MANAGING SHARED AREAS: FILE STRUCTURES

Benefits of a Good File Structure

A well organised structure for shared folders should mean that there is a consistent and agreed approach to the way information is organised.

This will mean:

- It will be much easier to find information
- You can be confident that all the records relating to a particular activity can be found in one place.
- It will be easier to apply decisions on how long different types of records are kept for (as the same types of records will all be together in one place)
- It will be easier for teams to work together as everyone will understand where particular documents belong

Characteristics of a Good File Structure

A good file structure….

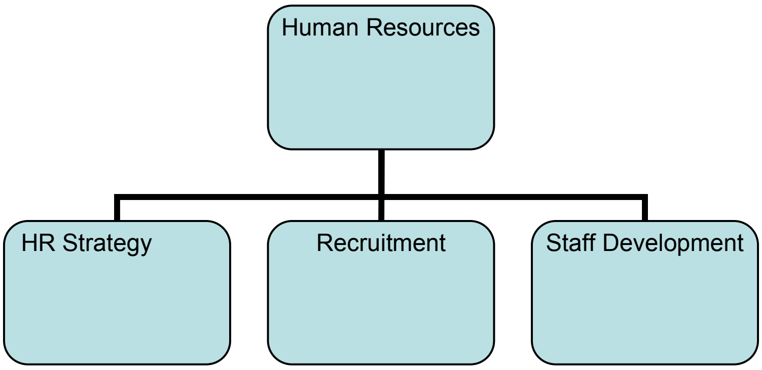
- Is based on the key functions of the team who are using the shared area
- Takes into account how long different types of information need to be kept for
- Is ideally no longer than 4 levels
- Is clear and easy to understand
- Is agreed by everyone
- Is monitored and controlled
- Mirrors paper filing structures

Designing a Structure

It is essential to give some thought to how the shared area should be structured, rather than allowing it to develop in an ad-hoc and uncontrolled way.

The structure should as far as possible be limited to 4 levels, and Levels 1 and 2 should reflect the key functions of the administrative or academic unit to which it relates. Levels 1 and 2 should normally be fixed – they should only need to change rarely, for example, if a new function is created.

An example for a Human Resources department is given below:-



Level 1 – 'Human Resources' – this is the folder seen at the 'top' level on the Z Drive

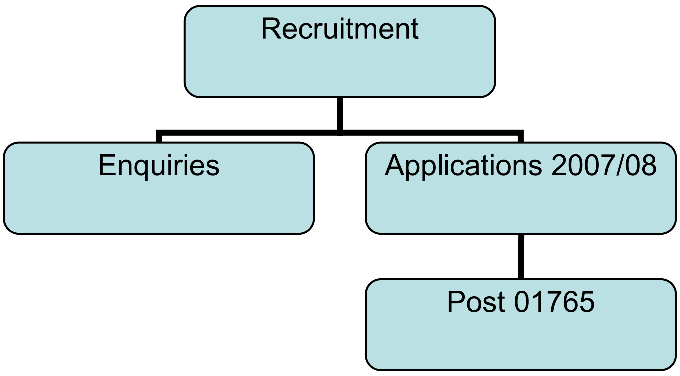
Level 2 – these are the key functions of the Human Resources department

Levels 3 and 4 of the structure can be more flexible – these will normally contain actual documents. The key points to bear in mind when thinking about levels 3 and 4 are:-

- How will you need to find the documents later?

- How long will you need to keep the documents for?

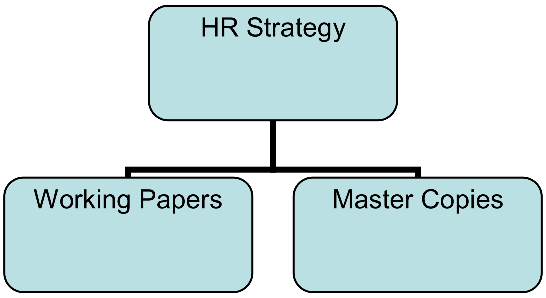
If you know you will need to find the document, for example, by the surname of a student, by the module code for course materials or the post number of a job application, then you should label your folders accordingly. An example is given below:-



Levels 3 and 4 have been labelled so that HR staff can retrieve documents according to the year of the application and the reference number of the post

You should also think in advance about how long you are likely to need to keep documents for – this is called a 'retention period'. Documents with the same retention period should be grouped together in sub-folders so that when the retention period expires the sub-folder can simply be deleted.

