Developing File Codes That Work for

ELECTRONIC AND PHYSICAL FILES

Ann Bennick, Ed.D., CRM, and Judy Vasek Sitton, CRM

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The most common traditional subject file classification method is the graded or ranked series in which each lower level is subordinate to the level above. To ensure that a subject file system does not become excessively complex, this traditional hierarchy should not extend past three levels of associated subject terms – major (primary), secondary, and tertiary (file title) – and title length at each level should be reasonable.

Although technology has afforded us the luxury of unlimited length fields, you should still keep the titles short (using only enough terms to adequately describe the subject contents). Using short titles is especially important if you have physical folders on which the titles will be printed.

Using more than three levels in a subject requires a trained, experienced file staff to assign *file codes* – a unique identifier identifying a specific subject group or individual physical or logical file folder – and to file, retrieve, and interfile records. In past years, many companies provided file rooms staffed with individuals with experience and knowledge of the business or technical information stored in the file room. This practice has changed due to factors such as economic cutbacks, increased upward mobility of workers once satisfied with a single-position career, the availability of more user-friendly records management software packages, and the rapid advancement, low cost, and availability of technology. Much of the responsibility of file identification and retrieval has shifted toward end users and away from career files experts. Development of a subject relative index (or its equivalent within the system's search technology) is even more important under these circumstances.

Updates to any file classification should be made in a timely manner and should be made available to all employees who use the index. Training is necessary to ensure understanding of the classification scheme and any codes that may be associated with each level.

As shown in Illustration 1, the traditional subject file system levels may be alphabetically arranged within each level. Each of the two major or primary categories illustrated, advertising and finance, has secondary levels. If needed, additional subordinate titles can be added under the secondary levels. As mentioned earlier, developing a system that goes beyond three levels is not recommended.

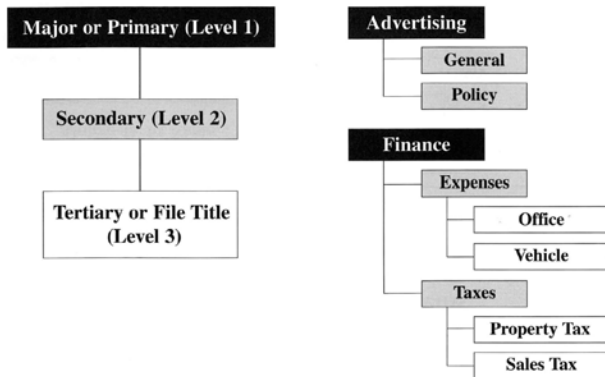**Three-Level Subject File Classification/Taxonomy**

Illustration 1: Subject File Classification/Taxonomy

Value of File Codes

Adding a file code creates a shortcut to the logical file name. A file code may be assigned to provide a unique identity and physical location for each folder and a parallel logical grouping for electronic or microfilmed documents on the same subject. If a file code is assigned, the physical folders should be arranged in this order on the shelf.

The recommended eight-character maximum is consistent with the maximum number of one-inch color codes that can be placed on a full end-tab file folder. In addition, including more than eight characters in the file code promotes errors in writing the code on the document. Excessively long codes also promote misfiled documents through misreading or transposition errors. Many records managers have found that codes consisting of a combination of alphabetic characters and numeric characters will result in fewer incorrectly coded and misfiled documents.

File Code = Street Address

A file code can be compared to a street address and house number. (See Illustration 2.) If you visit a friend in another city and do not know the address or telephone number, you are going to consult an index – the local *White Pages* telephone directory, which may be online. You will look/search for the friend's name, a key sequence known to you. From the index, you will identify the street name and the house number where your friend lives. If you have two friends living in the same city, you would not expect them to live side by side. The physical location of each friend would be found by using the index.
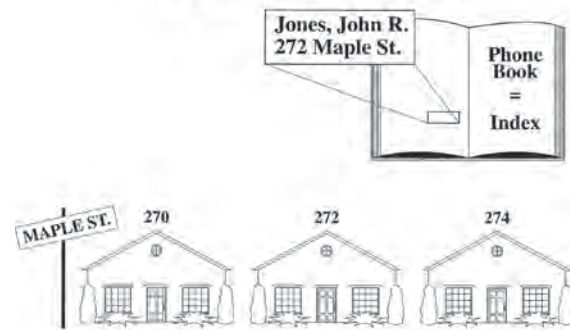

