Process and maintain workplace information

Section 1

Collecting workplace information

Each workplace relies on the exchange of information to carry out its daily business. Information is passed from employee to employee, customer to employee, supervisor to team member, supplier to customer, and so on. Dealing effectively with information and records is necessary and important for all organisations.

The quantity and variety of information kept by an organisation can be huge. Information needs to be sorted into related groups so that it can be stored easily and found when needed. An organisation's success depends largely on how well it manages its information.

You need to be familiar with the type of information used in your job and the way records are organised so you can collect, file, store and find information quickly and easily. Finding and using information is a large part of many jobs, so knowing how to deal with it is an important workplace skill. Being confident and efficient in this skill helps you and your organisation succeed.

In this Section you will learn about:

- Collecting information that meets the organisation's needs
- Using equipment and technology to obtain information
- Maintaining security and confidentiality when handling information

Collecting Information that meets the organisation's needs

Information is constantly received, used, stored, prepared and distributed in the workplace. Everyone is involved - it doesn't matter if you manage stock, prepare meeting agendas or collect forensic specimens.

Every workplace is different and requires different types of information to keep it running smoothly, efficiently and profitably. Different businesses collect and use different types of information. For example:

- a medical practice has records on patients, accounts and medical supplies
- a manufacturing company has customer databases, invoices and sales records
- a school or training centre has records relating to students, employees, equipment and training materials.

If you work in a sport and recreation facility, you might use:

- customer records
- supplier records
- equipment maintenance records
- booking records
- staff rosters
- occupational health and safety records
- financial records, including daily takings, banking, invoices, accounts and petty cash records
- staff records.

Every business must keep specific records for taxation purposes. This is the law. Many also keep information such as books, journals, magazines, reports and photographs.

Where you find the information varies according to what you are looking for and the business tasks involved. For example, a small business may have one central paper filing system, while a large organisation may have archived paper and electronic files stored away from the office.

Regardless of your job role, you need to be familiar with the type of information you will be using in the workplace.

Types of information

The types of records held by an organisation vary depending on the business. Music stores have a large amount of information on products, such as CDs and DVDs, and prices. Local government bodies responsible for public facilities, such as parks and public toilets, keep records of money spent on public works, contractors and financial transactions.

Common types of workplace information include:

- messages such as telephone and email
- correspondence such as letters, memos, faxes and email
- computer files such as reports and research
- sales records such as monthly forecasts, targets achieved and sales reports
- product information such as price lists, catalogues and brochures
forms such as claim forms, membership forms, order forms and leave forms
• electronic databases such as customer records, financial records and library catalogues
• accounts records such as invoices, credit notes and statements (from suppliers and to customers)
• personnel records such as employee details, salary rates and annual leave
• minutes of meetings
• cash handling such as petty cash receipts, cash takings and register readings.

Other information might include:
• a library collection which could include books, magazines and reports
• a video/aural collection which could include film stock, video, DVD, CD, jpeg, mp3 and mpeg
• promotional material such as catalogues, order forms, brochures and posters
• other printed products such as manuals, labels and signs.

While you should be familiar with the range of information that is kept in your workplace, it is unlikely you will have to know about everything. For example, some records, such as personnel files, have restricted access, which means they are only available to authorised staff.

You might only handle information such as:
• messages
• correspondence
• promotional material for products and services
• minutes of meetings
• orders
• sales records.

Most organisations store their records electronically (on a computer) and in paper form (hard copy). Some also keep image-based records. Image-based records can be stored on:
• a computer
• a CD or DVD (computer records transferred to a disk)
• microfilm or microfiche, where copies of records are transferred to a plastic film that can be accessed via a special viewer.

Ways of dealing with information
There are different ways to deal with information. Each business will have a system that suits its needs. For instance, a large company might have a centralised, electronic system that allows its workers to access information from any location throughout the world. A small company may have a specialised system that integrates different types of information into the way staff work (for example, paper-based filing systems and databases). Every organisation is different. The most important thing is to know how your workplace operates.

The following are the most common ways of dealing with information.

Paper-based records
Examples of paper-based records include:
• reports
• magazines, journals and newspapers
• project files
• contracts
• minutes of meetings
• business letters
• email messages and memos
• faxes
• forms
• diaries and other note-taking methods

Many paper-based records are also stored in electronic form. Different staff members will have their own preferences about what is kept in paper form and what is kept electronically. For legal reasons, some information, such as contracts with signatures, must be stored in its original paper form.

However, most businesses tend to collect information using a mix of paper and electronic systems, as in the next example.

Example
Rosanna runs her own small business. As she is the only employee, she is responsible for all the paperwork required to keep the business operating. Once a month she pays her electricity and phone bills at the post office. The post office stamps the bills 'paid' and gives her a receipt. She files the original copies in her filing
cabinet so she can refer to them later for bookkeeping and tax purposes.

When Rosanna sends completed work to her customers with a courier, the courier signs Rosanna’s register for each parcel they collect. If there are problems with missing parcels then Rosanna has a record.

Rosanna stores all the correspondence she receives. She even prints out some emails she wants to read later. There is a software database that she uses to record all of her customer information, as well as recording all the correspondence, emails and faxes sent to them.

At the end of each month, Rosanna completes an activity statement form for the government detailing the GST (Goods and Services Tax) that she has collected. This form must be sent to the tax office and a copy stored in her files. To complete the GST form, she refers back to the information in her records. These are all kept in the computer database, with a hard copy kept in the filing cabinet in case of computer problems.

Electronic records
Many organisations store records and information electronically. Storing information electronically can save space and paper. Examples of electronic records include:

- computer databases such as library catalogues, customer records, sales records and financial records
- electronic correspondence such as email and faxes
- computer files of letters, memos and other documents.

Information can be easier to access if it is stored electronically. You can search through records and copy information easily into other documents or files. The information in electronic records can also be updated, deleted or changed more easily than hard copy records.

The next example shows how one organisation uses electronic records.

### Example

Marius is responsible for processing telephone orders and adding new customers to his organisation’s customer database. When a customer calls him to order a product, he quickly searches his database to find the customer’s record. He checks that the customer still has the same delivery address then takes the order.

When the organisation has a special offer for customers, Marius uses the customer database to compile a list of names and addresses. He copies the information into a document that he can use to create and print out mailing labels for a ‘special offer mail-out’.

Image-based records
Image-based records (for example, on CD, DVD, microfiche or microfilm) allow large amounts of information to be stored in a small space. Image-based records are easy to access, but they may need to be read with specialised equipment.

Examples of image-based records include:

- records of bank account transactions
- indexes such as a list of journals held by a library
- old records electronically reduced for efficient storage or to protect fragile or valuable documents.

Archived records
The amount of information that must be kept by a business can be immense, particularly if gathering information is one of its main activities. For example, the public records office in each state and territory collects and stores millions of records annually. They have huge warehouses (archives) to store all their records and sophisticated systems to keep track of them. Every business and organisation must archive records when:

- they run out of space in the day-to-day storage areas
- the records are not used due to their age, but must be kept for legislative or organisational reasons.

When a record is archived, it is important to know how to retrieve it. Some businesses simply write the reference names and/or numbers on the box that contains the records. This allows anyone looking for a particular record to find it easily, as long as the information is stored in the right box and boxes are stored in a particular order such as chronologically, alphabetically or geographically. Other organisations use this system to keep track of their records but also record the archived information in their index or database to show people the exact location of the information. Information stored electronically also requires archiving. Hard drives in computers eventually fill up with records, documents and other information. Often, much of this is not needed for daily activities.

In order to free up space and keep only current information, electronic records are also archived. This usually involves using a program designed to ‘compress’ the information so it can be stored on removable media such as:

- magnetic tape such as tape drives
- magnetic or optical disks such as floppy disks, zip disks, CDs or DVDs.

Sometimes other storage methods are used, such as online storage services that act as electronic warehouses for
information, or dedicated hard drives that are used to store data.

**Information sources**

Information comes from many different sources. If it is your job to collect workplace information, you need to know where to find it so that you can collect it and pass it on promptly to the relevant people.

Information sources vary from workplace to workplace. Every organisation does things differently. Part of finding your way around any new workplace is learning where to find the various types of information you need. The more familiar you are with your organisation, the more efficient you will become.

Information sources include:
- colleagues such as team members or other staff
- individual computers
- computer networks or intranet (a private computer network inside a company or organisation)
- electronic archives
- disks, tapes and other electronic storage
- paper filing systems in drawers, filing cabinets, cupboards and rolling storage shelves
- answering machines and services
- newspapers, magazines and journals, in a library, in a newsagency or delivered
- mail and courier deliveries
- noticeboards.

**Files, folders and records**

It is sometimes confusing when people talk about files. Most people mean a single document when they say a computer file. In contrast, a paper-based file generally refers to a collection of documents. Individual paper documents are not generally referred to as files.

To store a group of electronic documents or computer files together, you can put them in an electronic folder. Similarly, documents in a paper-based file are often held together in a folder such as a manila folder.

Sometimes information can be stored electronically in the form of a record. This is common in a customer-based organisation such as a bank, insurance company or medical practice. A database record is set up for each customer, with spaces to fill in names, addresses, telephone numbers and any other information required by the organisation. To recall a particular customer's record, the database is opened and the record found for that customer.

**Storing information**

There are many ways of storing information. Again this varies from business to business. For instance, records can be centralised or decentralised. They can also be filed in different ways and stored in different types of equipment.

