differently. Part of finding your way around any new workplace is learning where to find the various types of information you need. The more familiar you are with your organisation, the more efficient you will become.

Information sources include:

- colleagues such as team members or other staff
- individual computers
- computer networks or an intranet (a private computer network inside a company or organisation)
- electronic archives

Information-handling policies and procedures
• The type of information to be kept and what should be discarded • When and how specific types of information are collected • Restricted access to records • Library check-out system • Who to circulate specific types of information to • Records maintenance

Legal requirements

The *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth) safeguards people's privacy by restricting access to personal information. Individual states and territories have regulations in regard to information and privacy. While you don't need to know the regulations in full, it is crucial that you understand how these laws affect the way you collect and process information.

Another law you should be familiar with is copyright. This restricts the way information can be copied or used.

Other significant legislation with regard to information handling is the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (Cth). This Act is important because the requirements of privacy and information protection laws must be considered against your employer's responsibility to protect the health, safety and welfare of all employees and those visiting the workplace. WHS legislation is also applied to ensure safe work practices are followed when performing tasks; for example, not carrying large loads of material for filing.

Anti-discrimination laws require you to ensure that no information contains derogatory comments about a person's age, abilities, physical or mental capabilities or ethnicity.

Ethical requirements

Ethical principles and codes of practice must also be followed when collecting and processing workplace information. Organisational policies and procedures will outline consequences, such as disciplinary action, when ethical principles and codes of practice are not followed. Below is a list of some ethical principles and codes of practice that may apply in the workplace.

1B Use equipment and technology to obtain information

Information can be collected in a variety of ways. For example, you may receive a report by email, post, printer or fax, or through the internal mail. You may have to collect information from the internet, libraries, newspapers and television. In order to do all these things, you need to be familiar with a range of business equipment and technology. You need to know what is used so you can process information quickly and efficiently.

To find and collect particular information and complete your tasks efficiently, you may need to use a wide range of business equipment and technology, some of which are described below. You must also know how to operate equipment safely and effectively.

Computers

You may use your computer for a number of tasks such as:

- searching the library catalogue
- using a customer database
- accessing the internet
- sending and receiving email.

Be sure you know how information is stored on the computer network so you can use the file paths to locate it.

Email is a quick and effective way of asking for and receiving information. Make sure you let the person you contact know the type of system you are using, so they can send you material in an appropriate form. Your computer system needs to be able to read the information being sent so that you can download it. You might also have restrictions placed on your email system regarding the size of documents you can receive. If someone tries to send you a large document, you may not be able to receive it.

Fax machines

A fax machine converts paper-based information into electronic information for transmission. It is useful for transmitting and receiving information that requires people to check data, read a report or confirm information. Staff are usually shown how to use the fax machine during their induction session, as different organisations have different sorts of machines. Asking people to send information by fax rather than by post can save time.

Photocopiers

You may need to copy the material you have found so you can distribute it to a number of people. Perhaps you only need a portion of the information you have collected. Or you may be in a situation where you cannot take the whole document with you, such as in a library, so you need to copy the portion you want. Photocopiers copy documents quickly and efficiently. Machines vary so you need to learn how to use the one in your organisation. Functions include double-sided printing, colour copying, collating and copying onto card. Remember that copying is restricted by copyright law. It is wise to check with your supervisor or manager if you are unsure.

Scanners

A scanner is a machine that converts printed material into images. Scanning is very useful for converting paper-based information into electronic information; for example, pictures from a book can be converted to an electronic file for your computer and then added to other documents. Some scanning programs also convert the text in a scanned document to text that can be word processed. Ask for help if you are having trouble using a scanner, as models vary.

Mobile devices

Mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets are rapidly becoming an integral component of office business technology. With the appropriate application software, they can perform many of the tasks previously dedicated to single devices such as scanners, computers and telephones. Their portability also enables these functions to be performed beyond the office environment.

Below is some information on methods to keep confidential and restricted files secure.

- Keep hard-copy files locked.
- Use encryption, a method in which the computer file is coded and requires a decoding key to open and translate the file.
- Use passwords to access restricted computer files.
- Obtain signed authorisation from a manager to access files.
- Store confidential computer files on a CD or other storage device rather than on the hard drive (the CD can then be stored in a locked cupboard).

