

Editorial Extract

Extracted From Paperless Ponderings
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Serious Records Management

SUBJECT	Filing and Acceptable Risk
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FILING and ACCEPTABLE RISK

Yes, records management, in any form, is about acceptable risk. I was talking to a partner in an accountancy practice who spoke of the filing clerk who was dyslexic and put everything in the incorrect place.

What are you willing to accept as a MISFILE RATE

When it comes to motor accidents or disease, we accept figures that talk about the number of incidents per thousand or per million. We think that a disease rate of one in 10,000 is generally acceptable in some circumstances. Many people expect perfection in filing. I have news for you. Even if you did the filing yourself you would have a higher error rate than even you would accept. (People never notice their own errors.)

However, when it comes to finding a file, particularly in the computer systems of today, we are willing to accept a much higher failure rate or a much slower retrieval rate than we would have in the past. But we don't always realize it. Our Broadband service suppliers promise 99% connectivity. That means each year they can be down for 3.65 days which is about 88 hours.

"Lost and missing documents are often a problem in a paper based filing system, mostly because of their being misfiled. Statistics on document management show 7.5% of all documents get lost, and 3% of the remaining are misfiled"

Just how true is this? – Well, it was found on a site selling IMAGING SYSTEMS.

It certainly reminds me of the old one liner, " Did you know 47% of all statistics are made up on the spot?!"

HOW DO FILING ERRORS OCCUR IN THE FIRST PLACE?

INCORRECT FILE NUMBER OR NAME.

The correspondence is given a wrong number or name by the person directing the filing and the file clerk checks only the number without cross-checking the name or subject.

INCORRECT FILE DIRECTION

Often by directing or placing a piece of correspondence into a "General" file when it should have been placed in a specific file.

I remember writing a report on a large (no, very large) government department that had file 401.1.1 "General – Miscellaneous – General" and it was up to part J. Now I beseech you, what was on this file in the first place?



PUTTING IT ON THE WRONG FILE.

Here, there are several options.

- Putting it on the file to the left or the right of the intended file, due to sloppy handling of the correspondence. (Reputedly up to 5%)
- Putting the documents on entirely the wrong file. (Reputedly about half of one percent in the 1970's standards published by Remington Rand).
- When documents are simply sorted in order (eg. in a Lever Arch File / Two-ring Binder, it is common to find that numbered documents can be misfiled within 5 places. eg. Item #3 is between 5 and 7.

Some years ago FILEforce did an exercise with a credit union to re-sort 35,000 signature cards. We found the most common error was the placement of a card back in the wrong place in the drawer BUT within 1cm of its correct location to be very common and we found this error to be in the order of 10 per hundred. (This included such errors as 123645789.) However, the interesting part was that for the whole 35,000 cards in twenty drawers, we found only one card per drawer which was in the completely wrong drawer.

The result was that there was one card in ten in the wrong place, but people could still find the signature card, as they always knew it would most likely be within the same general area.

FAILING TO ADEQUATELY IDENTIFY THE eRECORD

This is perhaps the most common method of misfiling. A document is simply saved as "Harry.doc" in the computer and no key words are placed in the files properties for later searching, or saving the file as an image and not adequately identifying the image in an index system.

FAILURE TO BACK UP A COMPUTER SYSTEM!

A high rate occurrence where files are placed on a disk and deleted after they have been used without backup to go back to. (See backup or be Damned – www.filing.com.au/freestuff/)

Failure to index the item at all!

Creating a record, putting it in a drawer, subsequently archiving the drawer and not having a clue what is in the archive box. We see this a lot. Boxes labeled "Jim's Filing" or "Sales Manager's Files". Now, what is in these boxes?

Putting files back in the wrong place!

This occurs when a file is replaced on its shelf in the wrong place. Again, there is a number of possibilities.

- Close at hand – it is put on the shelf one or two out of sequence.
- Transposition – When Jones is read as James, Band is read as Land. The most common are "I", "J", and "T" in the first letter position.
- Numerical – most common is putting a file before the previous number rather than after. This is just a handling problem.
- Putting a file inside another file and it gets lost completely – This is a physical thing and can only happen when fasteners are not used.

Old statistics I used to quote in college showed that in Alphabetical filing, without colour coding, a misfiling rate of about 6-8% was common for the reasons stated above. With Colour Coding, the error rate was reduced dramatically – which is why colour coding was invented in the first place.

If we use colour coding (Alpha or Numerical) the misfiling rate (placing a file folder in the wrong place on a shelf) is below .5% (yes, point five). Colour coding is definitely a plus and should be used at all times with lateral files.

THE FILE BECOMING PHYSICALLY LOST!

We have many anecdotal stories about the Fleet Manager getting cars back for replacement and finding Australia Post Corflutes, full of files, in the boot.



The four-drawer filing cabinet is a number one offender. Files have been known to be inadvertently dropped into a drawer *between* two folders rather *in* its folder. The result – the file disappears beneath the hanging green folders and is never seen again.

SO WHAT IS THE ANSWER?

The HONEST answer is that it is all about ACCEPTABLE RISK. If you do a google search in Australia for “misfiling” you get 153 responses mainly talking about reducing misfiling. This by itself indicates it is a problem, and everyone wants to manage the risk better. We know when we re-engineer personal file systems, they have the most mistakes.

HOW DO I REDUCE THE RISK?

In computers, use the Computer File Naming convention for EDP at www.filing.com.au/freestuff.

- For documents – take a little time and PRINT CLEARLY to eliminate transposition and transcription errors.
- For files – Use Colour file coding.
- For numbered forms – always put the number in the TOP RIGHT HAND CORNER of the form.
- Plan filing so that there is no mental or physical fatigue by job sharing and multitasking the operators.
- Get FILEforce to do the filing for you.