**Centralised or decentralised records**

Some organisations store all their information together in one large filing system. This is known as a centralised filing system. For example, centralised paper records may be held in rolling storage shelves, while centralised electronic records are held on one specific computer server. A decentralised filing system is when each department or section of the organisation stores its own records. Decentralised paper records may be stored in filing cabinets in each department, office or drawer, while decentralised electronic files are stored in individual computers.

A centralised filing system has the following characteristics:
- The main records are stored in one location.
- There are specific staff to look after the records. In a small organisation, this might be one person. In a large organisation, there might be a whole department with a records manager and staff.
- Records staff create new files, keep track of file movements and transfer or destroy old files. They follow the organisation's standard procedures for maintaining files.
- A centralised records system is often used in large organisations such as the Australian Taxation Office or other government departments where large numbers of records are held. However, many small organisations also store their records centrally. For example, a doctor's surgery generally keeps all patient records close to the reception area.

A decentralised filing system has the following characteristics:
- Each area of the organisation is responsible for its own records.
- The people who use the records have to keep the records in order.
- Record management procedures can vary from department to department.
The classification system (for example, alphabetical, numerical or chronological) can vary from department to department.

**Filing systems**

Organisations generally set up a filing system that best suits the type of work they do. Some organisations have filing systems that combine centralised and decentralised systems. Records that are relevant to the whole organisation are centrally controlled, while records that are only relevant to one or two departments are held in those departments so they are easy to access.

There may be an index to the decentralised filing system in the central filing area, so that a file from either system can be located by anyone who needs it.

The records manager for the centralised records may set up standardised procedures for the decentralised records as well. This means that filing procedures are the same throughout the organisation.

Some workplaces provide an explanation of the filing system in a policies and procedures manual, or there may be a separate user manual for different filing systems. Other staff can also provide assistance.

Depending on the type of business, some organisations may have a central library where reference material is stored. The library may have a paper-based catalogue as well as an electronic one for easy reference. In some organisations, each department may have its own bookcase for storing the books, reports, journals, etc. that they regularly use. Many people have their own mini-library. Not all of this information is catalogued.

**Storage equipment**

There are many different types of storage equipment. When deciding how to store records, an organisation must think about:

- how much space is needed
- how often the files are used
- how much security is required
- the cost of the storage equipment
- how to protect the files from the effects of dust, heat, light and humidity.

A small sports store may keep information about products and prices on a computer database, where it can easily be accessed each time a customer has a question. An insurance company may keep processed insurance claim forms in a locked filing cabinet.

Storage can be fixed or portable. For instance, filing cabinets usually stay in one place. Likewise, a set of rolling storage shelves (a compactus) is generally built into the office and not moved. On the other hand, CDs, DVDs and other electronic data storage, such as portable hard drives and devices that plug into various types of computer ports, are often stored in a box that can be carried around easily.

The following are some common types of storage equipment. It is your responsibility to learn about how and where different types of records and information are stored.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Electronic data is often stored:</th>
<th>Paper-based information is often stored in:</th>
<th>Images are stored in:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>on a computer database</td>
<td>filing cabinets</td>
<td>filing cabinets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in computer files</td>
<td>flat storage (for maps, drawings, photographs)</td>
<td>shelves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on magnetic storage media such as tapes, portable hard drives, Zip and Jazz devices</td>
<td>lever-arch files</td>
<td>rolling shelves;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on optical storage media such as CD-ROMs, DVDs, magneto-optical drives</td>
<td>suspension folders (for large drawings, computer printouts)</td>
<td>rotary storage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on solid state storage media such as Flashcards, Smartcards and USB devices.</td>
<td>shelves</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rolling shelves</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rotary shelves.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**How information is organised**

Records must be organised in a logical way. Filing a document or file involves classifying it, sorting it and storing it in the system. If you know how information is organised, you will be able to find it easily.
Classification systems

Each organisation classifies its information in a different way. What is appropriate for one organisation may not work for another. Records can be arranged or classified according to:

- alphabetical order; for example, customer records filed under customer names
- numerical order; for example, in banks where every person has an account number
- keyword (usually a subject heading); for example, in large organisations where records are filed under particular subjects
- geographical location or region; for example, sorting property files by suburb in a real estate agency
- chronological or sequential order; for example, where email messages, meeting minutes or customer correspondence are filed according to when they are created or received - with the most recent document on top
- subject.

In most organisations, a combination of these methods is used, as in the following example.

Example

An organisation sent a letter to one of its customers. A hard copy of the letter was filed under the subject 'Customers' in the paper-based filing system. Within the 'Customers' section, it was filed alphabetically. As it was the most recent item of correspondence, the letter was filed chronologically (that is, according to the date it was created) in front of the other records in that particular customer's file. The person who created the document also kept a copy of the letter on the organisation's electronic network.

Electronic directories

An electronic directory of computer files and folders generally includes information listed alphabetically, according to the way they have been arranged on the computer. Folders are used to hold the files, which are the documents that contain the information being stored. The display is often in a tree formation. This means that inside each folder there may be more folders, files and documents. The information can also be viewed in a series of windows that you can open one after the other to see what each one contains.

The following is an example of an electronic file tree showing a folder named 'Customers' in the 'D drive' of the computer. In this folder are a number of other folders with customer names, including one called 'Kate Sinclair'. This folder contains three more folders called 'Attachments', 'Emails' and 'Taxes'. In each of these folders the correspondence with Kate Sinclair is stored. You need to click on each of these folders to open them and see the electronic files within them. Clicking on 'Another Customer' would open another section of the tree to look at Each branch of the tree leads to information about that particular customer.

Notice that the folders in the example are arranged alphabetically. By using the functions of the browser (for example, Windows Explorer) it is also possible to display the folders and the files in the folders in date order, by file type or by
file size. It is also possible to search for folders and files using the browser.

Documents in electronic files are often also kept in paper-based form in filing systems. This may include copies of electronic files and information that is only in paper-based form such as letters from customers. In the previous example, the paper-based file would probably include documents received as well as created by the organisation; for example, all the letters to and from Kate Sinclair. The electronic filing system may include scans of hard-copy documents sent to the organisation from outside; for example, letters that Kate Sinclair had written to the organisation. It may also include electronic correspondence from the customer such as email messages and attachments and faxes.

**Types of indexes**

There are also several different types of index that can be found within an organisation.

- A paper index lists the files alphabetically or uses keywords that the files fall under. It is usually located near the storage area.
- An electronic index (or a database) enables staff to scroll through or search for files. It lists the files alphabetically or uses keywords that the files fall under. The advantage of this type of index is that it can be immediately updated when a file is created or deleted. Indexing systems are discussed further in later Sections

**Collecting information**

You may be asked to collect specific information on a regular basis such as:
- gathering orders from the fax machine and distributing them to relevant people
- collecting and storing forms, applications and other documents sent to the organisation.

At other times, you may be asked to obtain a particular piece of information for a colleague’s project. These responsibilities will differ according to your job role and the type of organisation you work for.

The most important thing about collecting information is making sure the material you collect is what people need. Is it the right information? Is it relevant?

You also need to collect information efficiently. People usually require information within a certain time frame. This means you must locate it and forward it to the appropriate person promptly. Always check that you know:
- what information you are collecting
- who the information is for
- when the information is needed.

How easily and efficiently you locate information will depend on your knowledge of your organisation's information systems and the policies and procedures you have to follow.

**Policies and procedures for collecting information**

There are many things you need to know before collecting information. For example, every organisation has policies and procedures related to collecting information. Make sure you familiarise yourself with these before you begin. Remember to ask your supervisor or a colleague for help if you are unsure.

As a quick reference guide, you should note important aspects related to collecting information including:
- the organisation's policies and procedures on collecting information
- where information is located
- the people you need to deal with to obtain certain information
- any other information vital to your work.

Take your notes with you wherever you go at work and use them as a constant reminder. Record everything you think might be useful in your notes. You will be surprised how often you will refer to them and how much they will help you to remember important facts.

Information-handling policies and procedures should include guidelines about:
- what information should be kept and what should be discarded
- when and how specific types of information are collected
- restricted access to some records
- the library check-out system
- who to circulate specific types of information to
- legal requirements such as privacy, occupational health and safety and anti-discrimination legislation
- ethical principles
- codes of practice
- records maintenance.
The Australian Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) safeguards people's privacy by restricting access to personal information. Individual states and territories have regulations in regard to information and privacy. While you don't need to know the regulations in full, it is crucial that you understand how these laws affect the way you collect and process information.

Another law you should be familiar with is copyright. This restricts the way information can be copied or used. Your employer should understand how the laws apply to your particular workplace. If you are not sure how this affects your work, ask your supervisor or manager to explain any restrictions you need to be aware of. They will advise you about the access, disclosure and storage of personal and other information.

Requests for information
You might be asked to retrieve paper-based or electronic information by a range of different people. They may include:

- your supervisor
- co-workers in your area or department
- co-workers outside your direct area but within your organisation
- someone outside of the organisation.

You might also need to locate a file for your own use; for example, to make copies of documents to include in a report. Some people want the information as soon as possible. Others may need the information within a few hours for a meeting, by the end of the day, by the following day or in a month's time.

The information you need might be located in a number of different places; for example, in the organisation's central filing system, the library, a database or a staff member's filing system. You need to think about:

- how urgent the request is
- what level of security the information comes under (for example, confidential, high security or general access)
- what information is required
- where the information is located
- the best way to deliver the information.

Recording requests
It is useful to keep a record of any requests that have been made, in case you need to retrace your actions. There may be a specific procedure to follow for recording requests and actions. You may need to write down what someone asked you to do and when it was done.