Practice task 3

1. List three examples of confidential information.

2. List three ways to keep confidential or restricted files secure.

Use your computer

You may need to use your computer to process invoices, record incoming journals on a library database, word process meeting minutes for distribution, update customer records, process order forms, record sales data or prepare correspondence.

A lot of the information you receive may have to be word processed or reformatted. Find out the kind of format that is required. Does the report need the organisation's logo on the cover page? Should you write a formal or informal memo? What sort of graphs should you use? How you process the information depends on what the person who has requested it wants and your organisation's policies and procedures.

Below are some steps to follow when entering and retrieving information from an electronic filing system.

Information entry

- Confirm the information you are to enter.
- Access the correct file or database using the index.
- Key in the information required.
- Check the information is correct.

Information retrieval

- Confirm the information you are seeking, who it is for and when they need it.
- Identify if there is any authorisation needed for access.
- Access the correct file using the index or use a search engine for the internet.
- Check the date of the information to ensure it is current or the correct date if it is an archived file.
- Print out relevant information.

Handle email

If you collect email messages, you should already know how to use your email software. To process email messages, you need to find out how the organisation expects you to sort, forward and file emails.

Examples of email handling procedures include:

- forwarding all messages from customers to a supervisor
- printing out some messages and not others
- filing messages relating to a particular project in a separate place
- seeking permission to delete a message.

2B Process information according to time lines and guidelines

Often information needs to be processed within a particular time frame, so you need to collect and process the information efficiently.

When processing information, use your planning skills and follow the relevant guidelines and procedures. You may be involved in collecting and processing different types of information simultaneously. Your work plan must take this into account. A well thought out plan helps you to deal with different tasks and to keep track of your activities and time frames.

Make sure you understand:

- how you need to format the information
- how to prepare information according to your organisation's policies and procedures
- how to choose the most appropriate equipment and technology.

Meet deadlines

Managing your time is very important because other people will be relying on you for information. In many instances, people will not be able to complete their work until you provide the information they have requested.

To plan your tasks effectively, you must know when the information is needed. It may be needed immediately and you will have to adjust your work schedule to fit in this priority. It may be part of your everyday work tasks to process information, such as recording messages from the answering machine or processing invoices.

Before you process any information, you should consider your options and work out the best way to get the job done on time. If you have a lot of tasks, you must determine the priority of each task and record any workplace time lines in your work plan.

For example, you may need to:

- prepare meeting minutes within two days of a meeting
- send information to clients within 24 hours of their request
- send invoices within seven days
- catalogue and distribute journals to staff as soon as you receive them.

2C Update, modify and file information

Information used by organisations needs to be regularly monitored to ensure it is current, is still necessary and can be easily accessed. It may be your responsibility to do this, so make sure you are familiar with your organisation's procedures for updating, modifying and storing information. Here is more information about these processes.

Update information

Updating means making sure the information is the latest, most current version.

There may be serious consequences if the information an organisation uses is not current. For example, a new customer may be annoyed if they are not sent a catalogue and newsletter because their name has not been added to the customer database. Or, the sales team may be working towards an incorrect target if updated sales figures are not regularly forwarded to them.

If you receive more current information after you have already sent information to someone, make sure you also send the updated information as soon as possible.

Modify information

Modifying means changing or altering information. It may involve reformatting, changing the content, adding information, deleting information or moving information. You may need to modify information when existing information is no longer useful or needs to be used for a new purpose. Modifying may include:

- using an existing flyer as a template and changing the text to advertise a new product
- adding headings, page breaks and pictures to a draft report
- removing all of last year's meeting minutes from the meeting minutes file
- changing a customer's address in the customer database.

File and store information

When you process information, you may be required to catalogue items in the filing system after you have collected, updated or modified them. You'll need to know:

- what information to keep
- the legal requirements of keeping the information
- your organisation's filing procedures
- the security issues surrounding the information.

Policies and procedures

Policies and procedures for dealing with workplace information may differ from workplace to workplace. For example, legal offices regularly receive updated legislative information that has to be filed with appropriate records as soon as it is received. A busy wholesale company needs to deal with large volumes of order forms, invoices and receipts on a daily basis.

Other workplaces rely on the filing system to work efficiently as part of their daily activities. For example, medical facilities need to be able to find patient records, update them quickly and file them immediately so the record is always readily accessible. Similarly, a library needs to update its records quickly to keep track of items that are borrowed, late, lost, on hold, on order, damaged and so on. This means that the filing systems in all these organisations need to be well-organised and well-maintained.

