

EXECUTIVE GUIDE TO PROMOTING GOOD BUSINESS MANAGEMENT THROUGH RECORD CREATION AND MAINTENANCE

Information Management describes the means by which organisations plan, organise, create, control and disseminate information.

Effective information and records management is extremely important. Information must be kept in such a way to:

- Meet internal business needs.
- Defend the Organisation and employees against external demands.
- Comply with regulatory and statutory requirements.
- Provide evidence of a transaction or business process that is admissible in a court of law.
- Ensure Organisation resources (staff, information storage) are used in the most economical way to meet the objectives above.

A **document** is work in progress. When a document is in its final form it has the possibility of becoming a record. A document can be any written, printed, recorded, magnetic, graphic matter, or other documentary material, regardless of form or characteristic.

A **record** is "Any information created, received and maintained as evidence and/or information by an organisation or person, in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business" (ISO 15489).

A record can also be any document conveying information by any means in any medium, for example:

- Paper documents
- E-mails
- Maps and plans
- Hand written notes
- Invoices and contracts
- Audio, video or digital record

Documents and Records

Individual organisation standards should dictate that when a document becomes a record the contents of that record should remain unaltered, without any deletions or revisions. When information is added to an existing hard copy record, for example by annotations, the additional information should be initialled and dated. This system provides an audit trail of revisions made, and ensures that all records remain accurate and true.

A large amount of records are generated within the Organisation on a daily basis; these newly created records should be subjected to a set of guidelines.

Consider the following when creating new records:

- Identity an owner and author
- Title the record consistently, in line with related records
- Quote all sources or references

New records should be maintained along-side existing records. There should be a clear relationship between new and existing records.

Maintaining records is a key activity. If full and accurate records are not maintained effectively, then team decision-making processes will suffer.

Ephemeral Records

These records have no business or evidential value. Ephemeral records lose value quickly (normally after a few days) and must be disposed of on a regular basis.

Examples of ephemeral records include:

- Simple queries to a department
- Invitations to meetings and conferences
- Rough drafts
- Reference copies of records retained elsewhere

Vital Records

Certain records are critical to the organisation activities. These are known as vital records. Without these records, a department could not operate, for example highways planning teams require accurate maps of current roads and pathways.

The Organisation must protect its vital records so that, in the event of a disaster, they can be recovered quickly and efficiently.

FILE PLAN

A corporate record of the Organisation must be contained in a formal structure of files. This promotes good business management and makes it easier to control the Organisation's information. This also facilitates the implementation of Freedom of Information legislation, thus making it easier to retrieve information when requested.

A file plan is a hierarchical structure of folders used as a navigational aid for the storing and retrieval of records and information.

A good file plan meets the following requirements:

- Arranges information in a way that enables quick storage and retrieval
- Ensures information is accessible in the long-term across the organisation and beyond
- Arranges information in logical groups enabling effective records management and information disclosure.

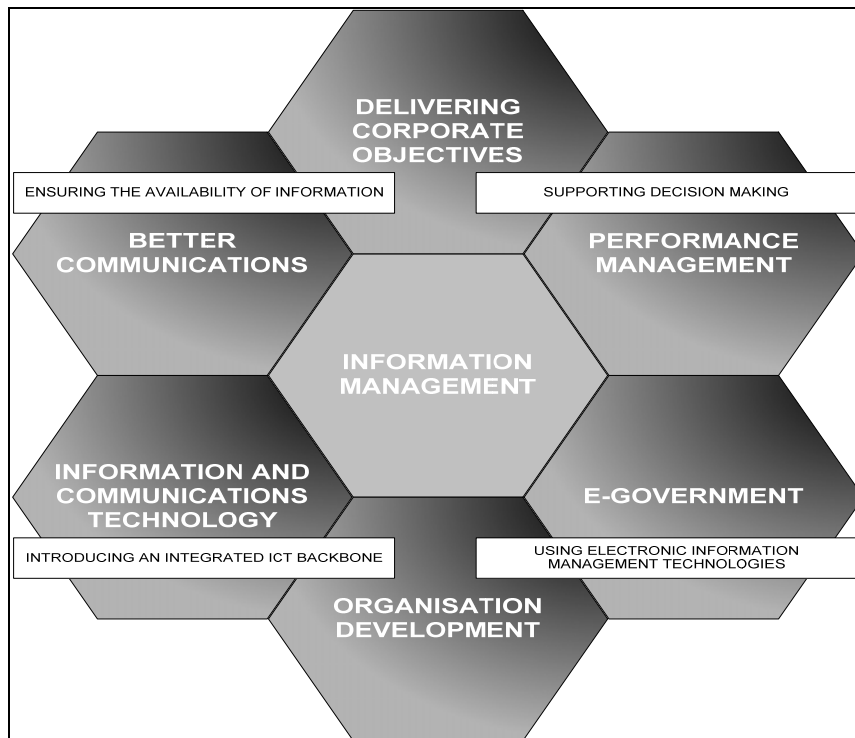


Figure 1. IM in Context

This diagram illustrates information management in context and the role and aims of the Information Management Unit within the Organisation.