If there is no common procedure, you should write the details in your notes or daily work plan. This way you will know when you were asked for the file, who asked you, when they wanted it and what you did.

Try to record:

- the file/record/information requested
- who requested the information
- the date and time of the request
- the date and time you delivered the information
- any problems you encountered.

Filing request forms
Some organisations use a formal system for information handling, especially for centralised, paper-based records. There may be a form to fill out when you need to obtain a file or other type of information. This might be:

- a paper form to be filled out and kept as a record
- an online form for external web-based access
- an intranet form for internal web-based access
- a CD-ROM or DVD form to be printed and faxed or handed to the designated person.

### Example

This is an example of a paper-based form for the records department.

| SMV Enterprises Ltd  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Records department</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>File name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>File number (if known):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requested by:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processed by:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Here are some typical examples of requests for information.

- Every day you have to record and deliver the out-of-hours telephone messages your organisation receives to relevant staff members.
- Your manager urgently requires a copy of a confidential letter.
- Your supervisor asks you to collect the latest sales records so they can be presented at the next staff meeting.
- A colleague asks you to download a membership application form from a website.
- Your manager asks you to find information about a new customer on the database.
- A customer asks for a price list of your organisation's products.

When you are asked to collect material, make sure you know exactly what has been requested. Use your communication skills and repeat the request back to the person. Then, both of you will be clear about what it is you are collecting. Always ask for clarification if you are unsure. For example, if your supervisor asks you to get 'the Anderson file', you need to clarify which Anderson they are talking about, as there may be more than one Anderson in your files. Write brief notes if necessary, so you can refer to them while you are searching for the information.

If you have any difficulties finding the information, let someone know immediately. Don't waste time trying to handle the problem yourself. Don't wait until the last minute to ask for help — it may be too late. You should become familiar with all aspects of your organisation's filing system, as well as other areas where information is stored such as a manager's office or the stock room. Knowing exactly where to find the information ensures that it can be delivered on time to the person who needs it.

### Obtaining relevant information

You need to ensure you collect up-to-date and relevant information. There may be multiple versions of a document or file. Clarify which version is needed when you initially receive the request. Check dates and find out where the most current versions of information are kept.

Ask for feedback from the person who requested the information. Is the information what they asked for? Does it help them find out what they need to know? Is there any other information you might be able to provide to help them? Feedback helps you to improve your information-gathering techniques. It may also show you how to improve.

When you are gathering information, if there is no single specific source for what is requested, you will need to think carefully about where you can find the particular information you need. You may be able to obtain some of what you need from sources within your organisation. Or, you may need to find the information outside your organisation. This may involve speaking to people on the telephone, accessing archives or other information storage facilities or using search engines on the Internet.

### Using search engines

A great deal of information is now available in digital form on the Internet. Internet sources need to be used with care because the information available is not controlled or regulated. The information may or may not be accurate or trustworthy. For instance, if you obtain a birth certificate from a government office or customer records from your organisation's files, you can be reasonably certain the information is accurate because you can trust the source. If, however, you obtain figures from an unknown website, there is no way of knowing whether the information is accurate. You need to understand the concept of credible or authentic sources of information.

Using the Internet to collect information can be time-consuming. You should record website addresses and the dates when you obtained the information. Having a date for any information taken from the Internet is essential. Information can go out of date quickly. Information may be updated on websites, so that something you find one day may be altered or even gone the next. This is why it is important to record the Internet address and the date you accessed it for future reference. Sometimes you may need to go back to a site to find the latest information available.

Search engines are programs that search for web pages and other data using keywords or phrases you type into them. Search engines use different techniques to find information and may give different results. Search engines can search the entire World Wide Web, selected parts of the web or only particular websites or databases.

The search engine you use will depend on your personal preference. If you are not sure which one to use, start by using some that others recommend to you. Your supervisor or the IT person in your organisation may have some advice on which engine to use and how to get the most from it.
Be careful about wasting too much time using search engines. It is very easy to become sidetracked by following link after link to areas that are not relevant to your search. Using the Internet effectively requires discipline and skill. Think about exactly what you want to find and try to use appropriate search words. Remember that the more specific you are when entering your search terms, the more relevant the results will be.

For example, instead of typing 'caterer' into the search engine to find a caterer for a seminar, try typing 'caterer' and the suburb or area where you require the service. This will limit the number of responses or 'hits' that you get and will narrow your search to caterers in that area. Sometimes a search will reveal no information about the topic you searched for. In this case, think about other ways of describing the information. If a search for 'caterers in Brighton' is unsuccessful, think about nearby areas to include or change the search term to 'catering' or 'event management'. Using the Internet carefully helps you locate the precise information you need.

Obtaining information efficiently

Obtaining information efficiently means:

- knowing where to find correct, up-to-date information
- collecting it according to the organisation's policies and procedures
- forwarding it to the correct people
- responding within a given time line, which is sometimes specified or you may already know what it is.

If you don't know how to do some of these things, you can waste a lot of time. You may look in the wrong places, find unnecessary information, operate equipment incorrectly and deliver the information too late.

Each time you are about to start collecting information, you should think about how you could complete the task in the most efficient way.

If you have trouble finding the requested information or if you are asked to work on something else, you must remember to keep the person who requested the information informed. They are relying on you and need to know if you cannot meet their expected time line and deliver the material as requested.

Prioritising requests

When collecting information for others, you may have to prioritise the requests you receive. Prioritising requests involves deciding in what order you should carry them out. Always process the most urgent requests first and try not to keep people waiting unnecessarily. Planning your activities and using your time efficiently are important skills in any job. Be prepared to think through what you need to do, plan each activity and organise your time so that you are efficient.

Monitoring your progress

To be efficient you need to know how to monitor your progress. This means identifying:

- how much of each task you have achieved
- what you need to do to finish the task
- how long it will take you to do this
- how you handle urgent tasks.

In a busy work environment, things may happen to alter your planned work schedule. For instance, people may decide they need information sooner than they thought or will ask for urgent information unexpectedly. Sometimes, you will have to wait for information from somebody else. Or a task may take a little longer than you expected.

When lots of things are happening, you need to monitor your progress and keep track of your tasks. The easiest way to do this is to have a work plan. Your work plan should list all your activities and tasks and record:

- who asked you for information
- what they asked you for
- what you have to do to obtain the information
- what you have to do with the information
- the agreed time line for the task.

You need to update your work plan regularly for it to be effective; for example, at the beginning of each week. Think carefully about everything you need to do and list it on your plan. Use your computer to prepare your plan so you can easily make changes when necessary.

If you are not certain about what is expected, the work plan can also help. If you are unsure about anything, check
with your manager, supervisor or the person asking for the information. They will confirm their requirements.

**Prioritising your work**

If the plan needs to be changed, write down the new information as soon as you get it. You can then see how this affects the overall plan. You may need to prioritise your work. This means working out which tasks are the most important and doing them first.

You will need to show your supervisor or manager your work plan and ask them to help you set priorities and deal with any tasks that conflict with your time lines. Time lines often have to be changed. However, it is essential that you talk to the people who are involved first. Your supervisor or manager may help you with this.

By managing your work in this way, you will always know:

- what you need to do
- when it is expected
- who is still waiting for information
- which task is the most important.

It becomes much easier to interact with your colleagues and answer their questions when you know exactly what you are doing for each of them.

A work plan helps you work more efficiently. Monitoring your progress is an important aspect when obtaining information.

**Keeping track of information**

Storing information in a centralised area allows everyone to access information easily, whether it is paper-based or in electronic form. However, systems must be in place to control the movement of information so everyone knows where a file is at any moment.

Most organisations have specific procedures to keep track of their paper-based files. Some organisations have a policy about how long files can be held out of the filing system. You need to find out the procedures followed in your organisation. They may include using:

- out cards (or file markers), which are inserted in place of the file you have removed and record details such as date removed, file name, borrower and date to be returned
- passing slips, which are filled out and given to the records supervisor if a borrowed file is passed directly onto another person without going back to the filing system
- a file register book to record the details of a removed file such as date removed, file name, borrower and date returned
- an electronic system, such as barcodes or other coding systems, to identify items taken for use and who is using them - a database stores information about what has been borrowed.

Electronic files on an organisation's computer network could be accessed by everyone. Files could be opened at any terminal and the information printed out or electronically copied. However, confidential files generally have specific passwords so it is easy to keep track of who is using the files.

**Using equipment and technology to obtain information**

Information can be collected in a variety of ways. For example, you may receive a report by email, post, printer, fax, or through the internal mail. You may have to collect information from the Internet, libraries, newspapers and television. In order to do all these things, you need to be familiar with a range of business equipment and technology. You need to know what is used so you can process information quickly and efficiently.

**Using equipment and technology to collect information**

To find and collect particular information and complete your tasks efficiently, you may need to use a wide range of business equipment and technology. You must also know how to operate equipment safely and effectively.

**Computers**

You may use your computer for a number of tasks such as:

- searching the library catalogue
- using a customer database
- accessing the Internet
- sending and receiving email.

Be sure you know how information is stored on the computer network so you can use the file paths to locate information.
Email is a quick and effective way of asking for and receiving information. Make sure you let the person you contact know the type of system you are using, so they can send you material in an appropriate form. Imagine you are working to a tight deadline and the information sent to you can't be downloaded because your system cannot read it. You might also have restrictions placed on your email system regarding the size of documents you can receive. If someone tries to send you a large document you may not be able to receive it. If you need to receive large amounts of information, ask the sender to compress it using an application such as WinZip.

