



Tech Brief:

**Standardizing Explorer Folder Tree File
Management into a Document Management
Solution**

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Intended Audience

This document is intended for anyone exploring alternative methods of managing files, achieving better control over creating and storing files in a folder tree structure. This content will be helpful to those transitioning the management of their organizations files, currently using Explorer style nested folders and file names, into a content management solution specialized in managing enterprise wide filing standards, instant document access, secure sharing, file security and the life cycle retention.

Scope

This document describes the definition and use of document management solutions in comparison with managing files by generating nested folders with the Explorer. Conversion from a nested folder management style into a content management solution is possible. Considerations for the conversion steps necessary for success are discussed.

Standardizing Explorer folder tree file management into a Document Management solution

Introduction

The concept of *standardization* is one of the most important and fundamental concepts in document management. The term literally means “*consistency*”.

Software driven processes that govern a structured standard in which business files are stored, equips all knowledge workers with the tools to locate records that have been filed by past employees and can be beneficial to newer inexperienced staff. Sustained consistency governed by the document management software makes it possible to discover and retrieve files created and stored years ago or as recent as yesterday. Policy enforced standards enable an organization with the ability to share files and their content, quickly, leveraging the knowledge base of the company, producing better informed decision makers and maintaining the highest level of productivity required in this competitive economy.

Even with the best of intentions, maintaining an organizations standardized filing system by permitting users to store files with Windows Explorer, is a records management problem that will worsen with the addition of each new file and each new folder, compounded by the number of current and past employees.

Explorer Folder Tree

This is the most common method for an individual to store files on their desktop computer. You can use your imagination as to the organization of the files. In addition, the Explorer provides a visual filing view that might resemble the way you would file paper in a folder or on shelves. What makes this method even more compelling is that folders can have nested sub-folders that are subsets to the main or higher level folder. The nested folders, as they grow, begin to look like branches on a tree, which is where the description “folder tree” was established. The folder tree can become as large and with as many branches as you choose. Once a folder tree is established for filing your records, now you have the freedom to name those files with whatever would spark your memory as to the contents of the file.

Sit in a room with 20 other individuals to see if they would file the same records exactly as you have, with the same folders, subfolder and file names. Multiply this exercise by 10 years. Now, look for the files needed on the staff member’s desktop next to you. Then move the next desktop for your next search.

The desired files may actually be located but it will take much more time and produce unnecessary frustration. Assistance by the person that originally performed the filing may be available, assuming they are still employed and remember how the documents were originally filed. Some organizations will create an archive folder on the network for their knowledge workers to file documents. This will benefit the organization in making all files more accessible and facilitate proper backup. Keep in mind that the larger the tree grows, the slower the response become in getting to the folder level and files you desire. It is not uncommon for a large tree navigation response time to take ten minutes or longer.

The organization might take it one step further and add a full text searching engine. This seems to be a reasonably painless step toward content management, but search engine results generally return “all” information pertaining to the targeted text search, most of which must be reviewed and has nothing to do with the files you desire. In addition, structured description fields, such as “date”, “document type” or “client name” may not exist in the text of a document. The search results on desired files are incomplete, delivering inaccurate decision making information.

Explorer folder style document management has other limitations and drawback for storing records for an organization.

Listed below are just a few objectives that cannot be achieved:

- Permissions based file security deployed across an organization.
- Searching file descriptions, meta data and text content
- Sorting records by files descriptions
- System wide access to all records.
- Anytime, anywhere access to records via browser based internet connection
- Companywide compliance of document descriptions, such as “name”, “number”, “date”, “document type”, “version”
- Document level policy based security
- Document control with versioning, check out and check-in
- Saved Searches for future reference
- Policy based file retention (when to legally destroy a document).
- Companywide legal holds on documents.
- Secure file collaboration with employees and outside associates
- Business process workflow between co-workers.
- Auto notification of file activity, such as document edits, viewing and the addition of new documents to a folder.
- Compliance driven logs of file access and the users activity

I still want my Folder Tree

As stated before, we have all managed our personal files with the folder tree, so none of us want to part with it just because we are now sharing files with others in an organization. No worries, your desired results can still be achieved but with enterprise wide standards and consistency. Allow content management software to enforce companywide document management policies. All employee files are directed through the document management software, which regulates the use of standardized file names, folder names, searchable document values and content.

The file storage end of this process produces a structured tree, preserved with standardized folder and file descriptions, in which all employees, regardless of current or future growth, will be capable of locating the files needed.

Before the document management application can begin to manage the organizations records, legacy files must be uploaded and then redistributed to their respective folders based upon the standards set forth by your records management policy.

How to move legacy files into a content management solution.

This process requires some preplanning.

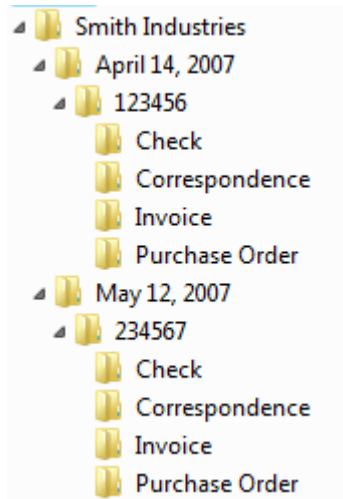
A goal for this step is to collect as much structured file data as possible for future organization, sorting, searching and records retention. The structured data available in an explorer tree are usually the folder names. The first 2 or 3 folder levels are generally unique to the files contained in those folders. A decision will be required on the disposition of the folders that are not consistently named. These folders are typically located below 3 levels of nesting. It is possible to move all of the inconsistently filed documents into a miscellaneous folder.

The file name can be useful and searchable, but they normally contain subjective information about the document that could add up to tens of thousands of unique descriptions. File names could be added to a searchable field named "description" or "file name", but will be difficult to use in creating the standardized folder structure.

Establish a policy for collection of files and the description names (fields) and their values (meta data). For example, accounts payable documents might have description names such as "Vendor Name", "Vendor Number", "Purchase Order Number", "Invoice Number", "Invoice Date", "Check Number" and "Document Type". The fewer description names, or fields, that enables you to find what you need, the better. Your organization may decide that they can locate what they need with "Vendor Name", "Check Number", "Date" and "Document Type".

Inspect your existing files to ensure that all folders are consistently the same. If not, designate or contract assistance to standardize the collection prior to adding to the document management application.

Your folder might look something like the example below:



For purposes of moving legacy files through the document management solution, the software can analyze the existing folder tree and assign a folder level to a field name in the document management software. Using the example above, the first level would be assigned to the field labeled “Vendor Name”. The second folder would be assigned to the field labeled “Date”, third “Check Number” and the fourth folder assigned to “Document Type”.

If some folder trees are missing critical “middle” folders, such as “Date”, then this folder must be created, even if it is empty. Otherwise, the lower level folder description values, such as the “check number” will be added to the wrong field. If the check number was missing in some tree structures, then the document type values will be added to the check number field.

Once the fact is established that the legacy folder tree is standardized, the process of registering files with the document management software may take hours, but operates as an unattended process. Processing time varies on the amount of content to index, plus other variables.

Upon the registration of legacy files, the document management application will either create a new set of folder trees or utilize the existing folder tree.

From this point forward, the document management software will be responsible for generating any new folders.

Conclusion

Your organization is now ready to manage all files, regardless of whether they were created electronically, from scanned paper or archived email. One content management solution will now control policies in place to insure standardization and continuity across the enterprise.

We didn't forget about that beloved folder tree. A good content management solution worth its salt will provide anytime, anywhere browser access with folder tree navigation of files.