Illustration 2: File Code = Street Address

File Code = Shelf Address

Similarly, if you are looking for two file folders, you can find both folders as long as you have a reliable classification/taxonomy. The two folders do not have to be placed side by side. As depicted in Illustration 3, the file classification/taxonomy (index) is our equivalent of the telephone directory, the major or primary category file code is our street name, and the folder number within the major category is our equivalent house number.

For natural order file systems, the employee name and number are equivalent to the street and house number. These are the key data elements that allow us to find information within a specific department's file – the same way that knowledge of the individual's first and last names will allow us to use the telephone directory to find an individual within a specific city.
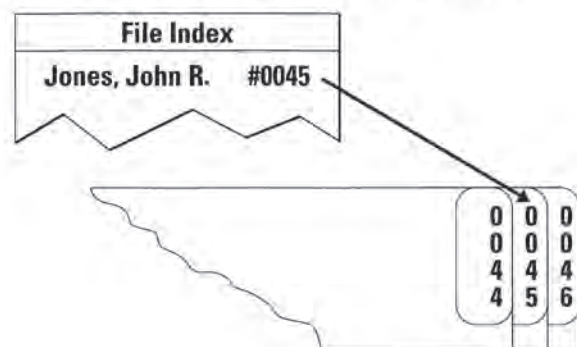

Illustration 3: File Code = Shelf Address

File Code = Logical Retrieval Key

The file code is equivalent to a physical file folder and, if possible, should be used as its physical "address" on a file shelf or within a file drawer. With continuing access to technology and the decreasing costs of sophisticated search technology (commonly called "search engines"), many indexes and documents are available to users at their workstations.

Even with these tools, a file code is still of value. When associated with a logical document as metadata, the file code is the equivalent of the physical file folder and carries with it retention, ownership, and a link to its parallel physical files (if any) on the same subject. The file code may not always be the primary retrieval key that a user will enter when searching for a document, but it is an essential element of an electronic document management system because it identifies a logical subject grouping and serves the same function as a physical file folder.

Assignment of a file code to either digital or physical documents may be manual or, preferably, auto populated through intelligent software. (See Illustration 4.)

Print or write the file code on each physical document. Use this number to ensure that like documents are collected in the same physical file folder. Apply the same file number to any electronic-based document about the same subject.
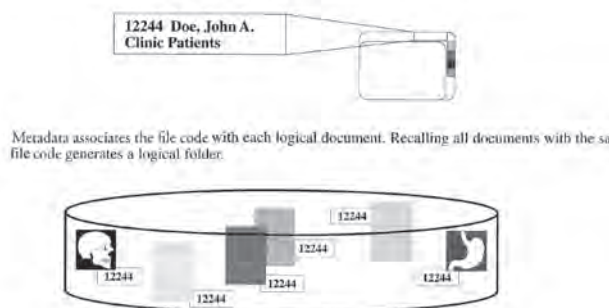
12244 Doe, John A.
Clinic Patients

Metadata associates the file code with each logical document. Recalling all documents with the sa file code generates a logical folder.

Illustration 4: Common File Code for Physical and Logical Documents and Folders

Subject File Codes

If file codes are assigned, each of the three fields should have a standard number of digits as shown in Illustration 5. This use of a standard number of characters within each field facilitates sorting and retrieval through a computer index. It is also compatible with the use of color code labels on file folders.

