A Document Numbering Strategy

Technical environments, particularly in the software product development environment, generate a huge amount of documentation. Product designers and customers are continually drafting specifications. No sooner has that been done than the client decides on a specification change and the document is edited again. How is this document named so that both it and its predecessor are available?

In non-technical environments, the problem is no different. There are large numbers of documents to be stored and kept track of. Although they might be letters, contracts, memos and similar, given a legal situation which requires traceability, each individual document must be easily located. How do we do this when there are dozens of people generating documents? What are the chances that two documents are given the same name?

Keeping track of documents that are randomly named is a very difficult situation. Particularly if there is a personnel change and the new incumbent is unaware of incidents that occurred in the past. Searching by date can work but where there are many hundreds of documents compiled and stored on the same day, even that task can be monumental.

There is a very good case for documents to be numbered and named in a particularly rigid fashion to ensure traceability. This ensures that corporate governance and compliance criteria are met and facilitates rapid information retrieval. Numbering of documents is the first step in a process of taking control of documentation. As an example, consider Melvil Dewey and the Dewey Decimal Classification devised for libraries. This system allows books to be easily located and similarly returned to a place where they will again be easily located. The very rigid rules are adopted world-wide and the system is used very successfully.

All documents should be numbered and named in such a way that they are easily located. If the document will be edited when located, it will keep its original number and name but have only the version number incremented. Systems such as SharePoint and Alfresco easily keep track of version numbers.

The solution to the problem should fit your organisation, but whichever way, all documents should have a number and a name and a version number. The document number should be linked to the corporate taxonomy and be a good indicator of the content of the document.

So for example, in a technical environment, you might have a document number consisting of four fields, each of three characters, viz. major, minor, document type and version. Then the major and minor fields will each have a list of appropriate abbreviations linked to the taxonomy. These could be products, business division, modules, systems, sub-systems etc. Similarly, the document type field would have a list of permissible document types. These may include letters (LET), memorandums (MEM), software requirements specifications (SRS) etc.

The version field has provisions for numeric digits only. The leading digit gives major revisions and the trailing digit gives minor revisions. So a document with version number 0.3 is a draft document, indicated by the leading zero, and it is the third re-write. Similarly, a version number of 3.6 indicates the third major release and there have been 6 minor revisions to the release.

Concatenate the document number and the actual title of the document to create a unique combination which can be indexed and can be characterised against the taxonomy making searching very fast. This can work in standard folder structure, a flat structure with all files in one folder or with a Content Management System such as SharePoint.

It's not a good idea to allow document authors complete free reign over the titles and the document controller must insist that titles actually help to get the job done. Avoid putting the document type in the title (it will already be visible in the document type field of the document number.

As an example, this article might be saved in your repository as:
    MIS-EZI-DOC-001 Ezine Article on Document Numbering

With MIS indicating a Miscellaneous group of documents, EZI indicating Ezine and DOC indicating Document (as opposed to DRG for a Drawing etc).

… and if you review it in a few weeks time and add your own comments, you might save it as:
    MIS-EZI-DOC-002 Ezine Article on Document Numbering

If you need to search for this particular document, you could start off searching for EZI and that would list all the Ezine documents in the Repository. That is already a very good start.

In essence, this exercise needs a range of documented processes and procedures against which people begin to work. It also needs a document controller who has an eye for detail. Content Management Systems can be configured to take care of naming and numbering conventions, reducing the workload even further.