If you consider this in advance, it should not be necessary to trawl through individual documents later to decide what to delete – you should simply be able to confidently delete the sub-folder. An example is given below:-



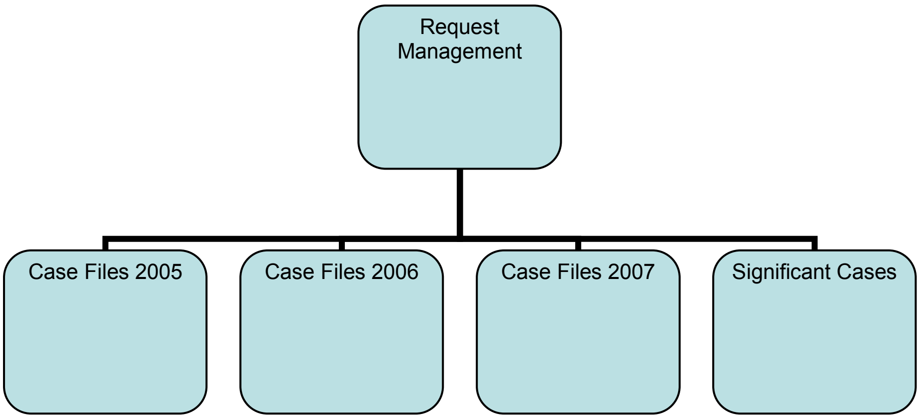
Master copies of policy/strategy documents normally need to be kept for much longer than background or working papers.

In this example, the 'working papers' sub-folder can simply be deleted 1 year after approval of the Strategy.

Applying University Retention Policies

The University is currently developing guidance on how long different types of University records should be retained for. If University guidance exists for your area, please refer to this when designing your structure – this will make it much easier for you to implement the retention policy.

An example from the Secretariat retention schedule is given below for managing Freedom of Information requests:-



In this example, good practice is to retain case records for 3 years but keep 'significant cases' for a longer period.

It is therefore essential that significant cases are identified at the time they are being dealt with and placed in a separate folder. This means 'case files 2005' can be confidently deleted in the knowledge that no significant information is being lost.

Relationship to Paper Filing Structures

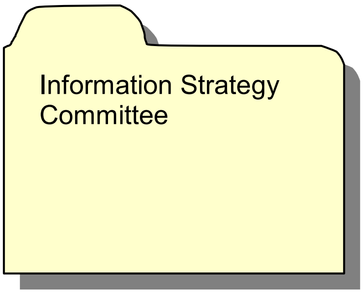
It is generally preferable to file all documents relating to a particular topic in one place only – either an electronic folder or a paper file.

However, in some cases there are good reasons why it is necessary to have both a paper file and an electronic file covering the same topic – this may be, for example, because some information is only available in paper format or it could be that the paper copy is the signed master copy.

Where you have information in both paper and electronic format on the same topic, it is good practice for the two folders to be treated as a single file. This means:-

- Both the electronic folder and paper folder should have the same name/title
- Ideally there should be no duplication between the folders – each document should be held in only electronic format or paper format (unless there is a clear need for duplication)
- Where a document is only available in paper format, a cross-reference 'note' should be included in the electronic folder (and vice-versa) to indicate this.

An example is given below for Committee records:-



The electronic folder contains:-

- *A sub-folder for each meeting containing individual Committee papers and minutes*
- *Brief notes to indicate individual papers which are only available in hard copy on the paper file*

The paper folder contains:-

- *Sub-dividers for each meeting (mirroring the electronic structure)*
- *The signed copy of the minutes for each meeting*
- *A master set of collated Committee papers for each meeting*

Security

As a general rule it is good practice to keep as much information as possible on the shared areas so that it can be easily accessed by colleagues. However, some confidential or personal information may need to be protected and is important to consider this when designing a file structure so that any restrictions can be applied to individual folders where necessary.

Any requests to restrict access to folders should be made to the Helpdesk via the designated Shared Area Managers. Details are available at:
Z:_SHARED AREA MANAGERS

External Guidance

JISC have developed a model Higher Education classification scheme and retention schedule which can be used as a starting point when developing file structures. This can be found here:

For HE records:
http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/partnerships/records-retention-he/index_html

Similar guidance is also available for Further Education records:

For FE records:
http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/partnerships/records-retention-fe

This Scheme lists all the functions and activities found in a typical HE or FE Institution, it shows these in a hierarchical order and indicates a recommended retention period for how long different types of records should be kept for. All University records retention policies are based on the JISC guidance. The JISC scheme equates to Levels 1 and 2 of your filing structure.

Although it is tempting to begin to organise your filing structure in accordance with the way your school, division or service is organised, there are some benefits to using the JISC model as a starting point.

This is because:

- the JISC model includes a retention period for different categories of records, so by organising your information into these same categories it will be much easier for you to adopt the same retention periods.

- The JISC model organises administrative functions in an objective, logical way rather than by the way a service area or faculty is currently organised. This is good practice as it means any future changes to service or faculty structures will not have a major effect on the filing structure.

You will obviously need to find a balance between a structure that adheres strictly to the JISC model and one that is easy for people to use, so it is accepted that the Scheme may need to be modified. Also, as the Scheme only relates to Levels 1 and 2 you are free to develop the lower levels of your structure as you think fit.

Templates for File Plans

A File Plan is a diagram of the structure which can act as an index of the shared area. It can include additional information about folders, including details of retention periods for the content of the folders, which can be added later. It can also include notes about the folders which will help people understand what they contain.

A recommended format for a File Plan is to use a Spreadsheet or Database as this can be easily updated and can be adapted in a way which best suits your needs. A suggested template can be found at the back of the Toolkit.

Further Links

Further information can be found at:

http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/records-management/guide-for-administrators

http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/partnerships/records-retention-he/developing-a-file-plan

http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/managing_elect_docs.pdf