Do not attempt to assign file codes that will maintain a strict alphabetic order, which is not possible to do if the system grows very much. Blocking of numbers or groups of codes is not recommended. Invariably, one or more of the blocked groups will reach the maximum number of codes, upsetting the intended order. The file code should be used to identify physical location of a folder or its logical counterpart in electronic-based documents.

The file classification and cross-references should be used as finding tools. This combination of file codes and some type of cross-reference index encourages records users to learn to "browse the index" instead of the file cabinets or shelving. This shift of emphasis by looking up file codes prior to entering the file room results in increased productivity. Of course, to be effective and accepted by users, the subject file system must be accurate and easy to use.

Subject File System—Alphabetical Major Codes

ADV Advertising
-01 General
-02 Policy

FIN Finance
-01 Expenses
-01 Office
-02 Vehicle
-02 Taxes
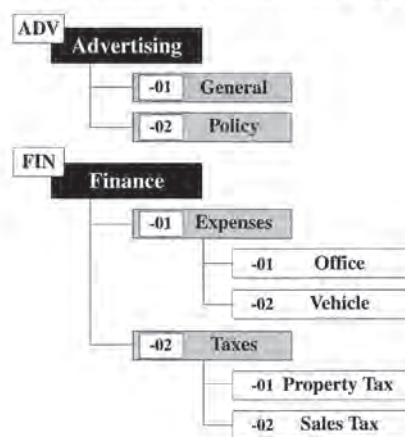-01 Property Tax
-02 Sales Tax

Illustration 5: Subject File Codes

For a small subject file system, you may want to use alphabetic codes associated with the words in the major or primary category as shown in Illustration 5. This close alphabetic association can be effective only within very limited systems because meaningful alphabetic codes will soon be exhausted.

Limited Alphabetic Codes

A more flexible alphabetic coding structure begins the major or primary code with the first letter of the first word in the major category, followed by a two-digit sequence. The next category that begins with the same alphabetic character is the second sequence. For example:

Unless you anticipate developing more than 99 major categories within each alphabetic character, this scheme provides sufficient flexibility and allows some alphabetic association between the file code and the initial word in the category. Note that the alphabetic characters are consistent with the first letter in the title but that no attempt is made to further alphabetize the title; it is simply assigned the next available sequential number.

Key Category Codes

Another coding format for keyword systems departs from traditional hierarchical rules. It provides a key or major category level, followed by file titles that are numbered as they are added. No further subsets below the second level (file titles) are allowed. Many natural order systems are effectively key category-level systems.

"Customer Files" (major category) is followed by customer name file titles. If you have both customer orders and customer compliant files that you want to file separately, use the key categories "Customer Complaints" and "Customer Orders," each followed by individual customer file titles.

Although this approach increases the number of key or major levels, it allows the use of more direct file titles

that generally mean more to the individual who creates, uses, or processes the information. The preferred term for the highest-level category in this type of subject system is "key category," implying grouping without being mutually exclusive of other categories.

This approach can be extremely flexible for both small and large organizations. Even in a very large company that has elected to develop a company-wide filing system, the key category approach accommodates users that need both broad and focused classification categories. For example, the key category "Personnel" could be used for employee-related documentation in all departments except the human resources department itself. This group would require more detailed breakdowns such as "Benefits," "Salary Administration," and "Employee Evaluations."

Accounting is another broad-based key category useful for most departments. Those groups that deal primarily with the accounting function, however, require more direct key categories such as "Accounts Receivable" and "Accounts Payable." Another approach to this difference in breadth of key category is to identify "Accounting-Local" (or "Departmental") as a key category for departmental accounting information and "Accounting-Company" for company-level generalized accounting file folders. The accounting business function would likely use the broader based "Accounting-Company" and the more detailed key categories of "Accounts Receivable" and "Accounts Payable." They might also select "Accounting-Local" for those accounting files directly related to their departmental operations.

