

Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers

ACARM Records Management Guides

1 What is Records Management?

This Guide gives a definition of records management and an explanation of some of the key terminology and concepts used in records management. This is followed by a list of the benefits that can be secured by its adoption. It also explains the relationship between records management and archives management.

Definition

There have been many debates on the definition of a record, and on how records differ from information and knowledge. For you, the practitioner, the most important distinction is probably between documents and records. The difference between these two is a matter of context. A document can stand alone; it does not depend on other relationships; it can be identified and interpreted without having to see it in the context of its relationship with other documents. Thus documents are records without context and records are documents with context.

Records are essential to the business of all organisations. They document the work of public authorities and private companies, support their operations and form the basis for the many services that are provided by them. They are essential to effective operations in several respects:

Supporting the delivery of services – you will want to document how policies and statutes are carried out, what services were provided, who carried out the work and how much it cost, and, in the longer term, your organisation's accomplishments.

Supporting administration – by providing information for the direction, control, decision-making and coordination of business.

Documenting rights and responsibilities – your organisation needs to provide evidence of the scope of its terms of reference, evidence of what it owns and evidence of its obligations. Records are important also in documenting the rights of corporate bodies and individuals in matters such as ownership, legacy, etc.

Legal documentation – many records comprise formal legal documents – regulations, local orders, etc – or formal documentation of the relationship between governments and people or institutions. They may, in this respect, be used in legal undertakings or be required for evidence in a court of law.

Evidence of the work of public authorities – your organisation needs to document the decisions, actions and obligations that it undertakes, and in this way provide accountability measures.

Future research – some of the records your organisation creates and uses will be preserved and will form the contents of archival establishments, providing important historical information on political, social, economical and other issues.

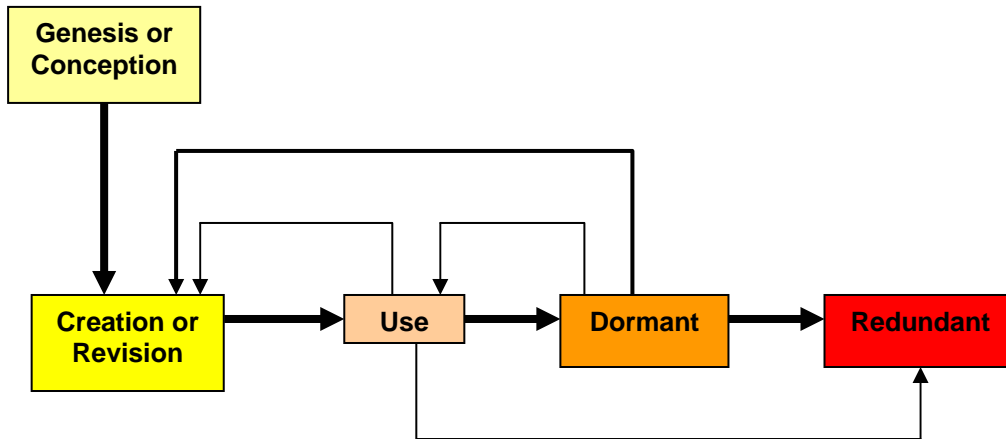
Records are therefore created or received in the conduct of business activities and provide evidence and information about those activities. They come in all kinds of format and media. A formal definition of a record might be:

*“Recorded information produced or received in the initiation, conduct or deletion of an institutional or individual activity, and which comprises sufficient content, context and structure to provide evidence of an activity, regardless of the form or medium.”*¹

Many organisations are moving quickly towards the creation, storage, maintenance and retrieval of their records and information solely in electronic form. In most areas, however, while many records are created electronically they are maintained in paper form - often filed systematically but just as often managed in personal systems. Records may also be created on media other than paper or electronic - microfilm, microfiche or computer output microform (COM); or as photographs (prints, negatives, transparencies and x-ray films), sound recordings on disk or tape or moving images on film or video. In some cases records might be in the form of three-dimensional models, scientific specimens or other objects. A set of records, in context, may be in more than one of these formats or there may be close organisational relationships between records in different formats.

¹ International Council on Archives, 1997

Records management life cycle



The process for managing records is often likened to a living organism in that it /they are conceived and created, live and are used, become dormant and are retired, and die and are archived.

Records management provides a framework to enable these actions to be undertaken. It aims to ensure that:

- *The record is present* - your organisation should ensure that it has the information that is needed so that it can reconstruct activities or transactions that have taken place. This ensures that the organisation is accountable to its stakeholders (whether they are citizens, parliament or shareholders).
- *The record can be accessed* – the people in your organisation must be able to locate information when required. This is vital in areas where there is freedom of information legislation but just as important to support the efficient operation of the organisation's business.
- *The record can be interpreted* – if required, your organisation must be able to establish a record's context, who created it, as part of which business process and how it relates to other records. This is a vital part of the organisation's accountability and transparency.
- *The record can be trusted* – when you and your colleagues are consulting a record, you need to be assured that it reliably represents the information that was actually used in or created by the business process, and its integrity and authenticity can be demonstrated. Records provide the 'official' evidence of the activity or transaction they document and must therefore be reliable and trustworthy.
- *The record can be maintained through time* – your organisation will need to ensure that the qualities of accessibility, interpretation and trustworthiness can be maintained for as long as the record is needed. If a record is changed or manipulated in some way, it no longer provides evidence of the transaction it originally documented. For example, if someone alters the minutes of a meeting after they have

- *The record will be disposed of* as part of a planned system, through the implementation of disposal schedules to ensure the retention of the minimum volume of records consistent with effective and efficient operations. Is your organisation keeping more records than it needs? This is often the case in very many organisations. The information that does not need to be kept gets in the way of the important information.

