



Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers

ACARM Records Management Guides

3 Records Audit/Information Survey

This Guide examines one of the key undertakings in the examination and development of records management systems - the records audit or information survey, as it is sometimes known. It is one of the most important processes that a records manager will undertake and the cornerstone of the records management system.

A records audit must provide an objective assessment of an organisation's record and information keeping practices and procedures. It is the first and most important step in gaining control of records and information. It can also be a useful tool in assessing the level of knowledge of records management in an organisation.

Records audits are primarily concerned with the examination of active records but occasionally it may be necessary to survey semi-active or inactive material when, for example, retention and disposal periods are being revised. It can be a time-consuming and very resource-intensive undertaking – but it is time and resources well spent. The time and resources invested at this stage will make subsequent work in the records and information management life cycle much easier to execute.

Purpose of the audit

The audit is the basis for the physical and intellectual management decisions that you will take on the management of records and information in your organisation. The data that you collect should provide the basis for decisions that enable the development and/or confirmation of the procedures that underpin the records management programme, such as retention schedules, file plans and vital records protection. The main purposes of the audit are:

- To describe the organisation's records
- To provide data on the quantity of records
- To provide data on the medium and format of records
- To identify and evaluate the nature and location of record storage and locations
- To provide information on the functions and activities that give rise to or are supported by the records
- To gather data on who uses records and the information flows between different functional areas
- To gather information to help assess the value and longevity of the records
- To identify sensitive or confidential records
- To provide information on legal and regulatory considerations

The audit also provides the records manager with the opportunity to meet and talk to a wide range of colleagues who have been identified as key stakeholders in the organisation. It will also give those stakeholders the opportunity to raise their own concerns relating to records management. A major purpose and outcome of the audit will be to raise the profile and organisational awareness of records management.

How to carry out the audit

Planning

Many of the difficulties associated with introducing new records management procedures can be overcome by careful planning of the records audit. This should include:

- commitment from top management
- organisation of the audit
- aims and objectives
- communication
- data collection
- compilation of forms
- reporting

1 Commitment from top management

The first step is to obtain senior management support. This should take the form of a directive from the Chief Executive/head of the organisation, informing staff that the audit is taking place and that they are expected to cooperate. The passage of the audit will be eased significantly with such a directive.

2 Organisation of the audit

The person or persons who will carry out the audit will depend very much on the nature and size of the organisation. For example, in a small organisation it may be possible for it to be undertaken solely by the records manager. It may be the National Archivist or representatives of the National Archives. In many cases it can be a small team, representative of the organisation as a whole, who drive the audit forward. The records manager/National Archivist must maintain control of the audit and provide any advice and guidance required.

3 Aims and objectives

Aims and objectives must be established before the audit is undertaken. These parallel the aims of records management in general and are actually part of the strategy in achieving those overall aims. They may be short-term or long-term. Short-term aims are usually the basics of records management improvement programmes, for example:

- the introduction of more economical records storage and retrieval
- how current records are created and managed
- the development of disposal schedules

Long-term aims will address the infrastructure of records and information management in the organisation:

- Reappraisal of the records management structure of the organisation
- Link between business functions and records creation
- Use of records
- Who controls the creation and management of local records and information
- How long records are required for business purposes
- Long-term (historical) value of records
- Legacy systems and hybrid records
- Identification of vital records
- What information is held (for example, to meet freedom of information requirements)

The overall objective of the survey should therefore be to gather only the information that addresses the aims and objectives that have been identified.

4 Communication

There should be a communication strategy. People need to know not only that an audit is taking place but also why it is necessary. It needs to be put into context. Prior to carrying out the audit a notice should be sent to all managers and staff concerned, identifying the nature of the audit, its objectives, how it will affect their work, and when it will begin. It is often useful to hold orientation sessions with key staff, and to keep managers informed by the issue of progress reports. The communication plan needs to include a timetable of visits. Don't just turn up one morning, but at the same time don't give the client so much notice that they forget about it. Two weeks maximum is usual.

Consider what are the best ways to communicate this information. It may be departmental meetings, newsletters, the intranet, informal discussions or any combination of these.

5 Data collection

Before conducting the audit several items should be collected and studied:

- costs of office space, equipment, supplies and staff.
- maps and plans of buildings, showing furniture and equipment
- copies of contracts with commercial storage companies, microfilming bureaux, computer services, etc
- inventory of equipment, including computers and photocopiers
- organisation charts that will give an understanding of the flow of information
- procedural manuals and forms
- copies of file lists or databases
- copies of previous studies

6 Compilation of forms

If the audit requires that participants complete a form (as may often be the case), this form must only ask for information that is relevant to the aims and objectives of the audit. In this respect, therefore, there is no one standard form that is recommended.

Examples of forms that have been used in the recent past in the UK are enclosed with this leaflet.