You should refer to the organisation's workplace policies and procedures or workplace user manual to explain the specific procedures for filing and storing information. If you are not certain of your organisation's filing procedures, make sure you ask your supervisor or manager to show you clearly. Remember to take notes as you go to refer to later.

Example: policies and procedures

Jeddah has just started work as an administrative assistant. She needs to know her responsibilities regarding information management. She talks to her supervisor, who gives her the following guidelines.

- After trade magazines and journals have been circulated to staff and returned to a central box, catalogue them and place them in the library.
- Destroy or recycle all junk mail.
- Store information about current seminars and conferences in a folder in the lunchroom.
- Print out email messages relating to current projects and file in the central paper filing system.
- Forward CVs from job applicants to the Human Resources department to be filed.
- Forward invoices for goods purchased to the Accounts department where they are filed according to the date they are due to be paid.
- File correspondence in the centralised paper filing system according to its subject or project.

Filing a paper copy of electronic information
• Information to be filed together should be collected in a folder. • Any relevant notes or instructions must be attached to the items, written on the documents or included in the folder. • Place the correct versions of the documents into the filing system (there may be many versions or drafts on the computer network). • Include a reference to the location of the electronic file, such as a code number or folder name.

Use your common sense

Not storing and classifying information according to procedures can result in information being lost, time being wasted in looking for files or files not being able to be found. Use your common sense to work out the best way to deal with these situations. For example, if an item is filed in the wrong place (misfiled), search the surrounding area and check files with similar names, codes or numbers. Your workplace user manual or guidelines may give you some clues. If you are unsure where to file an item, check with your supervisor rather than risk filing something in the wrong place.

Problems encountered during filing may include:

- documents that you can't identify or classify
- documents that don't seem to have any classification in the current filing system
- documents and objects that do not physically fit into the system – too large or heavy
- files missing from the filing system.

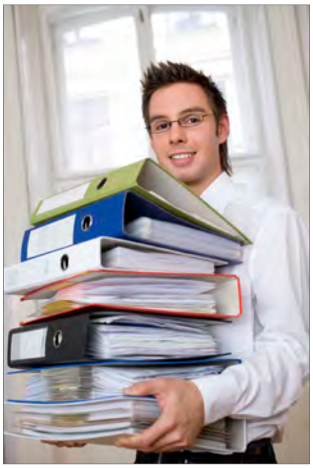
Understand security issues

Follow your organisation's procedures for filing confidential information. For example, you may need to place it in a manila folder and give it to your supervisor to file. You may need to return the document to a library. Some organisations have a security policy for handling files. This may mean that files must be handled in a special way to make certain the information is not lost or available for people outside the organisation to see. The range of security measures used by an organisation varies according to need. Here are some examples of different types of document security measures.

2D Collate and dispatch information

After you have collected and processed the information required for the task, you need to format it appropriately and deliver it to the person who needs it. The way you do this depends on:

- the type of information
- who it is for
- when the information is needed.



Organisations generally have policies and procedures for collating and distributing information, so make sure you know what is required. For example, does the information prepared need to be bound as a formal report? Can the information be emailed to the person? Does the information need to be sent urgently?

Collate information

Collating information means to arrange the contents in an appropriate order. You may have multiple pages that need to be sorted and stapled or placed in a folder. You may have a number of documents that have to be bound together using a binding machine.

Before you collate information, you need to ensure that it is presented in an appropriate way, according to requirements. Find out these details when you first receive the request for information. Ask questions and observe the people you work with to find out what standards are expected in your workplace.

Examples of presentation details
• What order do the documents go in? • How many copies are needed? • Do you need a cover page? • Should coloured paper be used? • Should the material be placed in a manila folder? • Does the document need to be stamped 'confidential' on the cover?

Summary

1. Business equipment and technology can be used to process information efficiently and appropriately. You must try to select the most appropriate equipment for the task.
2. Be aware of and follow your organisation's policies and procedures relating to processing information.
3. Confidential information must be handled according to organisational guidelines. This might mean that files should not be taken out of the office, must not be copied, must not be made public or require a special password for access.
4. Keeping to time lines is crucial. Use planning tools to organise your workload and keep on track.
5. Make sure the information you receive and deliver is the latest, most current version.
6. You may need to modify information on a regular basis to ensure it is accurate. This may involve reformatting, changing, adding, deleting or moving information.
7. You need to know the legal requirements for retaining certain information.
8. Information must be filed according to organisational requirements. This means using the organisation's electronic or paper-based filing systems correctly.
9. Information may need to be prepared before distribution. This might mean collating and binding a document.
10. Dispatch information according to requirements. You might use mail, telephone, email, hand-delivery, fax or a courier.
11. Keep notes on the procedures for handling different types of information in your workplace. You need to know how to handle each type of information, how to file it, who to advise and where to record it.