Principles underpinning the management of records

Records are a corporate resource

Records form part of the corporate memory of an organisation and are a valuable corporate resource. From the point at which a document is created as a record and used in the course of official business, it becomes corporately owned. The records you and your colleagues create and use don't belong to you – they belong to the organisation.

Electronic records

Electronic records that are generated by or received in an organisation in the course of its business are in this context no different from any other records – they are official, corporate records. Although most current practice is still to print electronic information to paper, your organisations should be making plans to maintain their electronic information as electronic records.

Record keeping should be integrated with business processes

Records management and archive administration must be built into systems for creating records, to ensure that they are capable of capturing records with all the necessary contextual information. This is vital because you will need to refer to them in the medium, and sometimes longer, term – and this will be regardless of whether they are in paper, electronic or any other form.

Records should be reliable, authentic and complete

Records should be able to function as evidence of business activities and processes through sound record keeping practices. In order to be reliable and authentic they must adequately capture and describe the actions they represent and once created must not be altered without creating a new record. To be considered complete the record should preserve not only content but also the context in which it was created and used, and links to other records.

Records should be accessible

Record keeping systems should aim to make records available quickly and easily to all staff and to others who are entitled to access or information from them. Information is the lifeblood of any organisation; yours or any other cannot hope to function effectively without it.

Responsibility for capturing, maintaining and ensuring access to records rests with the organisation as a whole

Responsibility for the capture and maintenance of records rests with everyone in the organisation, and all staff should ensure that they are familiar with and are adhering to the records management policy and any procedures and guidelines that are issued through it. Good record keeping is not just the province of the records manager – it's everyone's responsibility.

Benefits

Organisations with good records management practices benefit in many ways, for example:

- Staff time is saved both in filing records and in retrieval when they are needed again
- Decision-making and operations are properly supported and informed by relevant records
- Record storage is more cost-effective because redundant records can be removed
- Records are created and managed in compliance with and as required by legislation, standards and regulations
- Accountability is demonstrated because the records provide reliable evidence of policy, decision making and actions/transactions
- Duplicates and versions are removed as soon as possible

Archives Management

The functions for which archivists are mainly responsible emerge at the end of the records life cycle, at the time when records have ceased to be useful for supporting the business activities of an organisation and have been selected for permanent preservation because they have been judged to have a continuing (usually historical) value. In a sense, archives are a sub-set of records. The functions include:

Acquisition - The process of taking archives into an archival repository, whether by transfer from the creating body, or by donation or on loan as a collecting repository.

Accession – The activity of logging each new archival acquisition. The following details are usually recorded:

- date received
- depositing person or organisation
- their location or address
- a brief description of the contents
- its extent or quantity and condition
- the terms under which it has been transferred or deposited
- archival reference

Arrangement and description - If the archives are transferred from an organisation with an established records management system, there will be an existing arrangement and description of the material that may be re-worked to cater for archival access and other requirements. If a deposit is received from an organisation without such a system, it will be arranged and described from scratch.

Preservation - An overarching function aimed at securing the long-term survival of archives. It encompasses physical and environmental storage, handling practices, reformatting of fragile series (by microfilm, digitisation etc), conversion and migration (electronic records), and the physical repair of individual items (conservation).

Access - Archives should be made physically and intellectually accessible, as legal requirements permit.

Outreach - A programme that advocates archives to the outside world, and raises the profile of the organisation internally and externally. It is implemented through planned outreach activities such as exhibitions, media involvement, talks, presentations and publications.

Symptoms of poor records management

Inaccurate or incomplete information

Out of date information

Duplicate records, not knowing which is the latest version

Related information in different locations, unable to be linked

Duplicated effort

Time wasted looking for records and information

Complex filing systems, difficult to use

Information susceptible to loss or damage from fire, flood, etc

Too many records

Creation of records not controlled

Space wasted by storing unwanted records

Poor working environment

Poor decision-making

User dissatisfaction

Non-compliance with legislative requirements

Lack of security for information



Poor records management



A well-run records management unit

The **Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers (ACARM)** was founded in 1984 to promote professional development in the field of records and archives management throughout the Commonwealth. It provides a link for Commonwealth archivists, archival institutions and records managers which is especially important because of the common heritage of legal and administrative systems, and hence of record keeping practices, which the countries of the Commonwealth share.

ACARM shares practical solutions to the problems of managing records and archives, and disseminates professional and technical information through its *Newsletter*, listserv and website – www.acarm.org

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