

Model Electronic Document Handling Policy

This model policy is a supplement to **LAWPRO Magazine: Cybercrime and law firms**, published December 2013 and available at www.practicepro.ca/magazinearchives. This policy should be adapted to meet the specific requirements and technology in your firm.

This policy addresses the best practices for the handling, delivery, and exchange of electronic documents at [Firm Name]. While the main areas of concern are with sending documents to outside parties, the same principles of security, privacy, and confidentiality exist within the office as well.

The Issues

Electronic documents can be easily changed by third parties who have the same software that was used to generate the original document. To guarantee the accuracy and integrity of an electronic document, steps must be taken to “lock down” or prevent unauthorized modification.

Electronic documents may contain “metadata” (automatically created information that lives inside the document itself). It may not be suitable or desirable for others to view this information. It may include creation date, amount of time spent editing the document, originating author, etc. Electronic documents may also contain hidden “revision histories”; i.e., information about text or other content that was changed or deleted from previous versions. Electronic documents containing signatures may allow the recipient to copy and reuse the signature image without authorization.

Securing Your Documents

In order to ensure that we retain the integrity and security of electronic communications, documents should be exchanged with outside parties in 'PDF' (portable document format). PDF ensures that the presentation and content of the document cannot be changed by another party. PDF documents can be created easily from any software application (most notably Word and Excel, for our purposes) by printing the document to a special "Adobe PDF" entry in your list of available printers. Instead of selecting a physical printer for printing your work, you can choose "Adobe PDF". You will be prompted for the name and destination of a PDF file to be created, and the PDF document will be created just as quickly as actually printing the document. Once this PDF file has been created, it can be emailed or stored just as Word or Excel documents would have been sent traditionally.

Working Collaboratively

If you are working collaboratively with another party, and do require them to have editing access to your documents, observe the following guidelines when sharing your work in Word, Excel or PowerPoint.

Unless you specifically need to monitor revisions when working collaboratively with another party, ensure that change tracking has been turned off. In versions of Office prior to Office 2010, go into Tools, Track Changes, Highlight Changes to check the setting. In Office 2010 go to the Review tab and select Track Changes.

Ensure that you can view any hidden text, so you do not inadvertently distribute information. To check the setting, in versions of Office prior to Office 2010, select Tools, Options, View, and check the "Hidden Text" box. This will display any hidden text in your document. In Office 2010 go to the File tab, click Options, select Display and check the "Hidden Text" box. In versions of Office prior to Office 2010, ensure that "fast saves" are disabled. Check Tools, Options, Save, and ensure that the "Allow Fast Save" or "Enable Fast Save" boxes are unchecked.

Before distributing any document, ensure that the document properties have been checked. Check the File, Properties, and select the "Summary" tab and clear any inappropriate settings. Also take note of the Statistics and Custom tabs, which also may contain information unsuitable for distribution.

Once the collaboration is complete and the document is finalized, consider converting the document into PDF format in order to lock it down and prevent any further changes, or the inadvertent release of private information.

Conclusion

The procedures do introduce an extra layer of work required in the process of preparing documentation. However, the benefits of tighter security and confidentiality outweigh the costs of the extra effort required. If you have any questions or concerns about this policy, contact your supervisor for clarification or more information.

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