

Guide to Records Management

Records management is a process for the systematic management of all records and the information or data that they contain. Traditionally these were held on paper but are now held increasingly within electronic systems. Records Management is a complicated subject and a professional discipline but this guide is intended to help you to introduce simple changes to assist you to manage your records more effectively and efficiently.

What is a record?

Records are the outputs that document each and every administrative transaction of an institution and note details about its students, members of staff and all its external contacts.

They are the organisation's memory which provide evidence of all transactions, decisions and events which may be needed to be proven or recalled in the future. It is important then that these records are maintained in an appropriate manner so that when they are needed, their originality and legitimacy can be demonstrated.

Why manage them?

We operate in a complicated environment and as compliance becomes increasingly important, formal and authentic proof that decisions and actions have been taken, in turn, become more important.

Gone are the days when staff who had worked in an institution for their whole career could be relied on as remembering all decisions that had been taken in the past: these days, a more professional and objective approach must be taken.

Also, in these days of increased public sector transparency and accountability organisations must be able to demonstrate with confidence the actions that it has taken.

The choice is between muddling through and hoping all will be well, or instituting a records management programme.

Organising information

Records are best being managed together rather than individually. If you group together all the records that perform the same or similar functions, you can manage them as a group rather than separately. In this way you will reduce what you are managing from hundreds or thousands to perhaps a dozen or two.

All budget files can be managed together, as can student files, exam scripts, staff sick records, certain committee papers etc. By having rules for all budget files rather

than rules for each budget file, you will reduce the amount of effort you spend on your files significantly.

The records life cycle

There are three distinct phases to a records life: its creation, and use as a current record; its maintenance as a semi-current record; and its disposal or archiving as a non-current record:

Current Records: these are also known as open records, they are those regularly used for the conduct of current business and are maintained in their place of origin.

Semi-Current Records: these are closed records not needed on a regular basis, but still required sometimes for consultation by their creating body.

Non-current Records: these are those records no longer needed for reference by their creators but which need to be retained for a specific time by the organisation for legal reasons (see Retention Periods below). These need not be kept in expensive office space and can be stored in cheaper less accessible space.

Retention Periods

These are the periods of time, varying from a few months to permanency during which a record has to be maintained by an institution.

This is usually determined by statute, legal, regulatory or business compliance, or where these do not apply, by a best assessment of risks involved in destruction against the costs of retention.

Most financial records of organisations have to be kept for the current year + 6 years to meet VAT and Tax regulations, an effective total of 7 years. In this case the destruction date is known, fixed and can proceed without further intervention. Commercial contracts must be maintained for the life of the contract + 6 years. The exact number of years will depend upon the period of the contract.

For every different type of record, there is a different retention period. We are creating our own list of retention periods. This will be based on the model list JISC have, on behalf of the HE sector, created. It is online at:

http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=srl_structure

For further information about retention, please contact the University's Records Manager whose details are listed below.

Disposition

At the end of the retention period there are two choices: destruction or retention as a permanent historical record in an archive:

Destruction: most records are destroyed at the end of their retention period as they are no longer be needed for legal reasons and are not significant enough for retention as a permanent historical record. Destruction must be in accordance with the nature of the record, i.e. confidential or personal information must be securely disposed of.

Retention: Very few records are retained as for historic purposes. These tend to be committee papers and other official records such as annual reports etc. Other archival records are those which document significant decisions or events. Decisions to (or not to) retain records should only be made by an archivist or records manager.

Electronic records

Electronic records require all the same care that should be applied to records on paper but they present some unique and difficult additional challenges (as they are very easy to change, have no clear structure, can be easily misnamed and can be duplicated easily). The key difference is that systematic naming, the appropriate index terms, search data and retention period have to be applied at the point of creation if there is to be any chance of finding the record again or managing it as a record.

A record, which is created electronically as the only record of a transaction, decision or activity is an original record. It is worth saying that the final word processed version of a document held in an electronic system whether it is a minute or a letter is the original not the paper version and a record, which is created electronically as a digitised version of a record created in another medium (paper, film, voice) is a copy record. This remains true whether or not the original still exists.

There are three core objectives which must be applied to each and every new electronic record:

Authenticity: it must be an accurate version of the activity, transaction, or decision it represents.

Integrity: the record must not be altered after it has been defined as a record. As a general principle if the record content/information is required for subsequent processing this should be copied and a new record created.

Non-Repudiation: The original ownership of the record must be established and maintained to prevent the originator from disowning the record.

Without these, an electronic record may not be able to prove that it is in fact what it purports to be and so good management techniques are vital.

Emails

Not all emails are records. Email records are those that represent the official record (records that document business activities, and which have evidentiary or reference value) or sole copy of a document that needs to be archived. Only emails that are considered official records should be archived in an email archiving system.

Emails that are not records should be purged through routine email management processes. The criteria for assessing whether an email is a record are the same as the hardcopy records management criteria.

Further information and guidance

The University's Records Manager is Matt Stephenson (Head of Information

Governance) who is based in Governance Services Unit.

If you have any queries about records management, periods of retention or any other information management issues, please contact him on extension 56856 or email him at: m.stephenson@salford.ac.uk
