Official and Transitory Records: A Guide for Government of Alberta Employees

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Alberta
GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA

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1.
INTRODUCTION

As government employees, we all have an obligation to properly document what we do by creating complete and accurate records of our activities and by ensuring that the appropriate records relating to our work are filed in official filing systems. The records that document our jobs are important assets that are owned by the government. They are not ours to do with as we choose.

These guidelines are intended to help each government employee to

- decide what records to create;
- decide which records to retain in filing systems;
- decide which records are "transitory" and can be disposed of as soon as we no longer need them;
- dispose of transitory records securely; and
- comply with the requirements of the Records Management Regulation and the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.*

2.
WHAT IS A RECORD?

For the Alberta government, the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* and the Records Management Regulation define a record as

> "a record of information in any form and includes notes, images, audiovisual recordings, x-rays, books, documents, maps, drawings, photographs, letters, vouchers and papers and any other information that is written, photographed, recorded or stored in any manner, but does not include software or any mechanism that produces records."

Another definition of record is found in the international records management standard published by the International Organization for Standardization. ISO 15489-1[1] defines a record as

> "information created, received and maintained as evidence and information by an organization, or person, in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business."

In other words, records provide evidence of the conduct of government business and can be in any medium or format. Virtually everything that we document related to our jobs, whether we use a computer, personal digital assistant, pen, camera, or audio or video recorder, is a record.

It is especially important to understand that **electronic documents and information are records too**. Electronic records are the ones we create, distribute or receive by computer, such as electronic mail, Word documents, graphics and spreadsheets. Please keep this in mind as you read this document.

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[1] Information and documentation – Records Management – Part 1: General / ISO, Geneva, 2001.

3.
WHAT RECORDS SHOULD WE CREATE?

We create records to document and provide evidence of our work activities. When a land title, birth, death or marriage is registered, the registration system automatically creates a record. Someone must decide to take minutes of meetings, however, to record the decisions that were made.

Some ministries may have established policies or procedures for creating specific types of records. If not, we should create records that document how a program was planned and managed, what decisions were made, what was done and what results were achieved.

Here are some examples of activities and transactions that we should document:

- results of significant daily activities that support the mission and objectives of our organizations;
- advice and recommendations made to management and the decisions and actions taken as a result, along with supporting documentation;
- problems encountered in business operations and the steps taken to resolve the problems;
- interactions with the public, customers, clients, stakeholders, consultants, vendors, business partners and other government jurisdictions;
- verbal communications such as meetings, telephone calls and face-to-face discussions where significant actions or decisions have occurred;
- legal agreements of any kind, including contracts, along with supporting documentation;
- policy, business planning, performance measurement and budget activities, and supporting documentation;
- work done for the government by consultants and other external resources; and
- actions and decisions where payments are made or received, funds committed, services delivered or obligations incurred.

4.
WHICH RECORDS SHOULD WE RETAIN AND FILE?

We should retain and file records that

- are required to support business operations; or
- document and provide evidence of business transactions; or
- are required by legislation; or
- protect the rights of citizens and the government; or
- provide evidence of compliance with accountability or other business requirements; and
- will have some future business, financial, legal, research or archival value to the government and people of Alberta.

The records that we retain and file in organized filing systems and manage according to government and organizational records management policies, standards and best practices are the **_official records_** of government. Official records should be stored securely so that they will be readily available to those who need them and are authorized to access them. This applies both in our paper-based and our electronic work environments.

Generally, the business unit responsible for a program or service will maintain the master set, i.e. the most complete and comprehensive set of records related to that program or service. In some ministries, master sets of records are filed in one or more central file rooms, on shared network directories, or in Electronic Information Management (EIM) systems.

Committees, work groups and project teams present a special recordkeeping challenge. It's a good idea for committees, work groups and project teams to appoint someone to maintain the master set of agendas, minutes and other records and store them in a location that everyone can access. This will help ensure that the work of groups is adequately documented. It would then be up to each individual in the group to decide whether the reference/duplicate copies they receive have sufficient future value to their business units to merit retaining the copies or whether to dispose of them when they no are longer needed.

