



Records Management Tip

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

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Active Filing Series

Centralized vs. Decentralized

When you set up a records management program, you have to decide if you want a centralized or decentralized system. This refers both to where you store hard copy records and to the how you manage records.

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

Physical Arrangement

There are many things to consider when you are setting up a new office or renovating an existing office space. One of the questions that you have to answer is where will you put the filing equipment? Will you have a central file room where all files will be stored? Will you have clusters of filing cabinets scattered around the office? Will you put filing cabinets in each office or cubicle?

Your decision will be influenced by a number of factors. These include the floor strength of the building, the type of work that you do, and the confidentiality of the records.

Centralized filing locations usually come in the form of a file room that serves the entire department or division. There are many benefits to having a centralized filing location:

- File rooms offer the most control and security over records.
- File room staff can make sure that access to records is limited to those who are authorized to see the records.
- File room staff can track which files are taken from the file room, and who has them.
- Files are kept in one central location, so that all employees know where to find their records.
- Duplication is reduced because a single central file is maintained, rather than multiple copies held by many employees.

The drawback to centralized filing locations is that employees do not have files available to them at their fingertips. Some employees resist filing their records into a centralized filing system because it is not convenient. They may also feel a loss of control over their records.

Decentralized filing locations usually consist of clusters of filing cabinets, or filing stations, that are located around the office. In some cases, employees may have filing cabinets in their offices. Employees often prefer decentralized filing locations because

their records are close at hand. Security and control over the records, however, is usually lower than in a staffed file room. In this kind of system, offices are more likely to have problems with duplicate records being stored in filing cabinets around the office. This happens because no one knows that the information exists somewhere else.

Centralized and Decentralized Control

In a **centralized control** model, one person or one group of people looks after the records management program. This person keeps track of which records are being created and where the records are stored. He or she also manages the scheduling and disposition of the records.

There are many advantages to having a centralized control model:

- One place to go for information on the records that the department has.
- A single point of contact in the department for all records management activities.
- A greater degree of consistency between different divisions and work units in the department.
- Greater control over the creation and distribution of information.
- More efficient management of records. Annual or periodic tasks, such as sending records to the Records Centre, are not put off.

Centralized control models depend on the cooperation of all of the divisions in the department. Just as with centralized storage, centralized control may meet pockets of resistance in a department.

A **decentralized control** model is not a good model for managing records. In this kind of system, each work unit manages its records on its own. Individual work units may manage their records effectively, but there will be a lot of inconsistency across the department. Usually there is also a lack of records management knowledge across the department. When problems arise, departments find that they have difficulty finding out where to get help or finding out how they should proceed to solve the problem. Consequently, problems tend to build on one another.

Conclusion

Decisions about whether to centralize or decentralize the physical storage of records often come down to a question of space, security, and convenience. The question of whether to have centralized or decentralized control comes down to resources. In the GNWT, the best department records management programs are the ones that have a records coordinator who can provide centralized control across the entire department.