RETENTION AND DISPOSAL

Not all records created by the Organisation are worth preserving permanently. Records held do not have an indefinite life-span and should not be kept 'just in case'. Retention schedules will provide guidance to employees regarding what records should be kept and for how long.

Records need to be retained for the following reasons:

- To comply with legal requirements
- To protect against litigation
- To support decision making
- To improve performance
- To document activities and decisions
- To provide a 'long-term' corporate memory

Records and information should be destroyed for the following reasons:

- It costs money to store records indefinitely
- It takes administrative effort to manage stored files
- If you retain them, you may need to produce them
- It takes up valuable office space and staff resources

Appraisal

Paper records need to be appraised by a system that allows for their destruction as soon as their use expires. A different approach to appraisal will be required for electronic records.

Retention and Disposal Schedules

Retention and disposal guidance should be available for each department in the form of a retention schedule. It is important to note that retention schedules identify and describe each record collection or series and not the individual records they contain.

Disposal of Records

It is important to record any disposal of records. These lists must be retained permanently. For records requiring disposal that are not on the retention schedule, there should be appropriate policy in place to address such records.

It is important to note that confidential waste should be clearly identified and kept separate from other waste.

RECORD MAINTENANCE

Record Storage

Storage accommodation for records should be **clean, tidy**, and prevent damage to the records. Equipment used to store records should protect against **unauthorised access** and meet **fire regulations**.

The type of storage appropriate to records will depend on how frequently the records are consulted/used. The average record is most active in the first year of its life; in the second year only 20% are consulted; in the third year less than 5% are consulted.

Four-drawer (and two-drawer) filing cabinets are the least economical way of keeping records. It is better to store files on open shelves or mobile shelving. In offices, however, the use of standard cupboards holding files laterally is the preferred method. As well as being more economical, lateral filing also speeds up retrieval time and allows access to files.

Access to Records

Organisation records must generally be available to all members of staff who may need to use or consult them in the course of their official duties.

Tracking Records

The physical movement of records should be documented. The system should maintain control on the issue of records, the transfer of records between persons or operational areas, and the return of records to their home location for storage. Procedures for handling records should be taken into account, as staff may be required to answer questions under legislation.

Business Recovery Plans

A specific plan must be designed to protect the Organisation's vital records. Vital records are those records without which an organisation could not continue to operate. They are the records that contain information needed to re-establish the Organisation in the event of a disaster.

ELECTRONIC RECORDS

So far, we have dealt with paper records but many of the principles also apply to electronic records. New corporate standards require electronic records to be managed with the same level of efficiency as paper records.

An electronic record is defined as a record which can be created or received, stored and retrieved, maintained or transferred, in digital form. This includes word-processed documents, spreadsheets, graphics, e-mails and material contained on the Internet and Intranet.

Electronic records possess a number of characteristics which distinguish them from paper records including:

- they can be multi-faceted(text, sound, image)
- hardware and software dependent
- easily duplicated
- stored on unstable mediums

Organisation employees should be aware of some of the risks associated with electronic records such as:

- uncontrolled accumulation
- inadvertent destruction
- unauthorised tampering
- poor records management and record duplication (records are often unnecessarily duplicated electronically and on paper).

The Organisation will achieve excellent electronic records management when:

- business processes capture records quickly and effectively.
- new electronic systems are designed to capture reliable and authentic records.
- security of records is established within systems.
- all electronic records are accessible over time.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

All staff

Employees are responsible for their own effective records management. This includes safeguarding all records in their care and acting responsibly when dealing with any organisation information. The Information Management unit and the various Information Officers can provide further guidance on general record keeping practices.

Information Officers

Each department of the Organisation has appointed a person who, in addition to core duties, is responsible for liaising with the records manager on all matters relating to the management of records and information in their area(s).

Senior Managers

Responsibilities of departmental management team include promoting a culture that values information and its effective management and allocating appropriate resources to support information management.

Corporate Information Manager

The Corporate Information Manager (CIM) is responsible for providing advice and guidance on the management of the organisation's records from the moment they are created until the time of their destruction or preservation in the archives.

The IM Unit

Finally, the IM Unit has specific roles and responsibilities as outlined in the IM policy. Information Management is a key concern, and the IM unit is committed to developing and promoting a framework for records management, which includes standards, guidelines, tools and best practices that support their policy.

Oyedokun Ayodeji Oyewole is the president of Records and Information Management Awareness Foundation (RIMA Foundation), a Not-for-profit NGO that seek to promote proper management and security records and information for the benefit of the society and humanity. He can be contacted at: president@rimaw.org