Printers
A printer takes electronic information and turns it into paper-based information. There are several reasons you might need to do this. One is to create a hard-copy backup of the electronic information you have received. Another is to make reading a large file more manageable. It is often difficult to read files with lots of information on a computer screen.

Printers vary in type and usage. Some can print on many types of paper or other media such as transparencies or card. They can print in colour or black and white. Some can print large posters, maps and engineering or construction drawings referred to as blueprints. Learn the various functions of your printer so you can reproduce the information you have collected in an appropriate format.

Filing systems
Paper-based and electronic filing systems have been discussed earlier in this Section and include registers, out cards, databases and passing slips. Be familiar with the way the systems are set up and how to access and retrieve information. It is important to follow the correct procedures.

Telephones
The telephone is a useful tool for receiving and sending information quickly, and for leaving messages. Telephones allow people to be contacted in and out of the office, at any time of the working day. Replies can be immediate, which is essential if you have a tight deadline.

Answering machines, answering services and message banks
Answering machines are useful if the person you want to speak to is unavailable or if you are busy when someone calls you. An answering service takes messages on behalf of the person you are trying to contact and passes your message on to them. A message bank is a type of answering machine. Make sure you record times when you have tried to contact someone and left a message for them. You will need to follow it up if they don't return your message.

Fax machines
A fax machine converts paper-based information into electronic information for transmission. It is useful for transmitting and receiving information that requires people to check data, read a report or confirm information. Staff are usually shown how to use the fax machine during their induction session, as different organisations have different sorts of machines. Asking people to send information by fax rather than by post can save valuable time.

Photocopiers
You may need to copy the material you have found so you can distribute it to a number of people. Perhaps you only need a portion of the information you have collected. Or you may be in a situation where you cannot take the whole document with you, such as in a library; so you need to copy the portion you want. Photocopiers copy documents quickly and efficiently. Machines vary so you need to learn how to use the one in your organisation. Functions include double-sided printing, colour copying, collating and copying onto card. Remember that copying is restricted by copyright law. For instance, it is illegal to copy this book unless the publisher's permission is obtained. It is wise to check with your supervisor or manager if you are unsure.

Scanners
A scanner is a machine that converts printed material into images. Scanning is very useful for converting paper-based information into electronic information, so that pictures from a book; for example, can be converted to an electronic file for your computer and then added to other documents. Some scanning programs also convert the text in a scanned document to text that can be word processed. Ask for help if you are having trouble using a scanner, as models vary.

Using equipment effectively helps you complete your tasks efficiently and promptly. Always ask for help if you are having trouble. Perhaps the type of answering machine you have to use is different from the one you are used to or the email software you used previously has different functions to the one in your new workplace. Always find out the correct way to do things so you can collect information efficiently.
Maintaining security and confidentiality when handling information

It is extremely important that you understand and follow your organisation's requirements when handling confidential information. You need to be familiar with your workplace's policies and procedures on:

- maintaining data security
- sending confidential information
- collecting, capturing and updating confidential information
- filing secure information.

As discussed earlier in this Section, the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) protects people's privacy by placing access restrictions on personal information. Your workplace's policies and procedures will reflect the relevant Commonwealth and state or territory legislation in place.

Other significant legislation with regard to information handling is the Occupational Health and Safety Act 1991 (Cth). This act is important because the requirements of privacy and information protection laws must be considered against your employer's responsibility to protect the health, safety and welfare of all employees and those visiting the workplace.

It is crucial that you are guided by your workplace policies and procedures and understand how these laws affect the way you work. Remember, if you are unsure, ask your supervisor or manager.

Keeping information secure

Most organisations have at least some files that are not appropriate for general circulation. These may include personnel files, performance appraisal documents and sensitive material such as the business's strategic plans. For example, files containing personal information about employees should not be available to everyone. The only people who need to view these files are managers, human resources staff and the employee the file is kept for.

All files, confidential or not, are the property of the organisation. Employees must be careful not to release information to the public, competitors or anyone else outside the workplace.

In some organisations, file security is extremely important. These include:

- organisations that keep sensitive information about their customers such as insurance companies, legal firms and government departments
- organisations developing new products where information revealed to competitors may disadvantage the organisation
- organisations that do politically sensitive work.

Files that are confidential, or have restricted access, are generally kept separate from the main filing system. Sometimes they are tagged to indicate their security rating (for example, general, personal, restricted, confidential, secret and top secret).

Electronic files are more difficult to store separately, especially with a networked computer system, so other measures are used such as password protection.

Methods used to keep confidential or restricted files secure include:

- keeping hard-copy files locked
- requiring signed authorisation from a manager for access to files
- using passwords to access restricted computer files
- storing confidential computer files on a CD or other storage device rather than on the hard drive (the CD can then be stored in a locked cupboard)
- using encryption, a method in which the computer file is coded and requires a decoding key to open and translate the file.

If you require access to confidential or restricted files, you will need help to make sure you completely understand the policies and procedures for accessing such files. It is particularly important that the movement of these files is accurately recorded to ensure they are not accidentally released into the wrong hands or lost.

It is equally important to look after the organisation's files while you are using them. When files are out of the filing system, they should be kept in a safe place and treated with care. Don't leave documents lying unprotected on your desk, especially overnight. Place them in a folder, a desk drawer or a file. Be careful not to damage or remove material from a file. If something must be removed from a file temporarily (for example, to photocopy it) it should be recorded by using a marker, such as an out card, and returned to exactly the same place in the file. Security issues are discussed further in Section 2.

Discussion topics

Learners in a classroom can form a discussion group or have a debate. Those in the workplace might like to brainstorm these ideas with their colleagues. If you are learning independently, you might like to set up a chat room.
with other learners or ask a friend for their opinion.

How important is technology when gathering information in the workplace? What are its benefits?

'All information at work should be kept confidential.' Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

Every day I get requests to find information for colleagues. On top of that I have my normal tasks to complete. I have to provide sales data to my manager; catalogue, incoming journals and file them in the library; distribute the mail and send out brochures to clients.' What advice would you give this person to help them manage their workload?

Write down and discuss any other issues that are relevant to you and your team.

Section summary

- Workplaces rely on the exchange of information to carry out their daily business. Dealing effectively with information and records is a necessary and important task for all employees.
- Common types of workplace information include messages, correspondence, computer files, sales records, product information, forms, computer databases, accounts records, personnel records, minutes of meetings, library collections, promotional material and printed products.
- Information sources may include colleagues, computer networks, individual computers, electronic archives, electronic storage, paper filing systems, newspapers, magazines and journals.
- You need to know where information is stored and how it is organised so you can collect and pass it on promptly to the relevant people.
- When collecting information, you need to understand what you have to collect, who the information is for and when the information is needed. The information must be relevant, current and appropriate.
- Understand and follow relevant legislation and your organisation's policies and procedures for collecting information. For example, be familiar with the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth). This act safeguards people's privacy by restricting access to personal information.
- You will be more efficient in the way you handle information if you plan how to meet your deadlines, record and prioritise your tasks, keep track of information and monitor your progress.
- It is crucial to maintain security and confidentiality at all times when dealing with information.
- To process information quickly and efficiently, you need to know how to use the business equipment and technology in your workplace.

Section 2

Processing workplace information

Once you have collected your information, you may need to process it before it can be used, passed on or stored for future use. An important part of joining any organisation as a new employee (or moving to a new department or area) is to learn how you are expected to process information.

Sometimes information processing is simple; for example, collecting faxes from the fax machine, sorting the pages and handing them to the appropriate person. Other information may require more processing; for example, copying information from one document to another, reformatting the document, then printing, copying, binding and distributing it to customers.

In this Section you will learn about:

- Using business equipment and technology to process information
- Processing information according to time lines and guidelines
- Updating, modifying and filing information
- Collating and dispatching information

Using business equipment and technology to process information

In order to process the information you have collected you need to know who needs it and in what format it is required. For example, a colleague may be satisfied with a photocopy of the information, while your supervisor may want the information to be word processed, printed, photocopied and organised into a bound report with multiple copies. You need to clarify the requirements and then work out how you will process the information.

Knowing how each item of equipment and technology is used will help you process information efficiently. You also need to be familiar with the policies and procedures you have to follow. Always ask for help if you have trouble using any equipment or if you don't understand what you have to do. For example, you might know where to collect incoming faxes but are unsure of how to forward them to interstate branches.

You should use the most appropriate form of technology to process the information you have collected. This will depend on:

- the type and amount of information you have to collect
- the person who has asked for it
- how soon it needs to get to the person.
For example, it might be quicker to send an email than to use the post. Or, it might be more appropriate to telephone somebody than to send an email, particularly if it is only a small amount of information and they want a quick reply. If you have a large amount of information, it might be more appropriate to present it in a formal report.

**Processing information**
You need to be familiar with the different types of equipment and technology you can use to process information.

**Using your computer**
A lot of the information you receive may have to be word processed or reformatted. Find out the kind of format that is required. For example, you may have to:
- prepare a cover page and attach it to the information
- word process the information and format it into a report
- put figures into a table or present them in a report with graphs and results
- send a memo outlining the information you have found.

In all these situations, you need to know the guidelines you should be following. Does the report need the organisation's logo on the cover page? Should you write a formal or informal memo? What sort of graphs should you use? How you process the information depends on what the person who has requested it wants and your organisation's policies and procedures. Always confirm what is required.

You may need to use your computer to process invoices, record incoming journals on a library database, word process meeting minutes for distribution, update customer records, process order forms, record sales data or prepare correspondence.