3B Identify, remove or relocate inactive or dead files

In a functioning business, filing systems never stay the same. New files are created for new customers, projects or activities; old files are removed when they are no longer needed; and other files have information added or removed from them as required. If information storage systems are to be useful, they must be carefully maintained so everyone can find the information they need, when they need it. Here are some different aspects of file management.

Remove files

If an organisation kept every file it created, its records management system would soon be overflowing. More and more space would be needed to store the files, and filing and retrieving records would be a serious and time-consuming job.

To keep the system efficient and ensure there is enough storage space in the filing system, records and other documents that are no longer needed must be removed periodically. Some records can be deleted or destroyed completely. Others must be kept for a certain period.

Relocate files

It is important to keep enough room in an electronic filing system, in the same way it is important for paper-based files. This is because the computer hard drives used to store information become full, just as the filing cabinets, shelves and libraries used to store paper-based information become full. Electronic files can be compressed into a much smaller physical space than paper files; for example, on a computer hard drive, CD, DVD or USB stick.

Inactive files

Inactive files contain information that is no longer used but cannot be completely removed because it may be needed in the future. Files such as these are stored in a secondary or separate storage system. For example, the file of a customer who has not been in contact with the organisation for some time would be an inactive file. However, the customer may contact you in the future so you shouldn't throw the file away. Using secondary or separate storage to archive inactive files ensures that information is available if needed, but the files are not occupying valuable space in the system used to store active or regularly accessed information.

Manage electronic records

You must make sure that inactive records are regularly removed from the active electronic filing system. As more and more records are stored on a network, the amount of space left for storage decreases and it may become harder to find the information you need. Removing or archiving inactive records frees up space for more current information.

Computer files can be made smaller or compressed using compression software. This means the files are reduced in size and occupy less space in the archive. Compression software is also used for electronic files when the files are made available for download over the internet.

Computer-based records can be removed from the filing system using similar systems and procedures as for paper-based information. This means that removing inactive files is a regular, scheduled cleaning activity of the organisation, or it can be done as required.

A computer can be programmed to periodically archive or delete files that:

- have not been accessed for a given period of time
- are older than a specified date or time
- relate to specific subjects, organisations or individuals.

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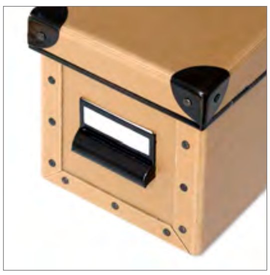
Store inactive and dead files

Inactive and dead files are generally moved to another storage location after removal from the main filing system. This means they can be stored in a compact form and are generally not as easy to access. By archiving inactive or dead files, the active information becomes more accessible. The archived information must be well-organised so that files can be found easily and retrieved as required. Some archives, such as in large government organisations, are huge and require storage in specially constructed and maintained warehouses. Most archives are smaller and more manageable, and are designed to suit the organisation's requirements.

Your organisation may store inactive and dead files in different ways, as outlined below.

Archive boxes



Archive boxes can be cardboard, wood or steel containers, sometimes specifically designed to store all types of paper-based information, files and documents. The boxes should be labelled to identify the contents. Labelling could be as simple as: 'Customer Records July 2007 to June 2008' or it may list every document and file in the box. This list may also require a reference number that identifies the box and how to find it.

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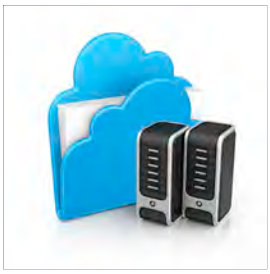
Cloud storage



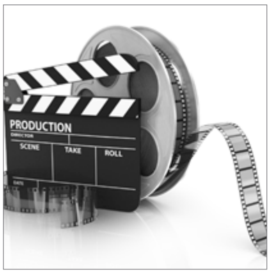
Some records or files are electronically stored on the cloud, which is essentially a number of remote servers that are accessed through an internet connection. This information is password protected to ensure only authorised people have access to it. Other information is publicly available via the internet such as old war service records, which can be viewed in digital form from the National Archives of Australia. Accessibility issues must be considered when storing and making information available via the internet. For example, files should be compressed to ensure they can be easily downloaded.

