

Introduction to managing records transcript

2019-08-13

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Hello and welcome to this Introduction to managing records webinar, a presentation from the Massachusetts Archives and Records Management Unit.

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In this webinar, we will be covering a variety of topics, starting with the basic question, “What is Records Management?” From there we will explore how to utilize the Massachusetts Records Retention Schedule and how record formats influence your records management choices. We conclude with some tools, tips, and resources to help support your records management program.

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Records management is understanding what records are being created, how they are used, how long you need to keep them for, how and when to get rid of them if you can, and how to save them if you need to save them. The more you know about the final disposition of a record, the better the choices you can make for its creation and maintenance.

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Records management is increasingly referred to as Information Governance because it is a broader term that more easily incorporates the idea of digital content. While incorporating the core ideas of records management, it seeks to highlight issues of security and legal compliance. And lots of people feel overwhelmed by records management, so every now and then you just have to rebrand your ideas.

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A record can be defined as data or information in a fixed form that is created or received in the course of individual or institutional activity and set aside (preserved) as evidence of that activity for future reference. This is one of the definitions from the Society of American Archivists Glossary for a Record. Notice that it does not specify a format or that the information needs to be in physical form. The Record Copy is the official copy for reference and preservation, often the original. A use or access copy is a reproduction of the document created for ease of access and use by other users.

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Active records are documents that are still in use in their creating office. To be active, they are usually referred to on a regular basis. Once the records are no longer being referenced on a

regular basis, they can be considered inactive. Records disposition refers to the final stage of records management where the record is either destroyed or is permanently retained.

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Whether you are using the term records management or the term information governance, the basis premise remains the same: managed records are an asset to your agency or department, and unmanaged records are a threat.

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A managed record is one that the right people can find and access when they need it and one that people who aren't supposed to be able to access the records can't do so.

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Controlling access may translate to the physical security and storage of your records. Whether it is placing your records in a temperature-controlled vault or ensuring that documents aren't left on a counter where anyone can see them, considering the physical location of your records is a component of managing them.

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Physical security also goes beyond locks. It is an unwritten law of nature that records end up in leaky basements and hot attics. Exposure to water, humidity and temperature changes can put your records at risk.

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Digital security involves secure passwords, virus checking, network security, and carefully planning and monitoring. We will talk more in-depth about digital records later in the webinar.

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As we said, a managed record is an asset, but an unmanaged record is a liability. Good records management involves retaining records for as long as you are required to for legal or statutory reasons. If you have a record, you have to produce the record if you are asked for it, even if it is past its retention period. Note: despite the image, cross-cut shredding is preferable to strip shredding.

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Managed records also support the business activities of your offices and departments. If you dispose of records you don't need to keep, you have more time, space and money to put towards records you do need to retain.

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Good records management also supports providing evidentiary documentation of our communities and a historical snapshot of how our government works, what is important to our citizens, and how things change over time.

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To summarize, good records management helps us to get rid of physical and digital clutter.

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And it gives us, as records managers, more time to spend on the important records.

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Record management means a place for everything and everything in its place – without tripping over piles of what we don't need.

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And it allows us to provide the right document to the right person at the right time.

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Records Management shouldn't be an "other duty as assigned" - it is part and parcel of what each of us does in support of our work. It can protect your agencies and departments from data loss and from breaches of important information.

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Your best tool for determining records disposition is the Massachusetts records retention schedule, either the Statewide Agency Schedule or the Municipal Schedule.

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The schedule is available in two formats: the database shown on the previous slide which contains both the Agency and the Municipal Schedules, and as an individual pdf as shown here. There have been changes to both schedules since they were last printed in 2011, so if you are still using the printed book it is no longer complete. In terms of differences between the two formats, there are some fields from the database that aren't part of the pdfs, such as the history of the schedule and the citation information.

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In both the Agency and Municipal Schedules, there is a Records in Common section. These are records that are created by lots of different departments and agencies, so it is easier and clearer to include them in the Records in Common schedule rather than repeating them over and over again. If you don't see the schedule you are looking for in your agency or department specific schedule, take a look in the Records in Common section.

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We're going to take a quick look at what information is presented in the database. It includes the Series Number which is the unique identifier for a specific schedule.

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There is a Series Title which gives you the name of the schedule.

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The Jurisdiction field lets you know if you are in the Municipal or the State Agency schedule. Make sure you are in the right one.

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The Department field tells you if the schedule is part of the Records in Common section or if it is a schedule specific to a department or an agency.

