

## RECORDS MANAGEMENT & SECURITY

### What Is Records Management?

Records management is an established theory and methodology for ensuring the systematic management of all records and the information they contain throughout their lifecycle.

According to International Standard ISO 15489: 2001, records management is defined as: *The field of management responsible for the efficient and systematic control of the creation, receipt, maintenance, use and disposition of records, including the processes for capturing and maintaining evidence of and information about business activities and transactions in the form of records.*

What is a record? Traditionally records were held on paper, microfilm or microfiche, but are now predominantly created and held in electronic format or within electronic systems. The core concept underpinning records management theory is that of the lifecycle, which sees records having a series of phases from creation to final disposition ultimately resulting either in their controlled destruction or being retained on a permanent basis as an archival record.

The principle reason for applying the lifecycle concept to records/information management is to ensure that the records being created and held by the institution are being managed and maintained in such a way that they:

- meet all internal business needs
- enable the defence of the rights and interests of the organisation and its stakeholders
- enable the content of the record to be accessed, used and reused in a controlled and efficient manner
- is compliant with all regulatory and statutory requirements
- is capable of providing evidence of a transaction or business process which is admissible in a court of law
- is kept and maintained/stored in the most economical way consistent with the above objectives
- is disposed of in a way which is auditable, and meets all environmental and other requirements

According to International Standard ISO 15489: 2001 records management includes the following activities:

- *setting policies and standards*
- *assigning responsibilities and authorities*
- *establishing and promulgating procedures and guidelines*
- *providing a range of services relating to the management and use of records*
- *designing, implementing and administering specialized systems for managing records and*
- *integrating records management into business systems and processes*

## Why Is Records Management Necessary?

For example, in a large and complex organisation, with hundreds or even thousands of staff, undertaking varied range of functions and having complex administrative structures straddling multiple geographical locations, striving to operate as modern, agile, efficient organisations and be able to sustain growth and manage change, it is essential that they have effective control over the records they create and use. Historically the way in which internal records have been managed has developed in a piecemeal, organic fashion - often in response to local departmental requirements. It is now increasingly recognised that a more proactive, consistent and comprehensive approach is required for the organisation to be able to cope with current and future demands.

Organisations and their staff are under pressure to do more for less. Creating accurate, reliable records; providing controlled, ready access to them and only retaining those worthy of preservation are all part of the essential infra-structure necessary to meet these challenges. This is especially true as it becomes less and less possible to rely on the knowledge and experience of individual members of staff. Increased staff turnover and regular organisational restructuring mean that the records an organisation creates now represent its 'collective memory' to a far larger degree than ever before.

Organisations are also becoming increasingly aware of the potential value contained within the internal records they hold. This could be the lessons they contain from past experiences, allowing organisations to learn both from their successes and their failures. Alternatively as knowledge-rich, research-driven organisations it could be the competitive advantage or even commercial gain that can be acquired through the effective exploitation of their information assets.

As the evidence left behind from the activities we undertake, records are also an organisation's best ally in terms of protecting its rights and interests. Effective records management ensures that the organisation can call upon a body of reliable evidence if required to justify its actions, or defend its position. This may prove a critical strength as we move into an increasingly litigious society.

Organisations are also under ever-mounting pressure to proactively demonstrate their accountability and good standards of corporate governance. This may take the form of internal audit, submissions to funding bodies or public scrutiny through legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act, Environmental Information Regulations and Data Protection Act. Compliance with all of these is only possible if the appropriate body of records exists to prove what actions were taken, why they were taken and on whose authority, and what their outcomes were. This is only possible with effective records/information management.

## What Is A Record?

The ISO defines **records** 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"*.

Whilst useful in stressing the essential evidential quality of a record and of highlighting the vital role played by the record as the output of a transaction, it could be said that this definition of a record fails to adequately describe the properties which define a record.

The International Council on Archives (ICA) Committee on Electronic Records definition of a **record** as, "*recorded information produced or received in the initiation, conduct or completion of an institutional or individual activity and that comprises content, context and structure sufficient to provide evidence of the activity*". The International Council on Archives goes some way to addressing these short-comings by stressing three key properties inherent in all records, that is that they must possess:

1. **Content** (i.e. information or data)
2. **Context** (i.e. it must be possible to ascertain how it relates to other records and to the organisation which created it)
3. **Structure** (i.e. there must be an inherent logic to the way in which the information it contains - and the metadata which is likely to define its context - are laid out and which is ultimately interpretable by the human eye)

The result of adhering to these properties should be to create records which contain the following qualities:

1. **Authenticity:** It should be possible to identify, and preferably prove, the process which created the record and who its authorised creator was.
2. **Completeness:** The record should contain all of the content required to act as evidence of the transaction it is documenting. This does not mean that one record must contain *everything* to which it relates; simply that it is complete in its own terms.
3. **Reliability:** It is important that the content of the record can be relied upon as an accurate representation of the transaction it is documenting.
4. **Fixity.** Once declared as a record its content should no longer be altered or changed in any way. It is in this way that its evidential value is preserved (by ensuring that the content of a record remains exactly as it was at creation).

### **Vital Records/Information Security**

Vital records can be defined as those categories of record which are required by the organisation to be able to carry out its essential core functions in a legally compliant manner. As such they make take many forms ranging from historic charters, through to estate records, insurance certificates, staff payroll information and emergency out-of-hours contact details for key staff.

### **Why Is This Important?**

The quickest way to describe the importance of such records is to imagine the situation without them. The organisation may have no legal mandate to provide services, may not be able to prove ownership of its built asset/estate nor allow those few staff who are willing to work without payment to operate without appropriate insurance cover. This may represent the most extreme, apocalyptic vision but even the 'milder' consequences resulting from the loss of vital records are certainly to be avoided at all costs. These include loss of intellectual

assets and competitive advantage, inability to protect the interests of stakeholders and of course severe damage to your reputation.

### **How to Protect/Secure Vital Records**

Clearly the first requirement is to be able to identify and locate those records which are deemed to qualify as vital. This process may prove easier if broad categories of types of vital record are first defined. Some example categories are included later in this text.

Additional management controls will be required for vital records. These are likely to include routine duplication together with off-site storage of back-ups, specific finding aids which allow vital records to be found quickly and easily in the event of a disaster and ensuring that management of vital records/information is co-ordinated with other aspects of the organisation's disaster recovery and business continuity planning measures.

Measures put in place to manage vital records will need to cover both existing records, plus all new vital records created in the future. When it comes to preparing for future records it will prove useful to identify the processes which will create the records in question.

Example categories of vital records includes: Legal (Charters, insurance certificates, deeds etc), Financial (Accounts, payroll, pensions etc), Operational (Schedule, drawings etc), Commercial (Contracts, memoranda of understanding etc), Intellectual capital (Research data etc), Disaster recovery (Out of hours staff contact details, estate plans, utility and emergency service contact details etc)

Finally, it should be noted that all of the above properties and qualities can apply regardless of the information/record's format, whether it be a sheet of paper, email, photograph or database entry. Such precise definitions and their theoretical underpinnings may seem complex and largely irrelevant to practitioners at the 'coal face' within organisations. However, they are relevant and do have a very real and practical application. It is largely this definition of what records are which separates them from other types of information or data, provides them with their added value and, as we have seen, defines the way in which they must be managed and secured.

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