Email archives

To archive inactive or dead email information, you can save the emails to a computer-based or electronic storage device by moving them from your general inbox to the archive area of your mail program. You can then save the information to a data file that you have created on your server or on the electronic storage device.

When you move emails from your inbox in this way, your email program may automatically mark them as deleted.

Film, sound tapes and similar storage media



Film, video, photographs and audio recordings may need to be stored as inactive files once a project has been completed. Archiving this information may require special skills, although many organisations store photos or film in the same archives as other information. There are often very particular procedures and methods used to both catalogue and preserve these objects. Some organisations specialise in storing this type of media. Make sure you understand any special procedures you have to follow.

Name a new file

When you create a new file, you need to decide on the most useful way of referring to (or classifying) the contents of the file. Think about how you would refer to the file if you were looking for the documents.

Many organisations have standardised procedures for naming new files. This means there are particular steps to follow whenever you are creating or naming new paper-based or electronic files. Standardised procedures are particularly important in a decentralised records system. Such procedures ensure that the system remains logical and consistent. A records management department with a centralised filing system also uses set procedures.

For filing systems that are arranged numerically, new files may simply be allocated consecutive numbers. This means that each time a new file is added to the filing system, it is given the next available number.

Sometimes a system that includes a date is used. This can be useful for organisations where the date is important to the information, such as records of births, deaths and marriages. There are many variations of systems that are designed to meet the particular needs of different organisations.

Factors that determine how a new file is named
• The classification system adopted by your organisation • Organisational procedures for naming new files • What is easiest for the people using the filing system

Practice task 10

1. List three procedures for creating a new file.

2. What do you need to consider when naming a new file?

Index by subject

Generally, when you are indexing a document, the first step is to determine its subject area. This will direct you to the most appropriate area of the filing system. Then you need to further categorise the document; for example, by putting it into alphabetical or numerical order.

When you are indexing a document, try to work out the most logical place for it. Think of where you would look for the file if you were trying to retrieve it from the filing system.

Organisations usually have policies and procedures for creating files. For example, managers may have to authorise the creation of a new file. Familiarise yourself with your departmental or organisational filing system so you can move between files quickly and easily. As you become familiar with the system in your organisation, it will become easier to index, file and locate documents.

Index by alphabetical order

Sometimes files are indexed in alphabetical order. When using alphabetical indexing, the following rules should be observed.

Alphabetical indexing rules

1. Names are indexed by the person's surname, first given name and second given name (for example, Giovanni Mario Domani would be indexed as Domani, Giovanni Mario.

2. An initial comes before a first name and a first name comes before a full name (for example, Ellerson, M comes before Ellerson, Mary, which comes before Ellerson, Mary Louise).

3. Titles are ignored (for example, Sir Charles MacKerras is treated as MacKerras, Charles).

Example: recipe index

If you are indexing chocolate cake in the recipe index, the first indexing unit is the subject, 'Cake'; the second indexing unit is 'C' for chocolate; and the third indexing unit is the 'H' in chocolate. The 'H' tells you that chocolate cake goes after carrot cake since 'H' comes after 'A' in the alphabet.

Coding

Coding is a follow-up step to indexing. It involves using a keyword or number that makes it clear where the document should be filed. Coding is also used as a way to quickly locate files. For example, some doctors' surgeries and legal offices use colour-coded files.

Codes make it easy to return a document to the same file each time it is taken out. Ask your supervisor to explain how your organisation codes documents.

Other examples of coding documents include:

- writing the file number onto the document
- underlining or highlighting a name with a coloured pen
- underlining or highlighting a date.

Cross-reference paper-based documents

Sometimes documents are filed in more than one location. If so, it is useful to have a reference to the document in both places. Then if somebody only looks in one place and the document is located in the other place, they will be directed to the correct location.

You might need to cross-reference when the document can be filed under different classifications. You might also need to cross-reference when:

- an organisation is known by more than one name (for example, Australian Government Publishing Service might also be filed under AGPS)