**Dealing with email**
If you collect email messages you should already know how to use your email software. To process email messages, you need to find out how the organisation expects you to sort, forward and file emails. For example, you may need to know if you need to:
- forward all messages from customers to a supervisor
- print out some messages and not others
- file messages relating to a particular project in a separate place
- seek permission to delete a message.

Make sure you understand the procedures you have to follow.

If you need to keep a copy of information collected via email, you may need to print it or file it in an electronic form. Otherwise you can simply email it to the person who asked for it. Remember to print on both sides of the paper if your computer has this function.

**Using the telephone**
If you need to pass on information immediately the telephone is often the quickest way. This method is appropriate if the information does not need to be processed in any way. You may need to follow up a telephone conversation with a photocopied or printed version of what you have relayed. Remember that using a telephone is only appropriate if the person you are calling is willing and able to answer it. Try not to ring people you know are very busy; often they appreciate an email that they can follow up in their own time.

**Photocopying information**
If you are asked to distribute information to a number of people, copying the information will save you time. This may also be an appropriate method if you need to send information to someone who does not have access to your organisation's computer network.

**Using a fax machine**
Faxing information to people is a quick and easy way to send information that cannot be emailed; for example, invoices or material you have photocopied. Many offices now use machines that have combined printing, faxing and scanning capabilities. If you are unsure about how to operate the equipment, always ask for instruction.

**Using a scanner**
Scanners are useful for inserting graphics or photographs into a document. If you need to have an electronic copy of paper-based information, scanning is quick and easy.

**Binding the material**
If you need to present the information you have obtained in a neat, manageable format you can use a binding machine. Binding is often used for reports or presentations. Bound documents usually contain a lot of information on a particular topic. In your workplace, you may use a heat binder or comb-binding equipment. Both are quick and easy to
use. Ask someone to show you how to use this equipment if you are unfamiliar with it.

Using office equipment safely
You must always use equipment safely and follow all occupational health and safety procedures. Safety is paramount in any workplace and the correct and safe use of equipment within occupational health and safety guidelines helps avoid dangerous situations.

Being environmentally aware
Similarly, how an organisation disposes of unnecessary information, such as waste paper, and the by-products of processing information, such as printer cartridges, is determined by procedures that reflect the environmental policies of the organisation. Make sure you are aware of any requirements regarding paper usage, equipment cleaning, replacing consumable items, such as cartridges, and any other environmental procedures. For example, you may need to double-side your printing whenever possible, and place used paper in recycling bins.

Processing information according to time lines and guidelines
Often information needs to be processed within a particular time frame, so you need to collect and process the information efficiently. Make sure you understand:
• how you need to format the information
• how to prepare information according to your organisation's policies and procedures
• how to choose the most appropriate equipment and technology.
When processing information, use your planning skills and follow the relevant guidelines and procedures. You may be involved in collecting and processing different types of information simultaneously. Your work plan must take this into account. A well thought out plan helps you to deal with different tasks and to keep track of your activities and time frames.

Meeting deadlines
To plan your tasks effectively, you must know when the information is needed. It may be needed immediately and you will have to adjust your work schedule to fit in this priority. It may be part of your everyday work tasks to process information, such as recording messages from the answering machine or processing invoices.
You need to judge the amount of time and work involved in processing the information. This involves selecting the most appropriate equipment and technology to use.

You must record any workplace time lines in your work plan. For example, you may need to:
• prepare meeting minutes within two days of a meeting
• send information to clients within 24 hours of their request
• send invoices within seven days
• catalogue and distribute journals to staff as soon as you receive them.

Managing your time is very important because other people will be relying on you for information. In many instances, people will not be able to complete their work until you provide the information they have requested.

Before you process any information, you should consider your options and work out the best way to get the job done on time. If you have a lot of tasks, you must determine the priority of each task.

Updating, modifying and filing information
Information used by organisations needs to be regularly monitored to ensure it is current, still necessary and can be easily accessed. It may be your responsibility to do this, so make sure you are familiar with your organisation's procedures for updating and modifying information.

Updating information
Updating means making sure the information is the latest, most current version. Updating may include:
✓ placing the latest issue of a newsletter on the top of the newsletter file
✓ adding the name of a new staff member to a staff list
✓ changing the answering machine message to include new opening hours
✓ adding the latest specials to the price list and order form
✓ adding the latest sales figures to the sales target chart.

There may be serious consequences if the information an organisation uses is not current. For example, a new customer may be annoyed if they are not sent a catalogue and newsletter because their name has not been added to the customer database. Or, the sales team may be working towards an incorrect target if updated sales figures are not regularly forwarded to them.
If you receive more current information after you have already sent information to someone, make sure you also send the current information as soon as possible. For example, you may have found information on the Internet and sent it to your supervisor for a report they were preparing for management and, in the meantime, you were given more up-to-date information from a colleague.

Your colleagues will expect the latest version of journals and other documents to be available, so make sure these are regularly filed in the library or filing system. Remember to include these regular tasks on your work plan, otherwise it is easy to forget them or leave them to the last moment.

Modifying information
Modifying means changing or altering information. It may involve reformatting, changing the content, adding information, deleting or moving information. You may need to modify information when existing information is no longer useful or needs to be used for a new purpose. Modifying may include:

- using an existing flyer as a template, and changing the text to advertise a new product
- adding headings, page breaks and pictures to a draft report
- removing all of last year's meeting minutes from the meeting minutes file
- changing a customer's address in the customer database.

Filing and storing information
When you process information, you may be required to catalogue items in the filing system after you have collected, updated or modified them. You'll need to know:

- what information to keep
- the legal requirements of keeping the information
- your organisation's filing procedures
- the security issues surrounding the information.

Deciding what information to keep
Filing and storing information is an important task and needs to be done in an organised, systematic way. Before you file anything, you must know what material, documents or files should be stored and what should be removed or deleted. Some information collected needs to be filed and some information can be discarded after serving its initial purpose. You won't need to file everything that comes into the office (think about all the junk mail — both paper and electronic — that organisations receive). You also need to consider if information should be filed electronically, in a paper-based system or both. Your supervisor will inform you about what is important to file. If you are unsure, remember to ask.

Filing and storing information is a daily task in most organisations. Items that are regularly filed and stored include:

- correspondence
- financial records
- minutes of meetings
- administration records
- customer details
- sales information
- magazines, books, videos, CDs and DVDs
- reports
- promotional material.

Other information to be filed and stored may relate to specific projects, job applications, special promotions and customer complaints.

After you have been in your job for a while, you will become familiar with what must be kept and what can be discarded. For example, you might be able to dispose of your research notes once you have processed the information into a report and sent it to the appropriate people. Alternatively, you might need to keep these notes in case someone wants further information.

If an organisation kept all the information it receives or collects, it would soon run out of storage space. Most organisations have procedures relating to archiving and removing information. This is referred to in more detail in Section 3.

Complying with legal requirements
Often the reason for keeping information is determined by requirements outside of the organisation; for example, legal requirements. Make sure you are familiar with the type of information you are required to keep by law. Some information must be kept for a number of years. It includes information relating to tax and other financial data that may need to be referred to in the future. Most organisations also keep records of industrial accidents, occupational health
and safety incidents, personnel disputes and environmental issues. These may need to be referred to in court cases or investigations some time after an incident has occurred.

**Policies and procedures**

Policies and procedures for dealing with workplace information may differ from workplace to workplace. For example, legal offices regularly receive updated legislative information that has to be filed with appropriate records as soon as it is received. A busy wholesale company needs to deal with large volumes of order forms, invoices and receipts on a daily basis.

Other workplaces rely on the filing system to work efficiently as part of their daily activities. For example, medical facilities need to be able to find patient records, update them quickly and file them immediately so the record is always readily accessible. Similarly, a library needs to update its records quickly to keep track of items that are borrowed, late, lost, on hold, on order, damaged and so on. This means that the filing systems in all these organisations need to be extremely well-organised and well-maintained.

You should refer to the organisation's workplace policies and procedures or workplace user manual to explain the specific procedures for filing and storing information. If you are not certain of your organisation's filing procedures, make sure you ask your supervisor or manager to show you clearly. Remember to take notes as you go to refer to later.

The next example describes one worker's information responsibilities.

**Example**

Jeddah has just started work as an administrative assistant. She needs to know her responsibilities regarding information management. She talks to her supervisor, who gives her the following guidelines.

- After trade magazines and journals have been circulated to staff and returned to a central box, catalogue them and place them in the library.
- Destroy or recycle all junk mail.
- Store information about current seminars and conferences in a folder in the lunch room.
- Print out email messages relating to current projects and file in the central paper filing system.
- Forward CVs from job applicants to the Human Resources Department to be filed.
- Forward invoices for goods purchased to the Accounts Department where they are filed according to the date they are due to be paid.
- File correspondence in the centralised paper filing system according to its subject or project.

**Before filing paper information**

You may have collected a number of different pieces of information that all need to be filed or stored. For example, you may have collected data that includes a report on new markets, information from prospective customers, brochures, DVDs, information on competitors and their products and survey forms completed by customers. Make sure you know how and where they are to be appropriately stored or filed.

For example:

- Do they need labels?
- Do you need to make a backup copy to be stored off-site?
- Does an electronic file need to be copied and placed in the paper-based filing system?
- Does material such as DVDs have its own storage system?

