



Recorded Information Management

Electronic Records: Some Key Challenges

A RIM Reminder

In June 1992 Management Board of Cabinet approved directive 7-5, a new Recorded Information Management (RIM) policy. Managers across government must now see that all records within their areas stay safe, secure and accessible until no longer of value.

In these times of diminishing resources, careful management of information resources is ever more critical. It's key to streamlined programs, excellence in service, and open, accountable government.

- Remember that electronic records - like other records - are subject to certain statutes and directives, including the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* and *The Archives Act*.
- Make sure that the data is not lost due to changing technology or deteriorating storage media... especially information with long term value.

Computers are... everywhere!

Every day most of the thousands of computer workstations across government are creating, distributing and storing critical information: messages, reports, financial data, scientific data - you name it! Computers have changed our lives, helping us work faster, save money, and accomplish more by harnessing their power and speed.

But in all the excitement over new technology it's easy to forget those things that ensure that electronically stored records remain readily retrievable and that data of permanent value remains useable.

Think about it...

- How often have you searched helplessly for documents lost somewhere in your computer directory just because there was no ready way of identifying the one particular record? You're not alone.

- With more and more decisions being made by e-mail, how do you distinguish e-mails worth saving from other messages, perhaps personal or routine? What are the rules for saving this documentation?
- What happens when data with important *long-term research value* is stored using complicated... and changing... technologies? How do you ensure that this information can be transferred in useable form to the Archives of Ontario maybe ten, fifteen years from now?

Maybe answers will depend on common sense and tapping the knowledge held by systems and records management professionals in your ministry. Others require new government-wide strategies and standards.

In the meantime, this fact sheet and two more to follow suggest some simple guidelines for managing electronic records.



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First things first. When acquiring new information technology systems... think strategically:

- *Think compatibility.* Make sure that new software applications will permit ready conversion of files from other systems to ensure their retrievability.
- *Think outgoing use.* Save and protect the software, systems documentation and data management tools needed to operate your system.
- *Think training.* Be sure your people understand their responsibilities to protect information. Computers require special practices; these have to be well communicated.
- *Think security.* Networks and computers should be guarded against threats such as viruses, tampering and unauthorized access. (See Management Board Directive 7-3, *Information Technology Security*.)

- *Think preservation.* Retention and disposal must follow appropriate procedures and include the Archivist of Ontario's approval. Otherwise costly investments in data may be lost and public rights to access data compromised.

Do it soon! The best time to build in retention procedures is when the system is being set up. Ask your ministry's RIM staff and systems people for help.

Once your new system or software's in place...

- *Plan adequate backup system; "refresh" data regularly by copying onto a new disc or tape.* Information stored in electronic media deteriorates over time. Tapes, hard drives and diskettes can be easily erased or damaged. When this happens, goodbye to irreplaceable data and hours of hard work!
- *Save storage space.* Current habits often result in electronic records of no value being kept... congesting system storage, slowing system operations, and crowding directories. Make sure your staff regularly purge

routine administrative message, personal notes, and minor redrafts.

But purge carefully. Remember that many records that today seem unimportant could be critical later, whether for other users or for analyzing and understanding important decisions.

Remember...

RIM applies to all records, including those produced electronically. RIM means **accessibility** (ensuring that records are properly organized, identified and stored); **security** (that they're safe from unauthorized access, alteration, and loss); and **conservation of resources** (ensuring that records are kept as long as they're needed, but then promptly destroyed to eliminate costs... *while also ensuring that the permanent records of government are preserved*)

Fact Sheet #6 will talk about organizing and storing textual documents on your pc or network.

Fact Sheet #7 will look at e-ma

For more information about this **Fact Sheet**, contact the **Archives of Ontario Policy Unit** at (416) 327-1568 or (416) 327-1570 or rim@archives.gov.on.ca