

Retention Schedules: An Overview

How long should you keep a record? It all depends on legal, administrative, operational, fiscal or historical requirements for each type of record. Retention schedules detail how long a record should be maintained after it is no longer active (used regularly by your organization for business), and what should be done with the inactive record, namely destruction or transfer to an archives.

Retention schedules rely heavily on statutory requirements to determine the length of time a record should be maintained. Some businesses and industries are more regulated than others. Most retention schedules do not differentiate between paper and electronic information: the content, not the format, is what matters when determining value.

For further information on Records and Information Management (RIM), visit the ARMA International website: www.arma.org.

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Records Management Basics Series

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Retention Defined

Retention Schedule: (also disposal schedule, records schedule, records retention schedule, transfer schedule), n. ~ A document that identifies and describes an organization's records, usually at the series level, provides instructions for the disposition of records throughout their life cycle.

Active Records: n. ~ 1. Records that continue to be used with sufficient frequency to justify keeping them in the office of creation; current records. – 2. COMPUTING · Information stored on computer systems that can be readily accessed by the operating system or software without a need to reload media, undelete the information, or reconstruct it from other sources.

Inactive Records: n. ~ Records that are no longer used in the day-to-day course of business, but which may be preserved and occasionally used for legal, historical, or operational purposes.

Disposition: (also **final disposition**), n. ~ 1. Materials' final destruction or transfer to an archives as determined by their appraisal. – 2. DIPLOMATICS · That portion of a record that expresses the will or judgment of the author.

<http://www.archivists.org/glossary/index.asp>

“The steps to establish the records retention schedule are establish series value, establish retention periods, determine requirements, and finalize retention periods.”

- Information and Image Management, 3rd Edition
Ricks, Swafford & Gow

All About Retention Schedules

When a record is no longer active, you should have a process in place to properly deal with said material. Retention Schedules provide a legally sanctioned means for proper disposition of records: destruction or permanent storage.

General Retention Principles

- You can develop retention schedules internally, or get help from public agencies, private corporations or consultants.
- To effectively develop a retention schedule, you need to know what types of records exist in your organization. Conduct a records inventory to determine type, location, format, etc of records.
- Materials born or stored digitally can be records, too.
- Base your retention decisions on legal requirements first. Your organization may have an internal need to keep records longer than the law requires, so you can extend retention periods, but should never shorten them.
- Differentiate between official records (sometimes called the record copy), drafts, and duplicates/copies. In general, drafts should be destroyed as soon as they are superseded, and duplicates should not be kept beyond the retention of the original.
- Retention schedules should be approved by your legal department, and should have support from the highest levels of leadership in your organization.

Types of Retention Schedules

- Functional—scheduling all records in your organization based on program or activity (function), independent of organizational structure or departments; a newer trend is to schedule fewer individual records and create larger functional categories, known as buckets.
- Department Records Series—scheduling records specific to different departments/sections/programs within an organization.
- Integrated Schedule and File Plan—schedule records in conjunction with a system of filing.

Private Sector

- Take into consideration your industry—are you part of a highly regulated industry, such as the energy sector? Your industry will effect your regulatory requirements for maintaining records.

Public Sector

- If you work for or with the federal government, contact the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) about retention requirements.
- State governments often oversee state agencies and political subdivisions, such as cities or counties. Contact your state records office, as they may have basic retention requirements ready for you to tailor to your organization.

Directory of State Archives and Records Programs: <http://www.statearchivists.org/states.htm>