When a document is ready for filing, the staff member responsible may let you know that it can be filed by marking it with a release indication. The release may be a stamp, a tick, or someone's initials. Make sure you are familiar with the system used by your organisation and the procedures for creating, updating and modifying the information in files. Some organisations have a file register, where a listing of all files and their whereabouts is kept. Similarly, a listing of the contents of each file is sometimes kept with the file or in the register.

Before filing paper information you should check that:

- documents are not damaged
- documents to be filed together are clipped or stapled together, as necessary
- any relevant notes or instructions attached to the documents are secure, or are written on the documents; for example, a list of people to whom the document was circulated or the version number and date
- documents are filed in their original condition (in case copies of the documents need to be made later).

**Before filing electronic information**

Information received electronically, such as letters, reports, emails, meeting minutes and information from the Internet, can be saved directly to the computer. Make sure you know which electronic file the information is to be saved in. The system is then backed up at regular intervals, to safeguard the information contained in the files against viruses and
Be sure you thoroughly understand the procedure in your organisation before you make any changes to the files or create new files. Although many organisational information systems are now electronic, many workplaces still keep a paper copy of some information as a backup. This ensures that if the information becomes corrupted in the electronic system and is difficult to retrieve from the electronic backup, then the business is still able to function using paper files.

Electronic files, just like paper-based files, may be listed in a register. This is often electronic itself, such as a database, or can be a paper-based listing of all the files and their contents. A paper-based register is often used in situations where the files are closed or archived. A closed file means that information cannot be removed or added to the file, so a paper listing can be made of all the contents. This can make it easier to search through large amounts of information.

Before filing a paper copy of electronic information, you should check that:
- information to be filed together is collected in a folder
- any relevant notes or instructions are attached to the items, written on the documents or included in the folder; for example, a list of authors who created the document or the version number and date
- the correct versions of the documents go into the filing system (there may be many versions or drafts on the computer network)
- a reference to the location of the electronic file is included, such as a code number or folder name is usually used to identify the source of the file.

**Use your common sense**

When you are filing you may find:
- documents that you can’t identify or classify
- documents that don’t seem to have any classification in the current filing system
- documents and objects that do not fit physically into the system - too large or heavy
- files missing from the filing system.

Use your common sense to work out the best way to deal with these situations. For example, if an item is filed in the wrong place (misfiled), search the surrounding area and check files with similar names, codes or numbers. Your workplace user manual or guidelines may give you some clues. If you are unsure where to file an item, check with your supervisor rather than risk filing something in the wrong place.

**Understanding security issues**

Follow your organisation’s procedures for filing confidential information. For example, you may need to place it in a manila folder and give it to your supervisor to file. You may need to return the document to a library. Some organisations have a security policy for handling files. This may mean that files must be handled in a special way to make certain the information is not lost or available for people outside the organisation to see. The range of security measures used by an organisation varies according to need. Security measures may mean that:
- files should not be taken from the premises
- files may only be viewed in a special ‘Viewing room’
- files must not be copied
- a password is needed to access certain files
- access to files may be restricted by law, such as some government records
- handling procedures must be followed for certain files, such as customer records must not be made public.

The contents of some files may be hazardous if they include objects, samples and so on. For example, the files of a mining corporation may include samples of hazardous materials. OHS procedures must always be followed for this reason.

**Collating and dispatching information**

After you have collected and processed the information required for the task, you need to format it appropriately and deliver it to the person who needs it. The way you do this depends on:
- the type of information
- who it is for
- when the information is needed.

Organisations generally have policies and procedures for collating and distributing information, so make sure you know what is required. For example, does the information prepared need to be bound as a formal report? Can the information be emailed or telephoned to the person? Does the information need to be sent urgently?

**Collating information**

Collating information means to arrange the contents in an appropriate order. You may have multiple pages that need to be sorted and stapled or placed in a folder. You may have a number of documents that have to be bound together
using a binding machine.

Before you collate information, you need to ensure that it is presented in an appropriate way, according to requirements. For example:
- What order do the documents go in?
- How many copies are needed?
- Do you need a cover page?
- Should coloured paper be used?
- Should the material be placed in a manila folder?
- Does the document need to be stamped ‘confidential’ on the cover?

Find out these details when you first receive the request for information. Ask questions and observe the people you work with to find out what standards are expected in your workplace.

**Dispatching information**

Dispatching information means sending or delivering it. Much of the information you gather will be used inside the workplace and delivered to various departments, areas or people. However, you could also be asked to collect and process information to deliver to people outside your organisation. Methods of delivery include:
- internal mail
- placing a document in a person’s in-tray
- hand-delivery
- postal service
- fax transmission
- telephone
- courier service
- email.

Make sure you are clear about the method of delivery required when the information is requested. For example, if the information is confidential you may need to send it by registered mail. If it is urgent, you may need to use a courier service.

Perhaps the most important aspect of distribution is the time line. When is the information needed? You should have identified this when you were given the task and entered the time in your work plan. Information needed by a certain date may be worthless if it is delivered late. For example, papers to be sent to committee members prior to a meeting must be sent well in advance to give members time to read them. Similarly, a meeting agenda must be sent some time ahead of the meeting. Using a telephone or email will guarantee information is delivered on time, but in many instances the information is too large, complicated or needs to be presented more formally. Delivering the information by hand ensures that it is received. This delivery method is often used for important legal documents that require a high level of security.

In the following example the time line was crucial.

### Example

Karl is an administrative assistant for a building contractor. An inner-city client urgently needs a copy of their contract. The company’s legal officers have just finalised it, so Karl’s supervisor asks him to make a copy, label it and file it in the appropriate folder. Then he needs to organise a courier to deliver it to the client. Karl knows there were different levels of courier service, so he asks for the Urgent Service, which guarantees delivery in the central business district within 20 minutes.

**Following requirements**

You should keep notes on the procedures for handling different types of information in your workplace. Keep the notes together in a place that you can easily refer to when you need to remind yourself about particular requirements. Become familiar with how to handle each type of information, how to file it, who to advise and where to record it. Be aware of any security procedures, such as keeping files locked away or otherwise restricting access to information. Remember, if there are any legal requirements for the handling of information, such as in a government department or legal organisation, you should make certain that you know what is expected and how to process such information.

**Discussion topics**

Learners in a classroom can form a discussion group or have a debate. Those in the workplace might like to brainstorm these ideas with their colleagues. If you are learning independently, you might like to set up a chat room with other learners or ask a friend for their opinion.

I. ‘All information needs to be processed quickly or within an exact time frame?’ Do you agree with this
statement? Why or why not? Give an example.

II. Think of a situation where the updating, modifying and dispatching of information could go wrong. Describe the consequences.

III. You have an urgent piece of information to deliver. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a range of delivery options.

IV. Write down and discuss any other issues that are relevant to you and your team.

Section summary

- Business equipment and technology can be used to process information efficiently and appropriately. You must try to select the most appropriate equipment for the task.
- Be aware of and follow your organisation's policies and procedures relating to processing information.
- Confidential information must be handled according to organisational guidelines. This might mean that files should not be taken out of the office, must not be copied, must not be made public or that a special password is required for access.
- Keeping to time lines is crucial. Use planning tools to organise your workload and keep on track.
- Make sure the information you receive and deliver is the latest, most current version.
- You may need to modify information on a regular basis to ensure it is accurate. This may involve reformatting, changing the content, adding information, deleting or moving information.
- You need to know the legal requirements for retaining certain information.
- Information must be filed according to organisational requirements. This means using the organisation's electronic or paper-based filing systems correctly.
- Information may need to be prepared before distribution. This might mean collating and binding a document.
- Dispatch information according to requirements. You might use mail, telephone, email, hand-delivery, fax or a courier.
- Keep notes on the procedures for handling different types of information in your workplace. You need to know how to handle each type of information, how to file it, who to advise and where to record it.

Section 3

Maintaining information systems

For a business to function smoothly, it must maintain and keep its records and other information up to date. Any information that is collected and processed within an organisation must be accessible when it is required. This makes it easier for the organisation to make decisions, and ensures it is projecting a professional image. Customers will be confident that the organisation carries out its activities with confidence and efficiency.

A poorly managed information-handling system hinders an organisation. It leads to inefficiency, mistakes and poor quality work, and can mean loss of business. For example:

- an out-of-date address list means that customers may not be contactable, and the organisation may lose business and waste money sending material to wrong addresses
- a disorganised filing system means time is wasted looking for information that should be easy to find
- a disorganised filing system in which essential information is lost could have disastrous consequences for an organisation.

In this Section you will learn about:

- Maintaining information and filing systems
- Identifying, removing or relocating inactive or dead files
- Establishing and assembling new files
- Updating reference and index systems

Maintaining information and filing systems

Maintaining an information system means keeping records up to date. All information within the system should be current and easy to access. Updating records is a day-to-day task for any organisation. The specific procedures for doing this may vary from place to place.

Keeping records up to date might include modifying particular records by changing information or adding information to them. For example, updating:

- stock records to make sure they match the actual number of stock items
- sales records to make sure they match the number of sales made
- customer and supplier details to make sure the details are correct
- account details to make sure the amounts owed by customers, and to suppliers, are correct
- technical information to ensure it is current
- daily, weekly or monthly sales targets, to reflect current goals
- regular specials lists or offers.

Some records need to be updated when policies, procedures, legislation or regulations are changed. Part of your job may be to
replace old information in the organisation's files with updated information. You need to do this correctly, so your organisation can easily access up-to-date information and carry out procedures in a lawful way.

