



Best Practices for Organizing Electronic Records

The Importance of Organizing Your Electronic Records

All University employees are responsible for the management of all public records created, received, or retained in connection with their position and the transaction of public business on behalf of the UW System, regardless of format.

Electronic records are required by Wisconsin Administrative Code, Chapter Adm 12, to be organized and managed to ensure they are accessible, accurate, authentic, reliable, legible, and readable throughout their lifecycle, as determined by University Records Disposition Authorizations (RDAs), also known as records retention schedules.

File organization practices work hand in hand with folder/file naming practices and should be distributed together within a unit/department to enable employees to locate and manage the files well into the future. This document provides best practices for organizing files and folders and may be used to create a file organization policy to be distributed to all employees. Checklists of best practices for managing digitized and born-digital records can be found in the [Chapter Adm 12 guidance document](#).

Centrally Manage Records in Shared Locations

As a university employee, you create and receive records that document the university's activities. The public records and information you manage as part of your job responsibilities belong to the University and the State of Wisconsin.

You are responsible for:

- Identifying and appropriately managing public records created and received as part of your job duties at the university
- Filing and organizing paper and electronic documents so they are readily accessible
- Retaining public records for the appropriate length of time
- Disposing of public records in accordance with an approved records retention schedule
 - sometimes referred to as a Records Disposition Authorization (RDA)
- Maintaining confidential and sensitive information appropriately
- Disposing of information that is not a public record
- Knowing where to go for help when you have questions about managing records

Saving records in a central location allows all staff to easily access and manage them, reduces duplication, and minimizes the time needed to locate records for business purposes or public records requests.



Any exceptions to keeping unit records on a shared drive should be discussed and agreed upon within the unit and then documented. Saving records on personal network spaces (e.g., personal drive, Box) or a computer hard drive (e.g., C: drive). makes them inaccessible to other staff and increases the risk of records being lost when a person leaves their position or a computer fails. When saving files to shared locations, determine who should have permission to access, view, edit, or delete files and folders. If there are security and access concerns about files on a shared drive, DoIT should be able to help set up restricted areas accessible only to designated staff.

Hierarchical Folder Structure

Hierarchical folder structures tend to start very broadly at the topmost folder and become more specific as subfolders are added. Some units start with division or section names and then add subfolders by function or retention schedule number. For records that cross areas, it may make more sense to order by records retention schedules and/or functions.

An example of a hierarchical structure may be like this:

- Folder: *UniversityHousing*
 - Sub-Folder: *DiningCatering*
 - Sub-sub-folder: *Catering*
 - Sub-sub-folder: *Menus*
 - Sub-sub-folder: *SafetyInspections*

Use subfolders to further organize your files, but flatten the structure as much as possible. It is recommended to limit the depth of your file structure to 4 or 5 subfolder levels.

Assign Records Retention Schedules to Folders

Integrating records retention schedules numbers into folder titles can help a unit manage records over time.

For a folder containing records that follow records retention schedules ADMIN354 – Activity and Production Reports, which has a retention of creation + 1 year and destroy, you could use: DepartmentActivityReports_ADMIN351.



Minimize Folder Titles

Use subfolders to further organize your files, but keep the folder titles as short as possible. While systems may allow you to create long file titles, doing so can cause errors when transferring files and folders to other locations or render them inaccessible. It is recommended to limit the depth of your file structure to 4 or 5 levels of subfolders and limit the folder/file titles to no more than 250 characters.

Use Versioning for Drafts

According to Wis. Stat. § 16.61(2)(b)(5), drafts of documents are not public records. For most documents, only the final version needs to be kept and previous drafts can be deleted once the final version is complete. The final version should be labeled clearly. It may be necessary to keep drafts where significant directional changes were made during the creation of the document. Where multiple versions are deemed to be important, they should be clearly labeled to eliminate any confusion as to which is the final item of record.

Separate Supplemental Materials

Supplemental materials are files that often appear alongside other objects or projects. Generally, these are kept for convenience or reference and should be discarded when no longer needed. Storing and tagging these in a separate subfolder will help in disposing of them at the appropriate time. Examples include: notes, reference information, documents sent by other organizations that are not needed to understand the content kept, or a folder of images that were later embedded in a document.

Minimize Copies

According to Wis. Stat. § 16.61(2)(b), copies maintained only for convenience or reference are not public records, although they can be used in a public records request.

The creation of additional copies across storage spaces by employees makes it harder to manage a unit's official records over time and should be minimized as much as possible.



Use Notes to Document Folder Contents

A ReadMe file or text document containing information about a folder's contents can be placed at the folder's root to help units manage their records consistently over time. For records that will eventually be transferred to the University Archives, ReadMe files also provide context for the files and how they should be preserved.

A ReadMe file can include a summary of the files, any unique file formats that exist in the folder, and the software that created them, how it's organized, special file naming conventions, any records schedules that apply to the folders and subfolders, and contact information about who "owns" or manages that data

Where Can I Get Help or Additional Training?

You can ask questions and get additional help by contacting the [Records Management Program](#). We also have additional training on records management topics on our [website](#).