

File management in an eDRMS

In an electronic document and records management system (eDRMS), electronic documents are linked, 'placed in' or 'attached' to an electronic file folder which serves the same purpose as traditional paper files. It is important to ensure good file management practices are maintained when changing from a paper to electronic environment.

This alert provides advice on how traditional file management practices are of value in an eDRMS environment.

Creating and capturing records

- As in the paper environment, responsibility and procedures for creating and naming files and capturing records should be clearly assigned.
- Generic titles, such as 'general correspondence' and 'miscellaneous' should not be used as they convey no real meaning, inhibit the retrieval of information, and make the inheritance of security and retention and disposal information difficult.
- Files should also include, either as part of the file name or as separate metadata, approved classification terms based on the functions and activities of the organisation.
- End users who are responsible for capturing documents into the eDRMS should be provided with clear guidance and training on what documents to capture, how to decide in what file to capture them, and what metadata to capture.
- Quality assurance procedures should also be instituted to monitor practices when records classification is done by end users.
- If using a hybrid system where there are both electronic and paper 'parts' of the one file, procedures should be implemented to ensure that the links between electronic and physical records are maintained.

Closing files

It is important to develop procedures to trigger the closure of a file. This will enable triggering of disposal actions and will also assist browsing of records by users. Users will often scan through the contents of a file to identify relevant records. If a file contains lots of documents, this can be a time-consuming and frustrating process.

Files may be closed when a project is complete, or at the end of a financial or calendar year for files dealing with routine, ongoing transactions. This may be built into the file title, for example, 'Publications – Enquires – Requests for brochures 2004 – 2005'. In addition, a procedural decision may be made to close files and create new parts when a certain number of documents have been attached (the equivalent to when a file gets 'too big' in the paper environment). This could be based on the memory size of storage device, if using offline storage.

Implementing disposal

In an eDRMS, disposal decisions are often assigned at the time of file creation. Sentencing at creation is easier if the titling of files and structure of the retention and disposal schedule are based on the same classification scheme and follow the same function/activity relationships.

Most eDRMS have the ability to automatically calculate a disposal date if the disposal triggers are translated into terms the software understands. For example, if the disposal trigger is 'after last action', last action can be set as the date the file is closed. If files are not closed as routine practice, last action should be the last date a document has been attached to the file. Last action should not be the last time someone looked at a file.



Sentencing at creation can lead to efficiencies in disposal, but sentencing and disposal cannot, and should never be, completely automated. The practice of assigning disposal classes on creation may never be completely accurate. For example:

- The appropriate disposal class may depend on whether an application is approved or rejected, or how important a matter is – such future action is often impossible to tell at the time of creation.
- The disposal class may have to be changed if a matter is being contested and litigation is likely, or if the record has been subject to a Freedom of Information application.
- Documents required a longer retention period are sometimes placed on a file designed for supporting or working material that would have a shorter retention period. In these circumstances, the disposal class would need to be changed to the longer retention period.

In addition, it can be difficult to automate some disposal triggers. For example, if the disposal trigger occurs when a contract expires, the software may not record this information and therefore cannot calculate the appropriate disposal date.

The disposal date calculated by an eDRMS should only be used as a review date to trigger a manual review of the files due for destruction. A risk-based approach can be used to determine the appropriate level of detail for this review. As with paper records, procedures should be developed to ensure appropriate staff, such as line managers, legal officers and audit staff, approve the proposed destruction before it occurs.

For hybrid files, with both paper and electronic parts, it is important to ensure that both parts are given the same disposal action and disposed of at the same time.

Maintaining metadata after disposal

Even after a record has been lawfully and appropriately disposed of, it is necessary to maintain some metadata about both the file and the component documents. It is desirable to tag the metadata so details of records that have been disposed of are not routinely presented in search results to users.

File metadata that must be retained includes:

- File title
- Date of creation
- Date of closure or, if not closed, date of last item added.
- Disposal authorisation, including QDAN number, version number and class reference.
- Date of destruction or other disposal (for example, transfer to different authority).

In an eDRMS environment, individual documents are also registered and identified. When a file is disposed of, it is also good practice to retain some metadata of the component documents, such as:

- Title / précis
- Author (individual or organisation)
- Addressee, if relevant
- Date of creation / date sent, as appropriate.

This document level metadata should be permanently associated with the file level metadata.

For more detailed guidance on the management of public records visit the Queensland State Archives' website at <http://www.archives.qld.gov.au>, or contact us on:

Telephone: (07) 3131 7777

Email: info@archives.qld.gov.au