Inaccurate records can be worse than having no records at all. Imagine what would happen if:
- a customer's address or telephone number was recorded incorrectly on the database
- a wrong 'received' date was stamped on an invoice sent to your organization
- an invoice sent to one of your customers was recorded differently in the company records from the amount appearing on the invoice
- a file number was recorded incorrectly on the file index.

Inaccurate records cause problems and confusion. If somebody looks at a record and the information is inaccurate or missing, at best they may need to spend time sorting out what the correct information is. At worst, it may affect the organisation's reputation; for example, customers may be upset or accounts may not be paid on time.

When updating a file, always double check:
- file codes
- the index to the filing system
- dates
- cash amounts and figures
- names, titles and addresses
- telephone, fax, mobile phone and pager numbers
- email and website addresses.

Identifying, removing or relocating inactive or dead files

In a functioning business, filing systems never stay the same. New files are created for new customers, projects or activities; old files are removed when they are no longer needed and other files have information added or removed from them as required. If information storage systems are to be useful, they must be carefully maintained so everyone can find the information they need, when they need it.

Removing or relocating files

If an organisation kept every file it created, its records management system would soon be overflowing. More and more space would be needed to store the files, and filing and retrieving records would be a serious and time-consuming job.

To keep the system efficient and to ensure there is enough storage space in the filing system, records and other documents that are no longer needed must be removed periodically. Some records can be deleted or destroyed completely. Others must be kept for a certain period.

It is important to keep enough room in an electronic filing system, in the same way it is important for paper-based files. This is because the computer hard drives used to store information become full, just as filing cabinets, shelves, libraries, etc. used to store paper-based information become full. Electronic files can be compressed into a much smaller physical space than paper files; for example, on a computer hard drive, zip disk, tape, CD, DVD or memory stick.

All information systems should be regularly cleaned out to make sure they are efficient.

Inactive files

Inactive files contain information that is no longer used but cannot be completely removed because it may be needed in the future. Files such as these are stored in a secondary or separate storage system. For example, the file of a customer who has not been in contact with the organisation for some time would be an inactive file. However, the customer may contact you in the future so you shouldn't throw the file away. Using secondary or separate storage to archive inactive files ensures that information is available if needed but the files are not occupying valuable space in the system used to store active or regularly accessed information. Archived records are discussed in more detail in Section 1.

Dead files

Dead files are closed files where all the business contained in the file is finished. However, these files must be kept for a specific period. It is a legal requirement for organisations to keep some information; for example, taxation documents and business documents are kept for a defined period — generally seven years. Some documents may be kept in the archives of the organisation for research or historical reasons.

Transferring files to secondary storage

Individual organisations have their own procedures for systematically removing old records. One example of record removal is the continuous transferring of records from the active filing system to secondary storage as a file is closed. These might be files that exist for a particular case or project, such as a legal case, a student record or a construction project. After the legal case is over, the student has graduated or the construction project is complete and the file is no longer active, it can be transferred into secondary storage.
Files may also be transferred periodically; for example, annually. This method is useful for records with fixed time periods such as end of financial year records. Records are transferred to secondary storage at the end of the period and new files are set up for the current period.

This method may also include a process in which the filing system is periodically inspected for inactive files. Inspecting the entire filing system may take some time and labour.

Computer records that have not been accessed for a given period of time, such as three years, may be deleted or archived. The personnel records of an employee who has left the organisation may be deleted or destroyed after the period they are legally required to be kept has elapsed.

You should never remove records from the filing system unless directed to do so. When removing records, you must follow your workplace procedures. If you are not sure how to proceed, check with your supervisor or manager. Your workplace procedures may include keeping a register of files removed or destroyed or obtaining written permission to remove or destroy information. Sometimes this involves contacting the people whose records are held by your organisation and either sending the information to them or obtaining permission to destroy it.

**Dealing with electronic records**

You must make sure that inactive records are regularly removed from the active electronic filing system. As more and more records are stored on a network, the amount of space left for storage decreases and it may become harder to find the information you need. Removing or archiving inactive records frees up space for more current information.

Computer-based records can be removed from the filing system using similar systems and procedures as for paper-based information. This means that removing inactive files is a regular, scheduled cleaning activity of the organisation or it can be done as required.

Alternatively, the computer can be programmed to periodically archive or delete files that:
- have not been accessed for a given period of time
- are older than a specified date or time
- relate to specific subjects, organisations or individuals.

Computer files can be made smaller or compressed using compression software. This means the files are reduced in size and occupy less space in the archive. The other reason compression software is used for electronic files is when files are made available for download over the Internet.

**Storing inactive and dead files**

Inactive and dead files are generally moved to another storage location after removal from the main filing system. This means they can be stored in a compact form and are generally not as easy to access. By archiving inactive or dead files, the active information becomes more accessible. The archived information must be well-organised so that files can be found easily and retrieved as required. Some archives, such as in large government organisations, are huge and require storage in specially constructed and maintained warehouses. Most archives are smaller and more manageable and are designed to suit the organisation's requirements.

Your organisation may store inactive and dead files in different ways. These include:
- Archive boxes
- Separate filing cabinets
- Computer-based records
- Electronic storage devices
- Online access
- Email archives
- Film, sound tapes and similar storage media
- Microfiche and microfilm.

1. **Archive boxes**

   Archive boxes can be cardboard, wood or steel containers, sometimes specifically designed to store all types of paper-based information, files and documents. The boxes should be labelled to identify the contents. Labelling could be as simple as: `Customer Records July 2007 to June 2008` or it may list every document and file in the box. This list may also require a reference number that identifies the box and how to find it.

2. **Separate filing cabinets**

   Separate filing cabinets may be kept in the centralised filing area or in another location, even off-site. Files stored here are stamped or marked to indicate they are inactive. The central index or system for recording the location of all files is usually changed to indicate the inactive status of the information and, if required, the information can be retrieved from the inactive or archived filing cabinets.

3. **Computer-based records**

   Computer-based records are the most popular method for storing inactive information as more and more information is in
electronic form and electronic storage takes up a lot less physical space. Documents not created on a computer and, therefore, not already in digital format can be scanned into a computer. The main problem with storing digital information is that the format for storage may become obsolete. For example, any information stored on old 3/2 inch floppy disks or the even older 5%-inch version, is very difficult to retrieve. Computer manufacturers and programmers no longer support these formats. For this reason, the contents of digital archives may need to be re-archived in a newer format to avoid losing historical information.

4. Electronic storage devices

Electronic storage devices, such as DVDs, CDs, tapes and other electronic devices, can store information in the same way as paper-based systems. It is important that the information contained on electronic storage devices is accurately indexed. Indexing describes or identifies the contents of a record or document and ensures easy access to the information.

The same concerns regarding information retrieval that were described in the previous section on storing computer-based records also apply here.

5. Online access

Some records or files are electronically stored and can be viewed externally via the Internet. Sometimes this information is password protected to ensure only authorised people have access to it. Other information is publicly available via the Internet such as old war service records, which can be viewed in digital form from the National Archives of Australia.

Accessibility issues must be considered when storing and making information available via the Internet. For example, files should be compressed to ensure they can be easily downloaded.

6. Email archives

To archive inactive or dead email information, you can save the emails to a computer-based or electronic storage device by moving them from your general inbox to the archive area of your mail program. Then save the information to a data file that you have created on your server or on the electronic storage device.

When you move emails from your inbox in this way, your email program may automatically mark them as deleted.

7. Film, sound tapes and similar storage media

Film, video, photographs and audio recordings may need to be stored as inactive files once a project has been completed. Archiving this information may require special skills, although many organisations store photos or film in the same archives as other information. There are often very particular procedures and methods used to both catalogue and preserve these objects. Some organisations specialise in storing this type of media. Make sure you understand any special procedures you have to follow.

8. Microfiche and microfilm

Microfiche and microfilm are systems for archiving inactive material, but with the advent of new technological options they are not used as often now. Photographs of documents were taken and the images stored on a roll of film (microfilm) or sheets of plastic (microfiche). The images are viewable using special machines. Each roll of film and sheet of plastic can record a great deal of information, which can be stored in a relatively small format. Microfilm is still used to archive newspapers but microfiche is rarely used any longer.

Monitoring inactive and dead files

Monitoring inactive and dead files means keeping track of where the files go when you move them. When you remove records from the filing system, you need to update the file index to show the new location of the file.

An up-to-date file index helps people access the inactive or dead files in their new location. To facilitate easy access to archived information and files, it is extremely important to catalogue and index them in the same way as the active files and information.

Your organisation should have procedures for indexing archives. You must follow these procedures whenever working with archived material. Don't forget the organisation is keeping the records for a reason. Don't ignore procedures because you think the records will never be used again. This could create big problems for the organisation in the future.

Establishing and assembling new files

New files are created when records or documents do not fit logically into *e *tsting filing system or when a new type of recorded information needs to be stored. If it £*your job to establish a new file, always follow your organisations Policies and procedures. If there are no guidelines, ask your superior or manager for advice. Workplace procedures should cover:

- how to create the file
- the coding or other identifying system used
- the method for keeping the information together (for example, a manila folder, an electronic folder)
- the system used to catalogue and index the files
- the system for accessing, releasing and returning files to their place.
Reasons for creating a new file
There are many reasons for creating a new file. You may need to create a new file because you are:

- setting up a file for a new customer
- setting up files at the start of a new project
- setting up files at the beginning of a new period (for example, the new financial year)
- re-organising material in an existing filing system
- responding to a request from somebody in your workplace
- responding to a demand (for example, when the organisation has gathered a certain number of documents relating to the same matter, such as subject, customer, project).

