KEY CONCEPTS

An understanding of the following key concepts is helpful for the development of an electronic records management program.

- Definition of a Record
- Electronic Records
- Metadata
- Information Governance
- Long-term Retention Approaches
- Electronic Records Management Goals

Definition of a Record

The California Public Records Act (CPRA) defines a public record as, "any writing containing information relating to the conduct of the public's business prepared, owned, used, or retained by any state or local agency regardless of physical form or characteristics."[1] A record includes all forms of recorded information that currently exist or that may exist in the future. The CPRA specifies a record as any, "handwriting, typewriting, printing, photostating, photographing, photocopying, transmitting by electronic mail or facsimile, and every other means of recording upon any tangible thing any form of communication or representation, including letters, words, pictures, sounds, or symbols, or combinations thereof, and any record thereby created, regardless of the manner in which the record has been stored."[2]

Essentially, an official state record includes any and all information produced for the purposes of conducting government business regardless of the format or shape the record might take.

Electronic Records

Various types and formats of electronic records exist but there are two main categories of electronic records: born digital records and digitized records. Born digital records are those records created with a computer that require a computer to be readable by people. A digitized record is one that is born analog and has been converted into a machine readable format using a scanner or camera. For the purposes of this handbook electronic records of both types should be handled in the same way. Electronic records such as email and word processing documents may resemble analog records, but more sophisticated electronic records such as geospatial records and databases exist which do not bear resemblance to analog records.

No matter how the electronic record was created, it is important to remember that an electronic record is one that requires a computer to read and translate.

[1] California Public Records Act, Government Code Section 6252(e).
[2] California Public Records Act, Government Code Section 6252(f).

Metadata

Metadata plays a central role in electronic records management. Often defined as "data about data," metadata's function is essential for e-discovery and determining record authenticity. Specifically, metadata describes the content of a file and allows users to locate and evaluate data. Metadata is most useful if a structured format is in place using a controlled vocabulary.

A simple example of metadata is the information stored with email files such as sender, recipient, time sent, and similar. These elements provide additional information in addition to the body of the email.

Information Governance

The idea of information governance can be attributed to the explosion of electronic data generation in recent decades. In short, information governance may be interpreted as records management for electronic records. Information governance incorporates more records management methodologies which cater to the unique issues records managers face when dealing with electronic records. Some of the fundamental principles of information governance such as appraisal, use, storage and disposition will resonate with records managers versed in analog records but proper management of electronic records necessitates attention to issues such as metadata management, storage optimization, electronic discovery requirements, and privacy attributes that may prove foreign to some. Proper information governance is crucial to the support of an agency's immediate and future legal requirements regarding electronic records.

Information governance establishes a course of action for electronic records to ensure their appropriate and effective use and to allow an agency to meet its specific goals.

Long-Term Retention Approaches

Given the variety of digital records and the fast pace of changing technology one must consider options for ensuring access to records that an agency may want to retain for future use.

- *Conversion*. Converting a file such as a Word document into a platform neutral format greatly increases the chances of having the file available for future use. One option may be to convert files retained for future use into PDF/A. Given the availability of programs such as Adobe Acrobat which easily convert files into a more desirable PDF/A format, this approach is feasible. A records manager may want to inform or educate staff about converting files that may be needed by the agency for future use.
- *Migration*. Migration refers to moving a record or file from one platform, storage medium, or other physical format to another. For example, an agency may have active records that are stored on volatile magnetic disks. Migrating those records to more stable storage such as a storage server is imperative to ensure their availability for future use.

The needs of an agency and the electronic records that are identified as worth retaining will dictate strategies for long term records retention. Given the complexities of electronic records it is best to

consult with your agency's information technology department on a solution that promotes long term availability of active electronic records.

As with paper records, it is important to include electronic records in any retention schedules produced. Just as with paper records, electronic records are public records and, therefore, fall under the same legal obligations and requirements for management and disposition of records.

Electronic Records Management Goals

Electronic records management, while involving special considerations, requires the planning, budgeting, organizing, directing, training, and controlling of activities associated with managing the record in its entirety. Electronic records require continuous management throughout their entire lifecycle because of the potential for lost or unreadable data. This is a complex task amidst the ever growing volume and diversity of electronic information. Whatever the methodical approach taken by your agency for your electronic records program, some key records attributes to be aware of include the following:

- *Trustworthy.* This refers to the information that is retained in your records. Is it reliable, authentic, and unaltered? Will your records hold up in a court of law if necessary? A collaborative effort with your IT department to identify and implement a strategy to ensure authenticity and trustworthiness of your records may prove valuable if the records in question go before a judge.
- *Complete.* Is the information contained in your records stored in such a way that it will be comprehensible if needed in the future? Proper metadata input will help identify the records' relationship to that of the agency's activity and to other records. Metadata is also helpful in discovering the record for future use. A record is not complete if it cannot be located and used at a later time.
- *Accessible.* If your record is not accessible it is useless. Therefore a strategy to locate and access records is important. Whether the records need immediate access or not can be determined by the needs of your agency and the possible public interest in the record.
- *Durable.* Again, if your record is not readable it is useless. Safeguarding records against possible loss is key to the records' durability and should be considered when selecting how and where to store them. The lifespan of storage media is not very long and due to the fast pace in changing technology it may be impossible to read files off of certain storage media after ten years or less. One should also consider the environmental conditions of where the storage media will be held. A hot warehouse or damp storage container are not ideal holding areas for storage media.