

### Functional vs. Subject-Based Classification

In its broadest sense, classification is the process of categorising information resources according to a predetermined hierarchy or scheme. The use of a classification scheme will ensure these resources are managed in a consistent and organised manner.

This Public Records Brief compares functional and subject-based classification, and outlines why the functional approach is preferred for records management purposes.

#### Functional Classification

*Information Standard 40: Recordkeeping* and the Australian Standard on Records Management (AS ISO 15489) both endorse a functional approach to classifying records, which ensures that “records and their metadata descriptions accurately represent the business processes that created them”.<sup>1</sup>

Functional classification is based on an analysis of the unique business functions and activities of an organisation, but is independent of the organisation’s administrative structure. This makes functional classification more flexible and stable as business units and divisions are likely to change over time. It also promotes effective information sharing in the organisation, with the ‘ownership’ of files shared across different business units.

Functional classification is used not only for titling and retrieval purposes, but it can also help define access and security restrictions and determine retention periods for records. This can be achieved by aligning classification tools such as Business Classification Schemes (BCS) and functional thesauri to other tools, such as a security classification scheme and a Retention and Disposal Schedule.<sup>2</sup>

#### How it works

The number of levels used in the classification hierarchy can depend on a number of factors, such as the size of the organisation, the nature of the business performed and the complexity of the administrative structure.<sup>3</sup> A three-tier system is recommended. The first level represents the overarching agency functions, while the second and third levels represent the activities and transactions that generate the records.<sup>4</sup> The third level is often referred to as the subject level. *Keyword AAA* and *Keyword for Councils* are two examples of a three-tier classification scheme.<sup>5</sup>

Function	Activity	Transaction or Subject
PERSONNEL	ALLOWANCES	Advances (financial)
	AUTHORISATION	Travel
	COUNSELLING	Career Guidance
	DISCIPLINE	Punishments
	EVALUATION	Job Evaluation
	LEAVE	Accrual

<sup>1</sup> *Australian Standard for Records Management AS ISO 15489, Part 1 (4.2.2.2)*

<sup>2</sup> For more information on BCS, see the Public Records Alert on *Business Classification Schemes and Thesauri*

[http://www.archives.qld.gov.au/publications/PublicRecordsBriefs/bus\\_class\\_schemes\\_thesauri\\_200505.pdf](http://www.archives.qld.gov.au/publications/PublicRecordsBriefs/bus_class_schemes_thesauri_200505.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> *Australian Standard for Records Management AS ISO 15489, Part 2 (4.3.4.1)*

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, C. (1999) *Records control and disposal using functional analysis*.

<http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/recordkeeping/keyword-products/records-control-and-disposal-using-functional>

<sup>5</sup> Information on attaining these tools is available from the QSA website:

<http://www.archives.qld.gov.au/government/guidelines.asp>



## Benefits of Functional Classification

The use of a functional scheme for records classification can lead to a number of benefits for a public authority, including the following:

- Records are organised and connected to the context that created them;
- Records are named in a consistent manner over time;
- The accessibility of records is increased;
- Information is effectively shared across the organisation;
- Security precautions and access rights for records can be determined; and
- Retention periods and disposal actions for records can be identified.

## Subject-based Classification

Classifying information resources according to subject terms is a practice commonly used in libraries and was popular in records management prior to the release of the first Australian Standard on Records Management (AS 4390). The emphasis of subject-based classification is on resource discovery and retrieval.

When used for records classification, subject-based schemes allow records relating to broad subject areas to be grouped together. This permits the end user to see all the transactions and activities that occurred under a single subject, such as a particular property or client. However, under subject-based schemas the focus is on what the item or object is about, rather than on the purpose or activity that the record was created to document. Therefore the context of the business activity can become imprecise and unclear, and will make implementing disposal actions over subject-based files more difficult as they will contain records with differing retention periods. For example, it can be more important to establish whether a record is a policy, a complaint or an application, rather than on the issue or entity.

### Example – Property Files

Property files retained by local governments are particularly hard to manage as they contain all of the records that relate to a single property. This can include records about dog registrations, development applications or rates notices, which must be retained for different lengths of time. Problems can arise, such as how to manage the file when the property's ownership changes or the storage issues created by retaining temporary records for longer than necessary.

If this approach is used, the file must be kept according to the longest retention period for records on the file.

## Applying multiple classification schemes

In line with national and international best practice, Queensland State Archives recommends that public authorities use a functional scheme as their primary classification tool. However, some public authorities may also wish to use subject classification to assist with resource discovery and retrieval. Maintaining more than one classification scheme for recordkeeping purposes is complex and may confuse end users. A functional scheme can include subject terms at the lower levels of classification to increase discoverability of information resources. Alternatively, some public authorities may also wish to use an industry-specific subject thesaurus rather than developing their own. This will help reduce the administrative costs associated with maintaining multiple schemes, while also ensuring intellectual control over the use of the subject terms.

In addition to this, many electronic recordkeeping systems allow subject terms to be included in the record metadata, which can assist with searching and retrieval. Also, the use of subject terms or free-text descriptors for titling purposes can also increase the discovery and retrieval of individual documents registered on a file.

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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:

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