The need and value of naming conventions?

No matter the value of a treasure, if it is buried and you can not find it, it is of no value at all. The same holds true for electronic files. Well organized computer files are more readily retrievable and are very valuable information assets but if the files are in disarray they can actually induce undue operational costs.

As time progresses everyone will have to increasingly manage more electronic documents, therefore increasing the likelihood of losing control, unless some basic organizational precautions are taken. The solution is quite simple! It is just matter of diligently naming files as per a well structured naming convention and storing them in pre-designated folders. The premise is that that if you name it properly and store it properly as per the accepted standard anyone will be able to find it and unlike buried treasures electronic files must be easily found by all interested authorized parties without needing a map.

Establishing Naming Conventions

Establishing a folder / file naming convention is simple but an awareness of the type files involved and an understanding of the business activity is essential. If multiple business activities are involved each should have its own naming convention. Any attempt to create a universal file naming policy for all processes or activities may prove to be unnecessarily burdensome. On the other hand, in a collaborative work environment it is important that the final structure proposed be universally and religiously adopted by all stakeholders and must be instituted as a policy by the person commanding the highest authority.

Deciding on naming structures may result in multiple conflicting opinions because file and folder naming can be a matter of personal preference which may unfortunately also vary from day to day. This is normal and in fact can be the root cause of file disorganization. Such conflicts should be viewed as positive reinforcement to justify the effort on hand.

For any structured naming convention there will be questions of how many elements, the type of elements, how to format them and how to delimit them within the structure. The following 10 basic rules can be used as a quick reference to help expedite the process:

1. Use short and simple folder names and folder structures and focus on using information-rich filenames.
    Yes: Z:\Prod\QA\AssL7_WO_Suzuki_L3688_20090725.xls **||** Z:\Pubs\ Article_eXadox_ File-Naming-Conventions_V03.doc
    No: Z:\Production \Quality Control\Assembly Line7\Work Orders\Clients\Suzuki Motors\ LOT3688_July-25-2009.xls   **||** Z:\Publications\Articles\eXadox\File-Naming-Conventions_V03.doc
    Because: Complex hierarchical folder structures require extra browsing at time of storage and at the time of file retrieval. By having all the essential information concisely in the file name itself, both the search and identification of the file is streamlined and more precise.

2. Put just the right amount of elements in the structure for easy retrieval and identification.
    Yes :   NOVALEC_37507_INVOICE_20090703.pdf **||** FUJITSU_S1500_SPEC_Scanner.pdf
    No: NOVALEC _INVOICE.pdf **||** FUJITSU_S1500_SPEC_Black _Desktop_Scanner_ ModelReplacesS510_.pdf
    Because: Precision targeted retrieval requires sufficient elements to avoid ambiguous search results but too much information adds undue effort at file naming time with little or no returns at retrieval time.

3. Use the underscore (_) as element delimiter. Do not use spaces or other characters such as: ! # $ % & ' @ ^ ` ~ + , . ; =) (
    Yes: SMITH-J_AXA_7654-6_POLICY_20120915.pdf **||** FUJITSU_S1500_SPEC_Scanner.pdf
    No: SMITH-J AXA 7654-6 POLICY 20120915.pdf **||** FUJITSU $S1500$ SPEC$Scanner.pdf
    Because: The underscore (_) is a quasi standard for field delimiting and is the most visually ergonomic character. Some search tools do not work with spaces and should be especially avoided for internet files. Other characters may be interesting but visually confusing and awkward.

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4. Use the hyphen (-) to delimit words within an element or capitalize the first letter of each word within an element.

Yes: Smith-John_AIG _7654-6_POLICY_2009-09-15.pdf || WhitePaper_ StructuredFileNamingStrategy.doc

No: Smith John AIG 7654 6 POLICY 2009 09 15.pdf || White Paper Structured file naming strategy.doc

Because: Spaces are poor visual delimiters and some search tools do not work with spaces. The hyphen (-) is a common word delimiter. Alternatively, capitalizing the words within an element is an efficient method of differentiating words but is harder to read .

5. Elements should be ordered from general to specific detail of importance as much as possible.

Yes : FY2009_Acme-Corp _Q3_TrialBal_20091015_V02.xls || Production_Paint-Shop_WorkOrder_775-2.xls

No: TrialBal _Q3_20091015_Acme-Corp_V02_FY2009.xls || Paint-Shop_775-2_WorkOrder_Production.xls

Because: In general the elements should be ordered logically, in the same sequence that you would normally search for a targeted file.

