



A PRIMER ON WORKPLACE RECORDS RETENTION

INTRODUCTION

Part of essential sustainable business practices is to document what we do by creating complete and accurate records of activities and by ensuring that the appropriate records relating to work are filed in official filing systems. Records that document business transactions and workflow are important assets that are owned by employers.

These guidelines are intended to assist you and or your company:

- Decide what records to create
- Decide which records to retain
- Decide which records are "transitory" and can be disposed of
- Decide how to dispose of transitory records in a secure manner
- Consider necessary compliance requirements

STEP 1: DEFINE A "RECORD"

The first step should be creating a definition of what constitutes a "record" for you, your team and /or your company. For example:

“Information in any form including notes, images, audiovisual recordings, x-rays, books, documents, maps, drawings, photographs, letters, email communication, vouchers and papers and/or any other information that is written, photographed, recorded or stored in any manner.

If there are regulatory requirements for you and/or your organization include the definition that supports that protocol. Example"

The international records management defines a record as “information created, received and maintained as evidence and information by an organization, or person, in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business.”

Records provide evidence of the conduct of business and can be in any medium or format. Virtually everything that we document related to our jobs, whether via a computer, personal digital assistant, pen, camera, audio or video recorder, is a record.



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STEP 2 : DETERMINE WHAT RECORDS SHOULD BE CREATED

Records serve to document and provide evidence of work activities. If policies and procedures do not exist for a given business or workflow function, they should be created and should document how a process, work flow or program is planned, managed, executed and maintained.

When developing records retention policies, clearly outline activities and transactions that should be documented, for example:

- Results of significant daily activities that support the mission and objectives of an department, team or organization.
- Advice and recommendations made to management and the decisions and actions taken as a result, including all supporting documentation.
- Problems encountered in business operations and the steps taken to resolve the them.
- Interactions with the public, customers, clients, stakeholders, consultants, vendors, business partners and/or other government.
- Communications, notes, actions and outcomes associated with meetings, telephone calls and face-to-face discussions where significant actions or decisions were discussed or occurred.
- Digital information including email, personal drives, shared drives and online collaborative workspaces.
- Legal agreements contracts and all supporting documentation.
- Policy, business planning, performance measurement and budget activities, and supporting documentation;
- Work provided for internal and/or external customers or clients via consultants or other external resources.
- Actions and decisions where payments are made or received, funds committed, services delivered or obligations incurred.

STEP 3: DETERMINE WHICH RECORDS SHOULD BE RETAINED

Once you have determined what constitutes a "record", the next step is determine which records are retained, how they are filed in organized filing systems and how they are managed. Again, this applies to both paper-based and our digital work environments.

Generally, the business unit responsible for a program or service will maintain the master set, i.e. the most complete and comprehensive set of records related to that program or service. In some cases, master sets of records are filed in one or more central file rooms or on shared network directories, or in Electronic Information Management (EIM) systems.



Decisions should be made pertaining to committees, work groups and project teams, appointing someone to maintain the master set of agendas, minutes and other records and store them in pre-determined locations that everyone can access. This will help ensure that the work of groups is adequately documented.

Decisions , protocol and directives for each individual in the group should be provided indicating whether the reference/duplicate copies they receive have sufficient future value to their business units to merit retaining the copies or whether to dispose of them when they are no longer needed.

Examples of files and records which should be retained are likely those which

- Are required to support business operations
- Document and provide evidence of business transactions; or
- Are required by legislation, HIPPA or SEC mandates for example
- Provide evidence of compliance with accountability or other business requirements
- Contain future business, financial, legal, research or archival value

STEP 4: DETERMINE AND OUTLINE TRANSITORY RECORDS

Because not all records need to be treated as official records; outlining a list of such documents goes a long way to providing adherence and understanding to the entire retention policy. Records pertaining to a minor transaction or those that should be held for a very short period of time, made obsolete by an updated version or by a subsequent transaction or decision are defined as **transitory records**.

Many offices keep more records than necessary utilizing valuable space on servers and hard drives, in file rooms, workstations and storerooms making it more difficult to locate and retrieve the records that are important. Routinely disposing of transitory records will make recordkeeping in your office more efficient.

Determining whether a record is transitory depends in large part on individual judgment of the value of the record. Because the roles of the employees and their use of the information are different., one employee could deem a record to be transitory while another considered it to be official. The key consideration is that if a record has only immediate or very short-term value to an organization and will not be required again after it is obsolete can in all likelihood be disposed of. If the information in the record will have some future business, financial, legal, research or archival value to the business, then it should be retained and filed appropriately. If in doubt, keep the record.

To help others make these decisions, creating a decision diagram (see page 7) is suggested as well as providing basic definitions for transitory records such as ones used in the following examples:



Advertising material: Advertising material includes solicited or unsolicited information you receive from businesses or individuals advertising their products or services. You may want to retain and file some of this material for future reference if it's relevant to your work. However, you can routinely discard most of it. Examples of advertising material are paper or electronic brochures, company profiles, sales letters, menus, catalogues and price lists.