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The Parent Title is not always used, but if what you are looking at is a sub-schedule, there will be a parent title listed.

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The Description field tells you what the schedule applies to although the descriptions, especially for Municipal Schedule, may not be as expansive as we would like.

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The length of time you need to retain a record may be based on qualifications. Qualifications help you determine when the retention clock starts ticking. For example, do you determine retention from the date the document was created or is it from the date of a final payment?

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The Massachusetts General Law and Code of Massachusetts Regulations provides any applicable citation information. These citations usually provide a general description of the process that creates the records rather than a specific retention period.

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There is also a Notes field for any additional information.

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Finally, the Provenance field provide information on the history of the schedule itself and any changes that have occurred to it.

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This is an example of a Records in Common schedule in the Municipal Retention Schedule as it appears in the database.

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A question we often receive in the Records Management Unit is “Where are the schedules for electronic records?” The important thing to remember is that schedules are format neutral. You want to consider the function the record is performing, not the format it is presented in. For example, the bulk of email is simply correspondence.

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Schedules that are listed with an Administrative Use designation can be destroyed without requesting permission for destruction. In general, secondary use copies are considered to be Administrative Use records.

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So, you’ve identified your applicable record schedule and determined that your records have reached their full retention period, now what? Reminder: retentions are minimal periods to retain records, if you have a business need to hold them longer you can, just be sure to document why you are varying from schedule so others can understand the decisions you’ve made. Also, if there is a legal hold on the records, they can not be destroyed until the hold is lifted, regardless of whether or not they’ve reached their retention period.

If you are looking to destroy the records, and they are not administrative use records, you will need to request permission to destroy records from the appropriate authority.

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For Statewide Agencies, you will want to complete the RCB-2U form and submit it to the Records Conservation Board for review and approval. The form has recently changed, so be sure you are using the most current version.

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For Municipalities, you will want to complete the RMU-2 form and submit it to the Records Management Unit for review and approval by the Supervisor of Public Records.

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At this time, there are three ways you can submit the form: via fax, by mail, or by email.

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As mentioned above, the RCB-2U forms for Statewide Agencies are reviewed and approved by the Records Conservation Board. They meet on a monthly schedule, usually on the first Wednesday of each month.

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RMU-2 forms submitted by Municipalities are reviewed and approved as they are received.

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If the records have a permanent disposition, whether you are in a state agency or a municipality impacts your options.

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State agencies are eligible to transfer permanent records that are no longer in active use in their offices to the custody of the Massachusetts Archives. Options in municipalities will differ, but working with your City or Town Clerk may be a good starting place for figuring out what to do next.

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Permanent records also provide as an opportunity to transition to our discussion of different record formats and how formats can affect your decision-making processes. When you are dealing with physical records, be sure to ensure that they are in a secure location with stable temperature and humidity. Make sure they are housed in appropriate boxes and that you are managing the information about your holdings.

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Especially for digital records, knowing the disposition of the records can really impact the choices you make for managing the records.

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Regardless of physical or digital records, there are certain characteristics they are important to keep in mind. The records need to be authentic which is defined as the quality of being genuine, not a counterfeit, and free from tampering, and is typically inferred from internal and external evidence, including its physical characteristics, structure, content, and context.

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Reliable and trustworthy means that the record is “created with appropriate authority, according to established processes, and being complete in all its formal elements.”

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And the record needs to be accessible which is the characteristic of being easily reached or used with a minimum of barriers. Also, it means there is the ability to locate relevant information through the use of catalogs, indexes, finding aids, or other tools. You also have the permission to locate and retrieve information for use (consultation or reference) within legally established restrictions of privacy, confidentiality, and security clearance; access.

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Now that we've discussed the similarities between physical and digital records, how are digital records different?

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You need intervening technology to access digital content both in terms of hardware and software.

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The material is also more complex than a paper record.

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As well as an increased risk of loss or corruption.

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You may also be dealing with multiple versions of the files, deleted copies and drafts and other copies.

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Security is also more complicated. It is much harder to hack a box of paper than it is to hack a digital file. Again, we are making sure that the right people can see the right information, and that we are preventing personal or private information from being inappropriately accessed.

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Not to mention that there is just so many more records being created.

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However, the mandate remains the same. You need to retain the record for the duration of retention period regardless of format.

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If you are managing short-term digital records, you will want to determine the official record copy so you know what copy you are managing and what copies are administrative use copies.

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File formats are less important with short-term records than with longer term records. And hardware obsolescence is less of an issue, especially if you are working in a managed, networked environment.