7 Reporting

Quantitative data from the audit can be presented in tabular form (eg number of different types of storage equipment), with charts (eg percentage of records covered by disposal schedules) or by graphs (eg comparison of number of staff and amount of records serviced).

Qualitative data, such as physical condition or staff comments, will need to be presented in narrative form.

The audit report should frame recommendations that are clear and which are constructive proposals for improvement or development. They should be short and supported by facts in the report.

The report should be as short as possible. Recommended structure:

- Executive summary (this is often the only part of a report which many people will read, so it needs to highlight major issues and recommendations in a clear and concise way)
- Introduction and background (why the audit was commissioned, respective roles of the client and auditor in the process)
- Methodology
- Findings (general and specific to business areas; data should be in annexes, eg people seen, file list, breakdown of storage equipment, etc)
- Recommendations
- Summary of recommendations (short/concise and referring to paragraphs in the main body of the report)

Collecting information

The collection phase of the audit needs careful consideration. You should only be collecting information that accords with the aims and objectives of the audit. Collecting information during the audit is a time-consuming and labour intensive exercise. There is no easy or quick way. There are three main methods:

1 Physical observation:

A physical survey requires records staff to visit business areas and look into each item of records storage equipment, ask questions and complete a standard survey form. It is usually sufficient to sample a series or collection of records rather than examine individual records.

The physical survey needs to be planned carefully and executed with a minimum of disruption. An initial investigation to establish the whereabouts, ownership, volume and condition of the records may be required to make the plan more effective. When the plan and timetable have been drawn up the detailed survey can take place.

Four main actions form the key to finding out information from the survey:

- **Find** every storage place (including tops of cabinets, disks, commercial storage, under desks)
- **Look** at all the records and information in the location
- **Ask** questions until understanding is complete
- **Record** the information acquired for future analysis

Don't believe everything you are told! Seek evidence for the information given to you.

2 Questionnaire:

The use of questionnaires relies on individuals to complete them accurately and timely. Much time can be wasted chasing up missing questionnaires and following up unclear information on completed, or partly completed, questionnaires. Because of the heterogeneous nature of information resources, careful consideration should be given before deciding whether the use of a questionnaire will provide results comprehensive enough to enable crucial decisions to be made. Although a well-constructed questionnaire that produces a high percentage response can be a sound, cost-effective approach to gathering information, greater coverage may be achieved through physical observation.

Consideration should be given to the issue of anonymity. If names are not included on completed questionnaires it may cause difficulties in checking the extent of replies received. However, replies might be more honest and open if the respondent is not required to include their name on the form.

3 Interviewing

Formal or informal interviews can be held with key members of staff to elicit the information required by the audit. These might be carried out in one-to-one situations or with small groups of staff from discrete areas of the organisation's business.

It is vital to target the person or persons who have most knowledge about the records in the framework in which the audit is set. For example, it is not always the head of a unit or department; it may be a clerk who has been in charge of record keeping for several years.

Preferred approach

The best method is probably a combination of all these methods:

- a) send the questionnaire to key personnel in each business area
- b) ask them to complete the questionnaire as far as possible and retain it
- c) make an appointment (for up to one hour) at which the issues raised by the questionnaire can be discussed and clarified
- d) use the appointment as an opportunity to look at some records and storage equipment

Auditing electronic records

For the most part the techniques, methodology and principles for auditing paper records apply to electronic records. However, the following should be taken into account:

- It is important to think through the level at which data about records will be captured. Often it is not so easy to identify an electronic record series, particularly in a non-managed environment such as shared drives, since records may be saved and maintained in many different locations
- It is also important not to confuse an application system with actual records but information on both will need to be collected. Inventories of application systems are often available from IT departments
- It is also a good idea to identify planned and potential changes that might threaten the viability of electronic records (for example migration to new systems)
- Bear in mind the definition of a record; don't forget, for example, e-mail

Next steps

It is important to take action on the audit report – not let it sit on a shelf/desk indefinitely. Often a good way to take it forward is to include specific recommendations or proposals in the next corporate/business plan of the organisation.

Consider giving presentations on the outcomes of the audit – to management boards, departmental meetings and similar gatherings. Use established channels of communication to promote the report's recommendations – the intranet, newsletters, etc.

Records managers and others involved in records audits need to be patient and flexible. It can be frustrating when much work has gone into the audit and there is a slow response to the recommendations. This is often the result of budget restraints but can also be because the rationale behind the audit has been lost. Even though some of the data gathered during the audit may not be used immediately to improve record keeping practices, it will be a valuable source of information for future developments.

Review of survey and systems

As organisations develop and change, their priorities and functions change which results in different recordkeeping requirements. It is therefore good practice not only to keep information from the records audit up to date but to periodically review or even re-survey. This ensures that the records management function remains comprehensive and consistent. Periodic audits of records also maintain awareness of the subject and demonstrate a commitment to best practice.

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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