

Electronic Records: An Overview

Whether born digital or converted to an electronic format, records managers and archivists must steward these records. Most retention schedules do not differentiate between paper and electronic information: the content, not the format, is what matters when determining worth.

Working closely with Information Technology departments, records professionals must consider the best manner to preserve and access electronic records. Some examples of electronic records include e-mail (perhaps the most problematic type to manage), graphics, databases, and word processing documents. Often electronic records represent the greatest challenge and liability to an organization, from management to production in legal cases.

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

To get assistance in managing your content with an emphasis on electronic materials, go to the **AIIM—The Enterprise Content Organization** website: www.aiim.org.

**Society of
Rocky Mountain Archivists**
www.srmarchivists.org

Electronic Records Management



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Records Management Basics Series

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Electronic Records Defined

Electronic Records: (also digital record; automated record, largely obsolete), n. ~ Data or information that has been captured and fixed for storage and manipulation in an automated system and that requires the use of the system to render it intelligible by a person.

Electronic Records Management (ERM): 1. The application of records management principles to electronic records 2. The management of records using electronic systems to apply records management principles.

Electronic Document Management System (EDMS): n. ~ A software application that uses automated techniques to ensure that information stored in digital formats is properly distributed, used, stored, retrieved, protected, and preserved according to established policies and procedures.

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

“As their defining characteristic, electronic records contain machine-readable, as opposed to human-readable, information.”

- Managing Electronic Records
William Saffady

Things to Consider, Questions to Ask

Electronic records are easy to create, manipulate, share, and duplicate. The qualities that make them so useful in conducting business also make them problematic to manage. Think holistically when managing electronic records: legacy systems, records creation, version control, management, policies and procedures, compliance, and disposition are important for all varieties of electronic records.

Retention Schedules

- Your first best step is a retention schedule.
- Content not format is key—electronic records should be considered but not scheduled separately.
- Will your EDMS help you with retention and disposition?

Technology

- You should consider legacy systems and compatibility issues before purchasing a new system or upgrading.
- Does your vendor and software fit your needs? The size of the organization, the types of records, or even the location of your employer will effect your decisions.
- The electronic culture of your workplace effects management. Some tax organizations have gone nearly paperless due to the nature of their records, whereas a county clerk’s office must contend with books, papers and electronics of varying ages.
- You must develop a migration program to ensure you can access all your long-term or permanent electronic records. Will you venture into PDF-A?
- How much and what should you make electronic? Should it be done internally or by a vendor? You must consider use, access, resources, return on investment, etc. before undertaking a digitization program.

Policies and Procedures

- Effective policies and procedures make it easy for people to follow best practices.
- Dissemination is key—employees can handle records appropriately only if they are privy to your requirements.

Training and Compliance

- It does not matter if you train individually, in a class setting, via electronic means, etc. Training must occur and be properly documented.
- Training is not the last step. Evaluating compliance ensures that the system is running properly (or lets you know that changes are necessary) and that you have a legally defensible system.
- Depending on the industry, compliance might drive most of your decisions.

Access

- Security is important, so consider carefully the advisability of shared drives, laptops, attachments, etc.