Blank information media: Blank information media includes anything that was intended to be used for collecting or storing information, but was not used, or has been used and erased, and has become obsolete. Obsolete stationery and blank forms are a good example. This also applies when you must physically destroy other blank storage media such as video or audiotapes, diskettes, compact disks, digital videodisks, magnetic tapes or hard drives. An example might be a situation in which it's necessary to destroy the medium to prevent the recovery of erased information.

Draft documents and working materials: Correspondence, reports and other documents usually go through several drafts or versions before they are finalized and distributed. Research or working materials such as calculations and notes are often collected and used in the preparation of documents. Once the final version of a document is complete and the master filed, most drafts and working materials can be disposed of as transitory records.

Note: Not all drafts are automatically transitory. In some cases, offices responsible for drafting legislation, legal documents, policy, budgets, standards, guidelines or procedures might need to track the evolution to the final product. These offices may need to keep various drafts, research and working materials in order to have a record of changes that were made and why.

Duplicates: Duplicates are **exact** copies of documents where:

1. Nothing has been added, changed, or deleted
2. The copies have been used for reference or information purposes only
3. The master version of the document has been filed in an official filing system.

A record must meet all three of these conditions to be a duplicate. If something has been added, changed or deleted then it's no longer a duplicate. It could be considered transitory, however, depending on the significance and future value of the addition, change or deletion. Some examples of duplicates are

- Photocopies of paper documents
- Copies of government brochures and pamphlets
- Duplicates of microfilm, CD-ROMs, DVDs
- Audio or video recordings
- Electronic copies of e-mail messages and other electronic documents
- Prints of microfilmed or imaged documents, e-mail messages or other electronic documents that are not the file copies for filing systems.



External publications: Publications include books, magazines, periodicals, pamphlets, brochures, journals, newspapers and software documentation, whether printed or electronic, that you have obtained from sources outside your organization. If they will have no future value, you can discard them after use.

Note: The master copies of publications produced by or for your organization are not transitory and should be filed. Extra copies of obsolete internal publications are transitory. They are examples of duplicates.

Information of short-term value: Businesses often receive documents containing information that is of little or no interest, or importance or may be useful for only a brief period of time after which it has no further value. These documents do not have to be filed and can be routinely disposed of once we are finished with them. Some examples are

- Routine notices or memos regarding holidays or special events circulated to all staff or posted in public folders
- Insignificant or inconsequential information items concerning routine administrative or operational matters
- Other issues not pertaining directly to your office or not requiring you to act
- Personal messages and information
- Routing slips and opened envelopes.

Note: In some cases business units where these types of records originate should retain a *file copy* if the records document their activities and have some future value. Generally speaking categories of transitory records are not absolute, but should be provided as a guideline. Records could appear to meet the criteria of being transitory, but because of how they are used in the course of work, should be retained.

STEP 5: DISPOSITION AND SECURITY

As a best practice, assuring that records are disposed of in a secure manner includes outlining workflow practices to support such. Assignment that responsibility to an individual who oversees knowledgeable records management or administrative staff who can help to assure security in that regard. These individual/s can manage the disposition of official records, and also coordinate the destruction of transitory records containing confidential or sensitive information.

Individual team members most likely dispose of transitory records in the process of deleting electronic documents and /or discarding paper documents. Accommodating these practices by providing confidential electronic receptacles or recycling boxes is worth the investment. The method that should be used to dispose of transitory records depends on the medium of the records, and whether or not they contain sensitive information. Clear guidelines and workflow practices should be outlined in absolute terms whenever possible and updated on a regular basis.



7 TIPS TO CONTROLLING GROWTH & DISPOSITION OF TRANSITORY RECORDS

- Don't create unnecessary transitory records by downloading documents and distributing them as attachments. If possible, link to the original web site instead.
- Discard duplicate print and electronic documents when you are sure the master has been filed.
- Dispose of draft versions of documents and working materials that you don't need to keep when you are sure the final version has been distributed and a copy filed.
- Securely destroy supplies of blank forms, letterhead/memo paper and business cards once they are obsolete.
- Discard routine, external publications once they have been circulated and/or you no longer need them, or once they are obsolete.
- Use techniques such as Spam Filters to reduce spam.
- Dispose of information with short-term value once you have acted on it.
- Dispose of advertising material and unsolicited mail as soon as you're finished with it.
- Review your e-mail messages regularly and delete transitory messages once they are obsolete.
- Erase voice mail messages after you listen to them; erase archived messages once you no longer need to save them.
- Keep a recycle box by the photocopier for extra copies and photocopying errors, BUT be sure you don't discard any copies with confidential or sensitive information.
- Keep a disposal box out-of-sight in your workstation or in the business unit for confidential transitory records – if you deal with especially sensitive information, make sure the box is secure.



Example: RECORDS DECISION DIAGRAM