5.
WHICH RECORDS CAN WE ROUTINELY DESTROY?

Not all records that you create or receive as you conduct government business have to be treated as official records. Some will have no further value to government beyond an immediate or minor transaction. Others might be required only for a very short time, perhaps until they are made obsolete by an updated version of the record, or by a subsequent transaction or decision. These are ***transitory records***, and you can routinely destroy or delete them. There are two instances where transitory records cannot be routinely destroyed. See the box on page 7 for details.

Many offices keep more records than necessary. This uses up valuable space on servers and hard drives, in file rooms, workstations and storerooms, and makes it more difficult to locate and retrieve the records that are important. Routinely disposing of transitory records will make recordkeeping in your office more efficient.

In the Alberta government, the Records Management Regulation requires us to dispose of government records according to the conditions set out in approved records retention and disposition schedules.[2] The Transitory Records Schedule allows us to immediately dispose of records that have only short-term value. It

- describes different types of transitory records;
- delegates authority to every government employee to identify and dispose of transitory records;
- applies to individual documents and not to file folders or sets of records; and
- applies to records in all media (i.e. electronic, printed and other formats).

5.1 How to decide which records are transitory

Determining whether a record is transitory depends on individual judgment of the value of the record. One employee could deem a record to be transitory while another considered it to be official, because the roles of the employees and their use of the information are different. The key consideration is that if a record has only immediate or very short-term value to an organization and will not be required again after it is obsolete, you can dispose of it as soon as you're finished with it. But if the information in the record will have some future business, financial, legal, research or archival value to the government, then you should retain and file it. If you're in doubt, keep the record.

To help you make these decisions, Appendix 1 contains a decision diagram to assist you. As well, the following sections describe types of transitory records you might deal with on a regular basis.

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[2] A records retention and disposition schedule is a legal authority that describes records, specifies how long and where they must be kept and what their final disposition (destruction or archival preservation) will be.

Advertising material: Advertising material includes solicited or unsolicited information you receive from businesses or individuals advertising their products or services. You may want to retain and file some of this material for future reference if it's relevant to your work. However, you can routinely discard most of it. Examples of advertising material are paper or electronic brochures, company profiles, sales letters, menus, catalogues and price lists.

Blank information media: Blank information media includes anything that was intended to be used for collecting or storing information, but was not used, or has been used and erased, and has become obsolete. Obsolete stationery and blank forms are a good example. This also applies when you must physically destroy other blank storage media such as video or audiotapes, diskettes, compact disks, digital videodisks, magnetic tapes or hard drives. An example might be a situation in which it's necessary to destroy the medium to prevent the recovery of erased information.

Draft documents and working materials: Correspondence, reports and other documents usually go through several drafts or versions before they are finalized and distributed. Also, research or working materials such as calculations and notes are often collected and used in the preparation of documents. Once the final version of a document is complete and the master filed, most drafts and working materials should be disposed of as transitory records.

Note: **Not all drafts are automatically transitory**. In some cases, offices responsible for drafting legislation, legal documents, policy, budgets, standards, guidelines or procedures might need to track the evolution of the final product. These offices may need to keep various drafts, research and working materials in order to have a record of changes that were made and why.

Duplicates: Duplicates are exact copies of documents where

- nothing has been added, changed, or deleted;
- the copies have been used for reference or information purposes only; and
- the master version of the document has been filed in an official filing system.

A record must meet all three of these conditions to be a duplicate. If something has been added, changed or deleted then it's no longer a duplicate. It could still be transitory, however, depending on the significance and future value of the addition, change or deletion. Some examples of duplicates are

- photocopies of paper documents;
- copies of government brochures and pamphlets;
- duplicates of microfilm, CD-ROMs, DVDs, etc.
- duplicate audio or video recordings;
- electronic copies of e-mail messages and other electronic documents; and
- prints of microfilmed or imaged documents, e-mail messages or other electronic documents that are not the file copies for filing systems.

