

## Six Steps to Better Files

### *Step 1. Understand the Scope of the Problem*

The keys to good filing practices are:

- Filing only what you need to file;
- Filing it in a way that facilitates access and disposition; and,
- Doing it consistently.

To do this you first must analyze your records management needs by determining what records are most important to your business, who should be responsible for them, and where they should be located. To start the process take some time in your regularly scheduled staff meetings to discuss the four questions posed below.

Question 1: What does your business do that needs to be documented?

Question 2: Which of these records series are important

Question 3: Who should be responsible for each of the records series?

Question 4: Where should each series be located?

### *Step 2. Conduct a Records Inventory*

### *Step 3. Develop a Filing System - The File Structure and File Plan*

Many people think a file plan is simply a listing of the file folders currently in their file cabinets. A real file plan is only one component of a filing system, which is a set of policies and procedures for organizing and identifying files or documents to speed their retrieval, use, and disposition.

File plans operate on two levels. They guide you in identifying and arranging the records series in the filing equipment, and they guide you in arranging the document or file folders in the records series. Although the two are related, there are some differences.

### *Step 4. Develop Record-keeping Requirements*

At one time, records management was thought of as simply a way to cut down on the amount of paper in the office. Retention schedules that allow for the rapid destruction of the records, and microfilming (or lately imaging) systems that "get the paper off the floor" and free up space were two of the cornerstones of an effective records management program.

There has always been a second component to records management - the need to provide for the "adequate and proper documentation" of activities. A company ensures that it has "adequate and proper documentation" by developing record-keeping requirements. In other words, "adequate and proper documentation" is the goal and record-keeping requirements are the means to implement the goal. Record-keeping requirements allow companies to create and maintain

documentation that is complete, consistent, concise (only necessary documentation is included), compliant (meets Federal and Provincial legislation guidelines), and cost effective.

### *Step 5. Apply Technology to Records Management*

People frequently turn to technology because they find they can't manage their paper records. Either they are swamped by too much paper, or they can't find the documents they need, or both. By itself, technology cannot fix a records management problem. The old saw is true: if you try to automate a records management mess, you will have an automated mess.

However, technology, even simple technology, can make a basically sound records management system operate better. Basic types of technology that can help  
*Better Filing Equipment:*

If reducing paper volume can't solve the problem, something as simple as better filing equipment may help you to manage the volume better.

*Document Tracking and Control:*

Everyone complains that documents or folders "disappear" from the files and can't be located. Control of documents throughout their lifecycle is first of all a matter of establishing procedures and enforcing them. Even the most sophisticated automated tracking system won't work if staff are free to remove documents from the file room at will. Determine who needs access to what files and reduce the ad hoc removal of files by unauthorized individuals. There are many ways of tracking files once they have left the file room, but the fastest way to gain control is to file by a number or code that not all staff have access to and then put a procedure in place.

### *Step 6. Create a Procedures Manual*

If you've followed along with the first five steps to better files, you should have seen a marked improvement in your files. Now is the time to crystallize all of your improvements in the form of a records management procedures manual. Creating the manual is not just a paperwork exercise. It provides the basis for a consistent program for records management that will become part of the regular ongoing office routine.

A sample table of contents for a Records Management Manual incorporating these topics is included here.

#### Sample Contents for a Records Management Manual

##### I. Introduction

Purpose of the Manual

Purpose of Records Management

Your companies Records Management Policy

- Staff Responsibilities
- II. Records Management Procedures in your office
  - Records Creation
    - When do you create records?
    - What must you do with the records you create?
  - Records Maintenance and Use
    - Filing procedures
    - Records circulation and control
    - Information security
  - Records Disposition
    - Records cleanup
    - Disposing of records
  - Special Media
    - Electronic records
    - Audiovisual records
    - Maps and Drawings
- III. File Plan and Records Identification
  - Overview of Major File Plan
  - Listing of Major Records Series
    - Description of records
    - Record-keeping requirements
    - Custodians
    - File plans
    - Disposition
  - Identification of non-record collections
- IV. Appendices
  - File Plan
  - Sample Forms
  - Glossary