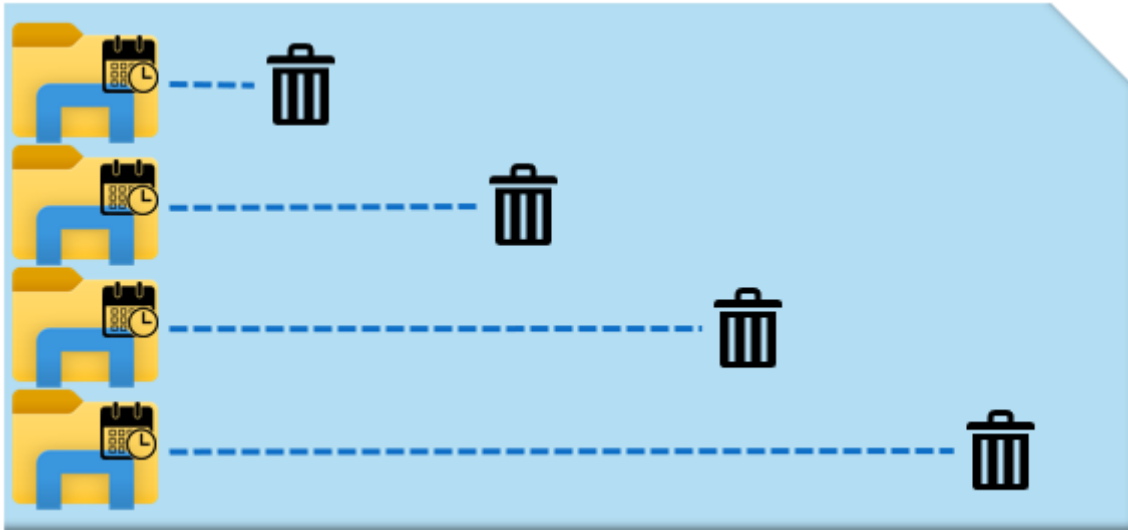


Records about the world



Setting retention labels on folders in SharePoint document libraries

A common question asked by many organisations is whether Microsoft 365 (M365) retention policies – labels in particular – can be applied to folders in SharePoint document libraries so the content in those folders will have the same label.

The quick answer is yes, but it is a manual process and – for all its perceived benefits – is likely to be more of an administrative and support burden and not worth the effort. Folders should NOT be thought of as the replacement for ‘files’ (aggregations of individual records), but more like dividers in a lever arch (= the document library).

This post describes how labels can be applied to and work with folders, including in SharePoint sites linked with Teams. It also suggests alternative options.

How retention labels are applied to a library

Retention labels are created in the M365 Compliance portal under either the Information Governance > Labels or Records Management > File Plan sections.

Information governance

Labels Label policies Retention policies Import Archive

When published, retention labels appear in your users' apps, such as Outlook, SharePoint, and OneDrive, based on the settings you chose. For example, you can create labels that retain content for a specific period of time.

[+ Create a label](#) [Publish labels](#) [↑ Import](#) [↓ Export](#) [Refresh](#)

Name

Test One - Retain Five Years then Delete

5.1.1 Accounting Records 7 years

(<https://andrewwarland.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/labellocationsm.png>)

Where labels are created in the Information Governance section of the Compliance portal

Labels created in the Compliance portal do not do anything once created; they must be applied to content in various ways to make them work. This includes by:





- Publishing one or more labels as part of a retention policy to various locations including SharePoint sites, Exchange mailboxes and OneDrive (but not Teams – see screenshot of available locations below). In this scenario, each label will be visible to – and selectable by – end-users.
- Auto-applying them to the same locations based on various options, including (for E5) trainable classifiers
- Adding them to Content Types used in SharePoint Syntex.

Choose locations

We'll publish the labels to the locations you choose.

All locations. Includes content in Exchange email, Office 365 groups, OneDrive and SharePoint documents.

Let me choose specific locations.

Status	Location	Included	Excluded
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> On	 Exchange email	All recipients Edit	None Edit
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> On	 SharePoint sites	All sites Edit	None Edit
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> On	 OneDrive accounts	All accounts Edit	None Edit
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> On	 Microsoft 365 Groups	All groups Edit	None Edit

(<https://andrewwarland.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/labellocationsa.png>)

Locations where labels can be published

Publishing labels to SharePoint sites

When one or more labels are published to SharePoint sites they don't do anything until they are 'manually' enabled through one of the following options:

- On each *individual* document library via the library settings option 'Apply labels to items in this list or library' (see screenshot below)
- On each individual folder in a library (via the information panel, see screenshot below)
- On each individual object in the library (also via the information panel)

Applying a label to the library

A label can be applied to the entire document library via **Library Settings**, as shown in the screenshot below.

