



## ***Retaining Records in Electronic Format***

Virtually all City employees use a desktop computer to perform some aspect of their job, creating hundreds of electronic records every business day. Because it has become second nature for us to create records using Word, Excel, PowerPoint and other computer programs, it's logical that we want to use the computer to maintain records as well. But, properly maintaining records in electronic format is a more complicated matter than simply making the decision to not to print them out.

There are computer software programs known as Electronic Document Management Systems (EDMS) that have the ability to collect and organize records, attach retention rules, keep the records unalterable for as long as they are required, identify records of historic value, enforce the retention rule through reliable destruction, and suspend destruction if an investigation or litigation action is pending or imminent. There is currently no EDMS for the entire City.

The ability to maintain records in electronic format does exist without an EDMS, but it requires considerable effort on the part of records creator to ensure that the records are retained in compliance with State recordkeeping requirements. Employees should be aware of the following facts and issues before making the decision to maintain records in electronic format.

### **What is an electronic record?**

An electronic record is any combination of text, graphics, data, audio, pictorial, or any other information representation in digital form created, modified, maintained, archived, retrieved, or distributed by a computer system that is used to conduct City business.

### **Is the document the official record version or an electronic convenience copy?**

The official version of the record is considered the primary copy and is subject to the retention requirements established in the City's records retention schedules.

A convenience copy is a secondary copy of a record kept for reference or research purposes. Secondary copies may be disposed of when they are not longer needed.

For example, you may retain the electronic version of a letter as a Word file in your network drive for the convenience of creating another version of the letter at a latter date. This would be the secondary copy. The official version of the record would be the signed version in hard copy.

### **What are advantages to retaining records in their electronic format?**

1. The author can access the electronic record faster than the paper alternative.
2. It saves on the use of paper and the storage space required to store paper files.
3. It can be easily shared with co-workers and sent to more than one person at the same time.

### **What are the disadvantages to retaining records in their electronic format?**

1. Electronic records are easy to manipulate creating questions about reliability and authenticity.
2. Rapid changes in the hardware and software will render the records unreadable unless they are migrated.
3. Media used to store records (CDs, magnetic tape, diskettes, etc...) is fragile and can lose records stored on them.
4. Degradation of electronic records often happens invisibly, meaning we aren't aware that the records are usable until we try to read them.

5. Often creates the necessity to maintain dual record keeping systems (paper/electronic) that emulate one another in order to ensure users can locate the complete file on particular issues or project.
6. Records are commonly only available in a user's network account without anyone else knowing of their existence.

### **What are the records retention periods?**

The retention periods for electronic records are based on the function of the record and are the same as if the records were in hard-copy, audio, video, etc. Retention periods are listed on the records retention schedule, either the City-wide General Records Retention Schedules or the Department Specific Retention Schedules if you have unique functions in your office. The retention period will have an impact on electronic records as maintaining records in electronic format gets harder and more expensive the longer it must be retained. Knowing how long your records must legally be retained will help determine if maintaining your records electronically is feasible.

### **How will people who need the records be able to find them?**

As with paper based records, having a file management plan structured on the office's records retention schedule with consideration to reflect how the records are requested is key to being able to find the records quickly when needed.

Records should be organized into folders using in the Windows operating system. Folders are designed to organize or group related records pertaining to specific business activities or subjects. These folders should reside on a shared network drive that allows access to authorized users. Folder and subfolder titles must clearly and accurately indicate the purpose, content, and characteristics of the records they contain.

### **How will the records be disposed of?**

Most people don't think about disposing of electronic records until they receive a call from IT informing them that they are almost out of server space. But this is not a sound records management strategy. Employees are responsible for reviewing their electronic records periodically and carry out the disposition of those records in accordance with the applicable records retention schedule.

### **What will happen to the electronic records if the employee leaves?**

When an employee leaves their position, the employee's manager is responsible for designating a new custodian for the records and ensuring that the records are properly identified and transferred to the appropriate place prior to deletion of the departed employee's accounts.

The City Records Management Program can help you determine which retention periods apply to your electronic records, develop plans to organize them, identify preservation strategies, and provide training related to electronic records management. Contact the City Records Management Program at 684-8154 for assistance.

