



Records Management Tip

Records management advice prepared for GNWT records professionals by the Records Management Unit, PWS

No. 23 – February 2005

Active Filing Series

Titling Files

The purpose of this tip is to provide suggestions on how to assign titles to hard copy and electronic files.

What is the Purpose of a File Title?

While the purpose of a file title may seem obvious, it is worthwhile to take a minute to think about why we assign titles to our files. The simple reason for giving a file a title is to identify the contents of the file so that the correct information is put in the correct file. Given that this seems to be a fairly simple and straightforward activity, it is surprising that many files titles have very little obvious connection to their contents.

Choosing the Right File Title

There are several things to consider when assigning file titles:

- The file title should describe the subject or function of the documents that will be included in the file. Users will have a difficult time deciding which file to use if the title does not describe the contents of the file.
- There should be one file for each group of documents dealing with a single subject, action, transaction, event, project, person, etc.
 - The file title should not be too general. A very general file title will encourage users to put a large range of material into the file. It is usually easier to file into and retrieve from a large number of files that have specific titles, than from a few files that have very general titles.
 - At the same time, file titles should not be so specific that documents dealing with the same subject or function will be divided up into several different files. Very specific file titles make it difficult for the user to decide which one of several files should be used.
- File titles should be complete. Very often a one or two word title will not provide enough information to help the user understand the purpose and contents of the file. Put as much information in the title as is needed to understand the contents of the file.
- Be consistent. It is easier to locate information, particularly electronic records, if file titles are assigned in a consistent manner. File lists, file tracking databases, and iRIMS will be easier to search if file titles for similar records follow the same format. Many departments develop guidelines on how they will title their files. These guidelines include rules on when to use

The Active Filing series gives you tips on how to manage active records in your department.

abbreviations, the order that title elements will be used, which terms are preferred, the date format that will be used, and so on.

Recommendations for File Titles

The following are suggestions for developing guidelines for file titles in your department.

- Use keywords relating to the subject matter or purpose of the file. Use terms that you and your co-workers will think of when you try to find the file again.
- Structure your titles so that the same information always appears in the same place. Give the most useful information first. For example, if you are filing and retrieving based on the topic, use an order such as: topic – type of record – date. A title that uses this approach may look something like this: “Electronic Records – Presentation – 2005 or Electronic Records – Report - 2005.
- Adopt a standard format for the names of people, organizations, projects and activities, and document types. For example, always list names in the “Last name, First name” format, or always list organizations in a “Department – Division – Section” order.
- If more than one name appears on the file, always put the names in the same order. For example, on a file where one person is making a complaint against another, always put the proponent’s name first and the defendant’s name second. A file titled in this manner might look like this: Doe, Jane vs. Bull, John.
- Adopt standard terminology for subjects and activities. If one concept has synonyms, pick one term as your office’s preferred term. For example, use the term “human resources” instead of “personnel.”
- Avoid using terms like “General” and “Miscellaneous.”
- Avoid using acronyms and abbreviations. Acronyms and abbreviations fall in and out of use, and several years from now they may not mean anything to anyone. Also, one abbreviation may stand for many different things. For example, the abbreviation CRM stands for Certified Records Manager, but it also stands for Customer Relationship Management.
- Use a standard format for dates. For electronic records, use a date format that will sort in chronological order, such as Year-Month-Day (e.g. 2005-03-15). Use numbers instead of letters for months because the letters do not sort chronologically.