External publications: Publications include books, magazines, periodicals, pamphlets, brochures, journals, newspapers and software documentation, whether printed or electronic, that you have obtained from sources outside your organization. If they will have no future value, you can discard them after use.

Note: The **master copies of publications produced by or for your organization** are not transitory and should be filed. Extra copies of obsolete internal publications are transitory. They are examples of duplicates.

Information of short-term value: We receive many documents containing information that is of little or no interest, or importance to us or is useful for only a brief period of time after which it has no further value. These documents do not have to be filed and can be routinely disposed of once we are finished with them. Some examples are

- routine notices or memos regarding holidays or special events circulated to all staff or posted in public folders;
- insignificant or inconsequential information items concerning routine administrative or operational matters;
- other issues not pertaining directly to your office or not requiring you to act;
- personal messages and information; and
- routing slips and opened envelopes.

Note: The business units where these types of records originate should retain a *file copy* if the records document their activities and have some future value.

These categories of transitory records are not absolute – there are always **exceptions** to the general guidelines. Records could appear to meet the criteria of being transitory, but because of how you use them in the course of your work, you should actually retain and file them.

5.2 Transitory records relating to FOIP requests or legal actions

In some situations, we must NOT routinely destroy transitory records. If a Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIP) request is received on a subject that pertains to our transitory records, our ability to destroy them is suspended until the applicant's request has been processed and any appeal or appeal period has been completed. It is an offence to wilfully destroy records during this time. Similarly, relevant transitory records should not be destroyed while any legal action, such as discovery, is underway. Your FOIP Coordinator/ legal counsel, Senior Records Officer (SRO) and manager are responsible for notifying staff when a FOIP request has been received or a legal action is underway.

6.
HOW CAN WE DISPOSE OF TRANSITORY RECORDS SECURELY?

As government employees we must make sure that records are disposed of in a secure manner. Knowledgeable records management or administrative staff manage the disposition of official records, and also coordinate the destruction of transitory records containing confidential or sensitive information. However, we all regularly dispose of transitory records when we delete electronic documents and discard paper documents in confidential receptacles or recycling boxes.

The method we should use to dispose of transitory records depends on the medium of the records, and whether or not they contain sensitive information. Transitory records can exist on any kind of media but the two most common are paper and electronic. They may or may not be confidential.

Just like some official records, some transitory records include information such as: personal information about individuals, third party business information, Cabinet confidences, and draft legislation or policies. Sections 16-29 of *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* provide guidance on what could be considered sensitive or confidential. Consult your FOIP Coordinator if you need assistance. Also, obsolete forms that could be misused, such as business cards, blank letterhead, purchase orders and requisition forms should be disposed of as confidential transitory records.

6.1 Disposing of paper transitory records

The Alberta Records Centre (ARC) manages the disposition of many of the government's confidential transitory records through contracts with private shredding companies. The process is secure and environmentally friendly.

Sometimes, you might need to shred paper transitory records on-site yourself or have it done by a mobile shredding company. If you use this type of process, make sure that the destruction procedure is secure and that the shredded paper is securely disposed of.

For security and privacy reasons, there are different procedures for disposing of routine transitory records, and those containing confidential or sensitive information.

Non-confidential paper transitory records: Most organizations recycle non-confidential paper transitory records. Employees deposit these documents into recycle bins. The paper is transported to a central facility where it is sorted by paper grades, then recycled on-site or resold and shipped to other recyclers. Recycling is not appropriate for confidential transitory records.

Confidential paper transitory records: As with official records, confidential transitory records should be collected and disposed of through a secure process in your business unit. Most often, destruction is carried out through secure shredding arranged by the Alberta Records Centre. It is not an acceptable practice to place confidential paper transitory records in recycle bins. If you are unsure whether a record is confidential, err on the side of caution and treat it as confidential.

6.2 Disposing of electronic transitory records

Regardless of whether electronic records are confidential or not, the process for disposing of them is the same. In the current environment, we should routinely delete e-mail messages, spreadsheets, etc. **after we've determined that they actually are transitory records, using the criteria in sections 3 – 5 of this guide**. This means regularly emptying our Deleted Items folder, Sent Items folder, Public Folders and electronic Recycle Bins once the records we need to retain are filed in an organized filing system.