Apply a label to items in this library

The labels here are provided by your organization to help retain and protect important information. When applied, all items in this library will be subject to the label's settings. For example, if you apply a label that retains content for 1 year, all new items in this library will inherit the label and be retained for 1 year. You can also apply the label to items that already exist in the library.

None ▾

Apply label to existing items in the library.

(<https://andrewwarland.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/labellocationsf.png>)

Note that the 'None' option is shorter if no labels have been published here

If the drop-down option is set to 'None', and there are no options to choose from, it means that no labels have been published to this SharePoint site.

If labels exist, they will appear in the drop down list (below the default 'None'). Note that only one label can be set as the default for the library. If the check box 'Apply label to existing items in the library' is selected, this will apply the label to all existing items. It will also likely override any existing label that may have been applied.

Settings ▸ Apply Label

Apply a label to items in this library

The labels here are provided by your organization to help retain and protect important information. When applied, all items in this library will be subject to the label's settings. For example, if you apply a label that retains content for 1 year, all new items in this library will inherit the label and be retained for 1 year. You can also apply the label to items that already exist in the library.





Company records - 7 years (Retain for 2 months) ▾

Apply label to existing items in the library.

(<https://andrewwarland.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/labellocationsc.png>)

When the retention label has been applied to a library, the label only applies to the non-folder objects stored in the library as can be seen in the option below. That is, the retention label is NOT applied to the folders by default.

Meetings 2020





 Document ID ▾	Name ▾	Modified ▾	Retention label ▾
	April	July 1, 2020	
	August	August 6, 2020	
	December	November 30, 2020	

(<https://andrewwarland.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/labellocationsd.png>)

Document library folders without retention labels

The retention label can be seen when the folder is opened:

Meetings 2020 > August

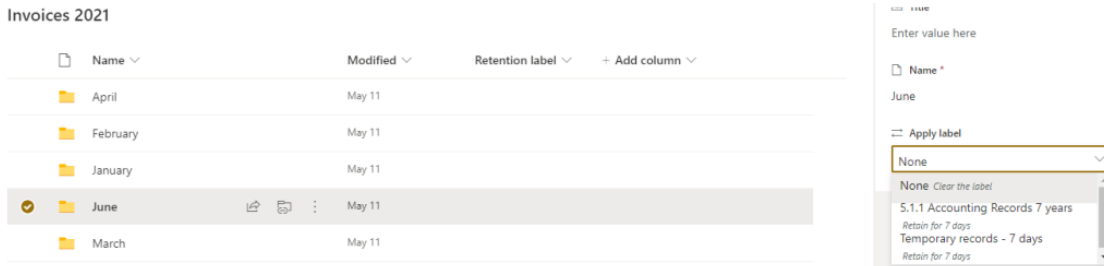
 Document ID ▾	Name ▾	Modified ▾	Retention label ▾
 CORPRECORDS-63285...	FruitSituation.xlsx	May 18	Company records - 7 years
 CORPRECORDS-63285...	MinutesAugust2020v1.docx	 May 19	Company records - 7 years

(<https://andrewwarland.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/labellocationse.png>)

Content inside a folder, with retention labels applied

Applying a retention label to a folder or document

It is also possible to apply a retention label to a folder or object stored in the folder via the information panel, even when a default library label has been set, as shown below. This can be done on each individual folder including, for Teams-based sites, each folder that maps to a channel.



The screenshot shows a file list for 'Invoices 2021' with columns for Name, Modified, and Retention label. The 'June' folder is selected, and a context menu is open over it, showing the 'Apply label' option. The dropdown menu for 'Apply label' is open, showing options: 'None', '5.1.1 Accounting Records 7 years', and 'Temporary records - 7 days'.

Name	Modified	Retention label
April	May 11	
February	May 11	
January	May 11	
June	May 11	
March	May 11	

(<https://andrewwarland.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/labellocationsg.png>)

When applied to a folder in this way, any content stored in the folder will inherit that retention label.

Invoices 2021 > **June**

Name	Modified	Retention label
Key Financial Figures.xlsx	7 minutes ago	Temporary records - 7 days
Test2.docx	2 minutes ago	Temporary records - 7 days

(<https://andrewwarland.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/labellocationsi.png>)

Documents stored inside the June folder have inherited the folder's label

If a default label has already been applied at the library level, the folder-based label will replace it, although in testing this, one of the original default labels wasn't replaced automatically as shown below, but could be manually changed via the information panel.