This need for additional key categories does not apply to all departments whose names could be interpreted as subject headings. "Purchasing," a key category in one company's file index, was used for both the user departments and for the purchasing department. As shown in Illustration 6, the purchasing department has natural order files, such as "Purchase Orders-Blanket (or open),", Key Category Number P02, and "Purchasing Vendors," Key Category Number P04, that can each be identified with a single file title in the master system. The master index directs the user to the many individual blanket

Key Categories and File Titles with Alphanumeric Codes

Partial Index—Two-Level Subject File System	
P01	Purchasing
P01 0000	Purchasing—General
P01 0001	Purchasing—Policy & Procedures
P02	Purchase Orders—Blanket
P02 2255	Kramer, Inc.
P02 2256	Arnold & Baker Tools
P02 2257	Graham & Slate, Inc.
P03	Personnel
P03 0000	Personnel—General
P03 0001	Personnel—Policy & Procedures
P04	Purchasing Vendors

Illustration 6: Two-level Subject File System

purchase order folders that are maintained by the department. A few examples of blanket purchase orders are shown in the illustration, although they are maintained as a separate, stand-alone system. The main purchasing system provides the natural order for both stand-alone systems – blanket purchase order number and vendor number.

Keyword Access

Another option is to use computer technology to provide keyword access to all words associated with the file title. Keyword access can be applied to any file classification/taxonomy, regardless of the file coding structure. In a keyword system, each significant word or series of words is searchable either on a printed listing or on a computer system.

Physical keyword listings (reports) and older keyword search technologies have system-imposed limitations on the length of a line that can be sorted or alphabetically arranged. Physical limitations, on a printed listing or in the use of visual retrieval aids, such as special labels or color coding, support limiting the number of characters in the file title and file code. A subject file system should be word-based rather than code-based, which does not mean that file codes should not be assigned, but rather that the emphasis should be on the words in each file title.

Department Names and Major Categories

When determining appropriate names for major or key categories, do not use departmental names unless the name happens to be the same as the appropriate key retrieval term for that category. Common category names that are sometimes mistakenly interpreted by users as organizationally based include "Purchasing," "Personnel," and "Accounting." If you deliberately tie the major category to current organizational names, you will be changing your classification/taxonomy each time the department name changes.

The classification/taxonomy should be sustainable throughout reorganizations. If you concentrate on major category retrieval words, you will be able to keep major category changes to a minimum. For example, the names "Human Resources," "Personnel," and "Employee Relations" have probably all been assigned at some time to the department in your organization that handles employee applications, benefits, salary schedules, and other employee-related business. If you decide to call a major category "Personnel" that also happens to be the current departmental name, stress that it is a subject term and does not reflect the departmental name. This attention to detail may seem like a minor matter, but it is not. Your classification/taxonomy should be designed to outlast changes of departmental or organizational names.

File Codes Are Forever

Whatever file coding structure you develop should also outlive organizational and business functional changes. Once a file code (at any level) has been assigned and records have been filed using this code, the code should not be reused. If that business function is no longer viable and no records are being maintained under one or more key categories, retire that series of codes. Remember that you have inactive records either online or at an offsite records center that have been coded with the number. If you reuse this number for another category or file title, any search for records will result in both groups being recalled. Worse, the wrong records may be identified and, perhaps, destroyed before their retention has expired. **E**

About the Authors

Ann Bennick, Ed.D., CRM, who has more than 30 years of experience in developing and implementing systems, programs, and training in records/information management, operates a records/information consulting business. A Certified Records Manager, tenured business professor at a Texas community college, and frequent speaker and author, she received her doctorate in education and prior degrees from the University of Houston. Bennick can be contacted at *abennick@pineneedlelodge*.

Judy Vasek Sitton, CRM, is an information governance analyst for Kinder Morgan in Houston. In more than 30 years in information management, she has designed, implemented, and managed information across multiple industries, as an employee and as a consultant. A Certified Records Manager, she also has served on the Institute of Certified Records Manager's Board of Regents and as an advisory board member of the DeVry University Health Information Technology program. Sitton can be contacted at *Judy_Sitton@kindermorgan.com*.

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