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For long-term or permanent records, you need to pay more attention to the file formats you are creating and maintaining the records in. Hardware obsolescence is also a concern and ideally your IT department is refreshing your hardware every 3-5 years and maintaining regular updates to virus software. There are a lot of complexities and variables with long-term and permanent records, so rather than delving too deeply into those preservation issues, if you have questions or need assistance in this area, please contact the Massachusetts Archives digital preservation staff if you have questions or need assistance in this area.

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When it comes to digital storage, there is the ideal and the reality. In an ideal world, we would be able to support three copies, each backed-up, and with one of the copies in a geographically distributed location. At a minimum, you need to have a back-up, hopefully not in the same building. You don't want to be in a situation where a fire or other disaster can take out all copies of your files in one event.

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Finally, let's take a look at some tools, tips and resources that can help with your records management.

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Records management tends to be a very personal activity. A file structure or naming convention that makes perfect sense to one person may be completely incomprehensible to another person. If records are being access by multiple people in your office or department, make sure there is consensus on how the records are being arranged and described. And it can be beneficial to document the decisions that you make so that five, ten or twenty years from now someone different looking at the records can understand the approach that was taken.

Whether you are working with physical or digital records, consider a filing structure to group and manage the records. Using a controlled vocabulary for your office can be beneficial; for example, setting a standard that Meeting Minutes are files as "Minutes" and not "Staff Meeting Minutes" can keep your records together. For digital records, consider a standardized naming convention.

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Consider information about disposition as you develop your filing structure and naming convention. If you file records with the same disposition together you can save yourself from having to pull apart files later.

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And if you are including date information in your filing naming convention, consider using the ISO standard of a four digit year, two digit month, and a two digit day separated by dashes. This format is understandable to your computer and the dates will sort correctly.

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Your office may be utilizing an electronic records management system. These systems are databases that allow you to associate metadata or indexing with either born-digital or digitized documents.

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The Massachusetts Archives has a document providing some more in-depth suggestions to think about when you are selecting an electronic records management system. Please contact the Massachusetts Archives digital preservation staff for a copy of this hand-out.

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The areas that prompts the most questions are email and social media retention. For these, the important thing to remember is that it is Content, not the Container that is used for determining the disposition. There is no blanket schedule for "Email" or for "Social Media." Think about what is the function that is being fulfilled. Is it correspondence? A press release? An announcement?

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It can also be helpful to consider some of the following questions. Is this the only form that the information exists in? In other words, is this copy of the record the official record copy or just a use or convenience copy? And is the site a document unto itself?

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There is no easy way to manage email. While some email management tools provide a level of auto-categorization, we are not to a place where the technology is seamless and doesn't require some level of manual intervention. For most of us, either creating a filing structure within our email or tagging files with disposition information are the available options for email management. When managing your email, don't forget to take a look at your Sent Mail folder as well.

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When it comes to digitization, there is a lot more involved than running a document through a scanner. It may not be worth the cost and effort to digitize a record that only has a 1 or 2 year retention period. Not only is there the cost of the digitization itself, but there is the cost of indexing, quality checking, long-term file monitoring and storage. It may not be worth the time and resources to digitize records for a short-term retention or for records that no one is ever asking to see. The Massachusetts Archives digital preservation staff is available to assist you in determining if digitization is right for your situation.

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If you do decide to digitize, the digital preservation staff can point you to existing standards and workflows like this Digitization Projects document from the Council of State Archivists.

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The Massachusetts Archives also has a Frequently Asked Questions document available on its website.

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Not surprisingly, the most frequently asked “Frequently Asked Question” is what happens to the paper documents after digitization. The current guidance is that you are responsible for retaining the records for the full retention period, regardless of format. If you digitize records, the digitized records become the record copy and you can destroy the paper copy without requesting permission for destruction. When the final copy is ready for destruction, in this case the digitized file, you will need permission. Remember though: some records may have inherent evidentiary or historical value that may justify retaining the paper record. And if you are a state agency working with permanent records, the Massachusetts Archives is available as a repository for both the physical and digitized copy.

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Just to reiterate, maintaining a digital file is more complicated than maintaining a paper file, but the mandate is the same: the record needs to be maintained for the full retention period. But remember, the Massachusetts Archives staff is available to help you work through these issues and we are happy to help.

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That concludes this Introduction to managing records. Thank you for your time and your interest in this topic. If you have further questions, please contact either the Massachusetts Archives or the Records Management Unit for further assistance.