Invoices 2021 > **May**

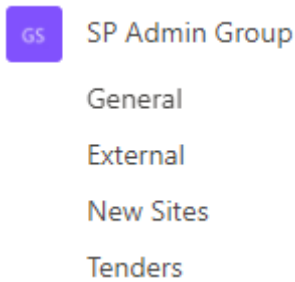
Name	Modified	Retention label
Invoice 1.pdf	May 18	5.1.1 Accounting Records 7 years
Invoice 2.pdf	May 18	Temporary records - 7 days

(<https://andrewwarland.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/labellocationsj.png>)

Implications for Teams-based records (Files)

Every Team in MS Teams has an associated SharePoint site linked with the underlying Microsoft 365 Group.

Every non-private channel in the Team maps to a folder in the Documents library of the SharePoint site as can be seen in the two screenshots below. (Every private channel has a separate SharePoint site that would be covered by a separate retention policy).



(<https://andrewwarland.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/labellocationsl.png>)

The Team's channels

Documents

Document ID	Name	Modified	Retention label
	External	December 2, 2020	
	General	January 28, 2020	
	New Sites	October 20, 2020	
	Tenders	May 28	

(<https://andrewwarland.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/labellocationsk.png>)

Four channel-linked folders in a Teams-based SharePoint site

Keep in mind that retention labels remove the ability to delete objects stored in the library (including via the 'Files' tab in a Team). If end-users are working in Teams, this could be annoying and potentially put them off using Teams. However, end-users can remove the label by navigating to the SharePoint site and removing the label via the Information panel.



(<https://andrewwarland.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/labellocationso.png>)

Why folder-based retention labels may not be a good idea

The default options to apply retention labels to content stored in SharePoint document libraries are:

- By applying them at the library level. This can apply the label to all existing (and future) content stored in the library but does not apply to folders.
- Through the auto-application of labels.
- Via SharePoint Syntex using labels on Content Types.

Applying retention labels to individual folders in a document library is a manual-intensive process, one that may be a waste of time given the potential number of libraries that can exist and the ease with which they can be removed by end users.

Additionally, applying retention labels to the channel-linked folders of Teams may be pointless if end users:

- Store documents at the same level as the channel-linked folders; that is, 'above' the folder structure.
- Create new folders via a synced library or SharePoint. These folders are not linked to channels.
- Create new libraries in the SharePoint site.

Keep it simple

It is very easy to deliberately or inadvertently establish over-complicated retention settings for content stored in SharePoint, especially as there is currently no simple way to see what label has been applied where.

Given the retention period linked with retention policies generally, there is a good chance that the person who applied the labels may not be around when the retention period expires, or to keep an eye on what has been applied or changed over time.

The best retention intentions may be overruled by practical necessity.

The best retention model, in my opinion, is a simple one that does not get in the way of end-users but ensures that records will be kept for a minimum period required. So, instead of applying retention labels to folders, especially on Teams-based SharePoint site libraries, it is recommended to:

- Start by trying to avoid mixing content with different retention periods in the same SharePoint site or Team, or document library. That will make it easier to manage the retention outcomes. (If you can't avoid mixing content, you may need to use auto-application of labels including via Syntex or trainable classifiers).
- Use 'back-end' safety net retention policies applied to all SharePoint sites. This ensures a minimum retention period and does not get in the way of end-user activities.

- Use retention labels on site libraries where more granular retention is required. Ideally, apply them as the default to *all* the content in a single document library (including the default library for all Teams-based SharePoint sites) and – preferably – only apply the labels when the content is inactive and the library can be made read only, to protect the records from that point.
- Only use multiple labels on folders when (a) all the labels applied to the site relate to the same function/activity pair or subject matter, and (b) the content is largely inactive. Ideally, avoid folder-based retention to avoid complication in the future.

In Place Records (<https://andrewwarland.wordpress.com/category/solutions/in-place-records/>) /
Records management (<https://andrewwarland.wordpress.com/category/records-management/>) /
Retention and disposal (<https://andrewwarland.wordpress.com/category/records-management/retention-and-disposal/>)

Andrew Warland

June 25, 2021

2 thoughts on “Setting retention labels on folders in SharePoint document libraries”

Mike says:

April 8, 2022 at 4:31 AM

I have 2 folders in a SP library with 2 different retention labels assigned to each folder. If I create a new file in either folder the file gets the same retention label that is assigned to the folder. If I move a file from one folder to another the retention label does not change to become what the folder has assigned to it. If I clear the label for the file before moving the file it will assign the new label. Is there a way to change this so that if a file is moved from one folder to another folder the retention label will change to the folders default assigned label?

Reply

Andrew Warland says:

April 9, 2022 at 11:28 AM

The short answer is no, when moved manually. I imagine it would be possible to write a script to achieve this outcome but I think your use case is moving items one by one. I am not a great fan of applying retention labels to folders (or individual documents).

Reply