Procedures for creating a new file
When creating new files, you need to make sure the system remains logical and easy to use. You also need to make sure all the appropriate information is collected in the new file.

Procedures for creating a new file may include:

- creating or assigning a name or number to the file
- creating an index card for the new file
- documenting the new file in a file register or database.

Naming a new file

When you create a new file, you need to decide on the most useful way of referring to (or classifying) the contents of the file.

Think about how you would refer to the file if you were looking for the documents. How you name the new file depends on:

- the classification system adopted by your organisation
- organisational procedures for naming new files
- what is easiest for the people using the filing system.

Many organisations have standardised procedures for naming new files. This means there are particular steps to follow whenever you are creating or naming new paper-based or electronic files. Standardised procedures are particularly important in a decentralised records system. Such procedures ensure that the system remains logical and consistent. A records management department with a centralised filing system also uses set procedures.

There may be a limited number of people authorised to assign file names in your organisation, or there may be instructions that clearly set out the procedure for naming files.

For filing systems arranged numerically, new files may simply be allocated consecutive numbers. This means that each time a new file is added to the filing system, it is given the next available number.

Sometimes a system that includes a date is used. This can be useful for organisations where the date is important to the information, such as records of births, deaths and marriages. There are many variations of systems that are designed to meet the particular needs of different organisations.

All files, whether paper-based or electronic, need to be incorporated into the filing system in a logical way. Does the new file fit into a category that already exists in the filing system? Is the place you have chosen for the new file easy for others to locate?

When you incorporate a new file into the filing system, it is always a good idea to check with someone who regularly uses that section of the filing system. They can let you know whether or not you have chosen a logical place for the new file.

Updating reference and index systems
If you create a new file, you may need to classify or index it. An index is a method of classifying and recording the type of information that is in each file, document or archive. This can include the file name, the names of people in the files, dates, subject (such as inactive customers), and any other information you think is required. Always keep in mind the requirements of your organisation.

A file index can be as simple or as complex as you like. It might be left with the file and a paper-based copy placed in a central index or register. The information in the index is often in alphabetical order to make it easier to search. Electronic systems also have indexes.

Each document must be filed logically so it can be quickly and easily accessed. For example, if you were classifying or indexing a recipe for chocolate cake it might appear:

- under the heading: Recipes
- then within: Recipes, under the sub-heading: Cakes
- under: Cakes, it could appear in alphabetical order after: Carrot cake but before: Date loaf.

In this example, there are two levels of indexing: by subject and by alphabetical order.

Indexing by subject
Generally, when you are indexing a document, the first step is to determine its subject area. This will direct you to the most appropriate area of the filing system. Then you need to further categorise the document; for example, by putting it into...
When you are indexing a document, try to work out the most logical place for it. Think of where you would look for the file if you were trying to retrieve it from the filing system.

Organisations usually have policies and procedures for creating files. For example, managers may have to authorise the creation of a new file. Familiarise yourself with your departmental or organisational filing system so you can move between files quickly and easily. As you become familiar with the system in your organisation, it will become easier to index, file and locate documents.

The following diagram is a portion of a sales department's electronic filing system. It shows three different levels of indexing. In this example, the various departments and sections of the organisation have their own filing system. Each of these is broken down into classifications, which are then broken down into further classifications.

Classifying and indexing files is all about making logical decisions.

The indexing unit

The information used for indexing (that is, the company name or the subject) is sometimes called the indexing unit or the indexing caption. Information in the indexing unit may include:

- keywords (for example, names, subjects, geographic locations)
- numbers (for example, dates, customer numbers, file numbers)
- the information used to put documents in alphabetical order.

Indexing by alphabetical order

Sometimes files are indexed in alphabetical order. For example, if you were indexing chocolate cake in the recipe index, the first indexing unit is the subject: Cake; the second indexing unit is: £ C for chocolate and the third indexing unit is: the ‘H’ in chocolate. The ‘H’ tells you that chocolate cake goes after carrot cake since ‘H’ comes after ‘A’ in the alphabet.

When using alphabetical indexing the following rules should be observed:

- Names are indexed by the person's surname, first given name and second given name (for example, Giovanni Mario Domani would be indexed as Domani, Giovanni Mario).
- An initial comes before a first name and a first name comes before a full name (for example, Ellerson, M comes before Ellerson, Mary Louise).
- Titles are ignored (for example, Sir Charles MacKerras is treated as MacKerras, Charles).
- Joining words or conjunctions such as 'the', 'and', 'of, are ignored (for example, The Flower Shop is treated as Flower Shop, The House of Beauty is treated as House Beauty).
- Hyphenated or prefixed names are indexed as one word (for example, Grieves-Smith is treated as Grievessmith, Van der Vaas is treated as Vandervaas, D’Amore is treated as Damore).
- Names beginning with Mac and Me are grouped together but where two names are the same except for Mac or Me, Mac will come first (for example, MacPhee comes before McPhee, but McPhee comes before MacRobertson).
- Abbreviations are treated as though they are the full word (for example, St Mary’s is the same as Saint Mary’s and Co is the same as Company).
- Company names that include full names are indexed as for personal names (for example, James Hill Publishing is treated as Hill, James Publishing).
- Company names that do not include full names are filed as they appear, except for joining words, (for example, Giramondo Cycles, Wholesale Office Supplies Ltd).
- Numbers are treated as though they were spelt out (for example, Bistro 21 would be treated as Bistro Twenty-one).

Indexing rules are also explained in many office skills books. Individual organisations may have their own rules for indexing that vary slightly from the rules outlined above.

Coding

Coding is a follow-up step to indexing. It involves using a keyword or number that makes it clear where the document should be filed. Coding is also used as a way to quickly locate files. For example, some doctors’ surgeries and legal offices use colour-coded files. Other examples of coding documents include:

- writing the file number onto the document
- underlining or highlighting a name with a coloured pen
- underlining or highlighting a date.

Codes make it easy to return a document to the same file each time it is taken out. Ask your supervisor to explain how your organisation codes documents.

Cross-referencing paper-based documents

Sometimes documents are filed in more than one location, as in the case study about Rosy's Florist in Learning
Activities 36. It is useful to have a reference to the document in both places. Then if somebody only looks in one place and the document is located in the other place, they will be directed to the correct location.

You might need to cross-reference when the document can be filed under different classifications. For example, the documents from the Riverside Resort (formerly the Mighty Murray Motor Inn) might be filed under:
- the name of the organisation
- the region in which it is located (geographical classification)
- the type of motel.

You might also need to cross-reference when:
- an organisation is known by more than one name (for example, Australian Government Publishing Service might also be filed under AGPS)
- an organisation or individual has changed their name, and your organisation still uses the service (for example, old records from Telecom might need to be re-filed under Telstra).

Cross-referencing involves filling out one or more cross-reference cards or sheets to be filed in the alternative location. Alternatively, you could photocopy the document and file it in both locations.

When you file copies of the same document in different locations, it is important that the documents are clearly marked 'copy' and 'original'.

The following is an example of a cross-reference card.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Riverside Resort (formerly known as Mighty Murray Motor Inn) See:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Victoria See also:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-star accommodation Description:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brochure and price list as at 1 July 2009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using reference and index systems to find information

Reference and index systems are the keys to finding information in the workplace. Everyone relies on the file index (or other index system) to list all the files in the system. When they find a file listed in the index, they should be confident that they can also find the corresponding file in the filing system. An inaccurate, out-of-date index is of no use to anyone. When files are removed, deleted, added and modified in the filing system, their listing in the index must also be changed.

From time to time you may need to:
- update the file index (for example, when files have changed names or codes to reflect the status of the files currently held in the filing system)
- add new files to the file index and delete removed files.

There may be specific guidelines for updating the reference and index systems. Perhaps you are required to update them every week, once a month or every time a file is changed, added or removed. You need to know the procedures you are expected to follow.

Discussion topics
Learners in a classroom can form a discussion group or have a debate. Those in the workplace might like to brainstorm these ideas with their colleagues. If you are learning independently, you might like to set up a chat room with other learners or ask a friend for their opinion.

1. What might occur if the filing system of an organisation is not maintained? Discuss the problems.
2. I hate filing. I leave it until my in-tray is full/ How could you persuade this person to adopt a better attitude? What effect might this person's actions have on the rest of the organisation?
3. How should a filing system be monitored? Discuss a range of methods that could be used. Is there any danger in allowing staff to create files whenever they need to?

Write down and discuss any other issues that are relevant to you and your team.

Section summary
- A well-maintained information system is vital for a business to function smoothly. A poorly managed information-handling system can lead to inefficiency, mistakes, poor quality work and even loss of business.
- Keeping records up to date means changing or adding information when required. Records may need to be updated when customer details, policies, procedures, legislation or regulations change. New files may need to
be created for new customers, projects or activities. Old files may need to be removed when they are no longer needed.

- Inactive files contain information that is no longer used but which cannot be removed because it may be needed in the future.

- A dead file is one that is closed (that is, all business contained in the file is finished), but which must be kept for a specific period. It is a legal requirement for organisations to keep some types of information for a defined period (for example, seven years), such as taxation documents and business documents. Some documents are also kept in the archives of the organisation for research or historical reasons.

- Inactive and dead files are generally moved to another storage location after removal from the main filing system (for example, to archive boxes, separate filing cabinets, CDs or compressed computer-based records).

- Inactive and dead files should be constantly monitored and maintained.

- New files should be established according to organisational requirements and procedures.

- Reference and index systems must be updated on a regular basis so files remain easy to identify and access.