In addition, messages or documents might be automatically deleted by a system after a specified period of time, or when an individual's allocated workspace on a network server is full. If your organization does this, then it's particularly important for you to regularly determine which records you need to keep and file, and delete the rest.

Also, you need to be sure that when you delete a transitory record, you also delete duplicates and drafts of the record that could be located on various devices such as: your C:\ drive, your individual work spaces on networks, shared drives, active and archived e-mail folders, disks, laptops and other portable computing devices.

Note: Government **computers are often reallocated within and between departments, or sold as surplus** outside government. Any official records on reallocated or surplus computers must be printed, copied or moved to another storage device, transitory records must be deleted, and the drives wiped according to government standards and practices before the device is transferred. Your Senior Records Officer should work with an information technology specialist to ensure that records are deleted properly. Failure to do this could result in inadvertent disclosure of sensitive personal or government information.

Occasionally, to securely dispose of confidential transitory records, you may have to physically destroy other media such as microfilm, audio/video tape, diskettes, CDs, DVDs or magnetic tapes. As with reallocated and surplus computers, it will be necessary to print, transcribe, copy or move any official records to another storage medium before the first medium is destroyed.

7.
TIPS FOR CONTROLLING THE GROWTH AND DISPOSING OF TRANSITORY RECORDS

Here are some common-sense tips for dealing with transitory records:

- Don't create unnecessary transitory records by downloading documents and distributing them as attachments. If possible, link to the original web site instead.
- Discard duplicate print and electronic documents when you are sure the master has been filed.
- Dispose of draft versions of documents and working materials that you don't need to keep when you are sure the final version has been distributed and a copy filed.
- Securely destroy supplies of blank forms, letterhead/memo paper and business cards once they are obsolete.
- Discard routine, external publications once they have been circulated and/or you no longer need them, or once they are obsolete.
- Use techniques such as Spam Filters to reduce spam.
- Dispose of information with short-term value once you have acted on it.
- Dispose of advertising material and unsolicited mail as soon as you're finished with it.
- Review your e-mail messages regularly and delete transitory messages once they are obsolete.
- Erase voice mail messages after you listen to them; erase archived messages once you no longer need to save them.
- Keep a recycle box by the photocopier for extra copies and photocopying errors, BUT be sure you don't discard any copies with confidential or sensitive information.
- Keep a disposal box out-of-sight in your workstation or in the business unit for confidential transitory records – if you deal with especially sensitive information, make sure the box is secure.

8.
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This publication places more emphasis on the management of transitory records than on the management of official records. Other government publications go into more detail on the management of official records. Your organization may also have its own policies, guidelines and procedures for dealing with official and transitory records.

If you need assistance or further information, your first point of contact should be the person responsible for records management in your office or your Senior Records Officer (SRO). Your SRO can also provide you provide you with further information on government records management policies, guidelines and practices. An up-to-date list of SROs can be found on the Information Management web site: http://www.im.gov.ab.ca/directory.

APPENDIX 1:
TRANSITORY RECORDS DECISION DIAGRAM

The diagram below can help you identify records that are considered "transitory" and, thus, can be deleted.

Step 1:

- Does the record (electronic or paper) document or provide **evidence of a business activity, decision or transaction** related to the functions and activities of your organization?

Yes →

Step 2:

- Does it contain information that is of only immediate or **short-term business value** and won't be required in the future?

- Is it a **duplicate** (or c.c.) that was circulated to you strictly for reference purposes and has the master copy of the e-mail been filed?

- Is it a **draft** version of a document that will have no further value once an updated or final version of the document is produced?

No →

Remaining Records:

- Needed to support business activities.

- Protect the rights of citizens and the Government of Alberta.

- Provide evidence of compliance with accountability or other business requirements.

- Have **future business, financial, legal, research or archival value** to the Government and the people of Alberta?

Yes →

It's an Official Record.

(File and manage it.)

No — Non-Business & External

Yes — Business Related

Transitory Record
(Securely dispose of it.)