6. The order of importance rule holds true when elements include date and time stamps. Dates should be ordered: YEAR, MONTH, DAY. (e.g. YYYYMMDD, YYYYMMDD, YYYYMM). Time should be ordered: HOUR, MINUTES, SECONDS (HHMMSS).

Yes: RFQ375_Cables-Unlimited _BID_20091015-1655.pdf || 2009-11-20_AMATProj_Phase1_Report.doc

No: RFQ375_Cables-Unlimited _BID_10152009-1655.pdf || Nov-20-2009_AMATProj_Phase1_Report.doc

Because: To ensure that files are sorted in proper chronological order the most significant date and time components should appear first followed with the least significant components.

7. Personal names within an element should have family name first followed by first names or initials.

Yes: Tate-Peter_SunLife _1-7566-2_POLICY_10YrTerm.pdf || SmithJ_ ID3567_ADMIN_WageReview.xls

No: Peter-Tate_SunLife _1-7566-2_POLICY_10YearTerm.pdf || JSmith_ ID3567_ADMIN_WageReview.xls

Because: The family name is the standard reference for retrieving records. Having the family name first will ensure that files are sorted in proper alphabetical order.

8. Abbreviate the content of elements whenever possible.

Yes : RevQC _QST_2009-Q2.xls || MCIM_27643_POD.doc

No: Minister of Revenue Quebec _Quebec-Sales-Tax_2009-2ndQuarter.xls || MultiCIM-Technologies-Inc_27643_Proof-Of-Delivery.pdf

Because: Abbreviating helps create concise file names that are easier to read and recognize.

9. An element for version control should start with **V** followed by at least 2 digits and should be placed as the last most element. To distinguish between working drafts (i.e. minor revisions) use **Vx-01->Vx-99** range and for final draft (i.e. major version release) use **V1-00-> V9-xx**. (where **x =0-9**)

Yes : MCIM_Proposal_V09.doc || eXadox_UserManual_V1-02.doc

No: MCIM_Proposal_9.doc || eXadox_UserManual_V2FinalDraft.doc

Because: The "**V**" helps denote that the element pertains to a version number. A minimum of 2 digits with a leading zero is required to ensure that search results are properly sorted. The intent is to avoid the situation where for example, a filename with a "**V1-13**" will wrongly appear before an identical filename with a "**V1-2**" version number when sorted in ascending alphabetical/numerical order. To distinguish between working, review and final draft a single digit prefix followed by hyphen "**-**" is preferred to facilitate proper sorting; using words in the file name such **Final**, **Draft** or **Review** in the filename affect the order and should be avoided.

10. Prefix the names of the pertinent sub-folders to the file name of files that are being shared via email or portable storage devices.

Yes : Prod_PS_AssL7_WO_Suzuki_J3688-20090725.xls || FY2009_Acme-Corp _Q3_TrialBal_20091015_V02.xls

No: WO_Suzuki_J3688-20090725.xls || Q3_TrialBal_20091015_V02.xls

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Because: Attached files and files shared through portable devices include only the file name and can be totally devoid of the context that is generally provided by the folder structure of origin. To compensate and avoid confusion it is sometimes essential to prefix the name of the subfolder(s) to such file names.

Putting Naming Convention into Effect

For the project to succeed, all the participants must first realize the following:

- Electronic files are <u>information assets</u> that are the property of the organization.
- Electronic files are <u>shareable resources</u> although sometimes for restricted users only.
- Electronic files are <u>critical components</u> to operations that affect productivity and profitability.

Therefore everyone should do their utmost to diligently apply the naming policies and be aware that deviating or compromising in naming policy adherence could have negative consequences to everyone. Policy adherence should be monitored because people are human and can be prone to error. A solution to this problem is to use semi-automated structured file naming and storage software that helps manage naming policy adherence and also help with the monitoring process. For details visit www.exadox.com or refer to *eXadox White Paper: Semi-Automated Structured File Naming and Storage*.

About the author: Vincent Santaguida is the founder and president of MultiCIM Technologies Inc., a company that specializes in software development and business process automation. In addition to executive responsibilities, he is involved with the conceptual design and development of eXadox, an electronic file organizer and retrieval software that semi-automates structured file naming and storage.