

**Records Management Fact Sheet 10:
Analyzing Electronic Systems and Preparing Records Schedules
January, 2008 (revised)**

As information technology continues to influence record keeping practices the Public Records Board wants to provide advice to state agencies on how to analyze electronic systems and prepare records retention schedules. This guidance builds on the publication Guidelines for the Management of Electronic Information, which the Board issued in 1993. It reflects the developing experience of many individuals in understanding issues surrounding electronic record-keeping.

Be proactive and use the systems approach.

In the electronic environment it is advantageous for the agency to consider records needs during the development of the information system or soon thereafter. By using the systems approach, agencies can address the record-keeping needs of the system, track information within an agency and analyze all of the component parts. The outcome of analysis is a comprehensive document that serves several purposes; a list of internal procedures; additional system documentation and accurate records retention schedules.

What are the steps in the systems approach?

A. Collect the following information about your electronic information system.

1. Obtain an overview of the system including a statement regarding its purpose and objectives. A description of the system will likely be in system documentation first and strategic plans/annual reports second. Smaller systems will likely not be included in these types of reports. They are likely to be maintained in system documentation by the program staff that uses the system or the IT application developer who built the system.

2. Chart the flow of information through the system, noting system inputs and outputs. Ask the following types of questions:
What input documents are needed? Input documents may be paper, electronic forms, in a web format or other electronic transferred data.

What are the outputs from the information system? In what media are they distributed? If multiple copies of a report are needed, in what medium are they distributed? What happens to all the copies? (Some systems do not issue reports, but modifications made to the data in the system are reflected in system backup tapes.)

3. Describe contents of database(s) or data sets. How is the information in the system structured? Is it a flat file? Is it a relational database; a hierarchical database? Identify some of the major data elements.

B. Conduct the analysis and appraisal

1. Determine what parts of the system should be retained and for how long. How long should the documents (input) be retained? Do the input documents or data

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have any audit or legal value once the information has been entered into the data system? Is it sufficient to retain summary reports and in what format and media?

Consider the following types of data retention, retrieval and documentation issues:

What are the oldest data that need to be kept on-line? When can data be written to off-line storage (magnetic tape, floppy disks, and/or optical media)? How long do they need to be retained? Has agency staff created purge criteria? If so they are establishing retention and disposition policies which must be approved by the Public Records Board.

What are the backup and library maintenance policies for the particular application? What are the data recovery policies? Will additional programming be required to restore data after a given period of time? Who maintains the system program documentation? Is it regularly updated to reflect changes to the system?

2. Records retention decisions are based on the informational content of the records. The selection of appropriate storage media is a business decision and should be made after appraisal. Decide what medium is most appropriate to accomplish the business and retention objectives. Generally electronic media provide excellent retrieval functionality for the active stage of the records life cycle but are poorly suited to retention of information for long periods of time.

Therefore, the retention and disposition of information in electronic formats may differ from the same information maintained on paper or other media. However, keep in mind that useful life of the media and retention of the information need to be addressed.

Are Records Management Officers expected to do this analysis themselves?

For simple databases, it is anticipated that record management officers will be able to do the analysis using the systems approach. Records Officers, working with program officials, should be able to determine the relationships between the electronic and paper formats for each record series e.g. retention for paper records is CR+3 and for electronic version of the record is CR+5 years.

For more complex data base systems Records Officers will need to work closely with program officials and agency IT staff to do the systems analysis using a team approach. Sometimes this type of work is contracted out to consultants who are studying imaging and or workflow system improvements. Most large systems have the information or documentation that is needed to do this analysis.

Must I use the RDA form to schedule electronic records?

You may use this form or you may develop an alternative form that facilitates description and identification of inputs and outputs for your system. In preparing alternative forms remember that the records series must comply with definitions of record series as

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interpreted by the Public Records Board. Also remember that Board members who review and approve RDA's generally do not have a technical background. Focus on the relationships between data elements and records and not the technical aspects of the program documentation.

Are their samples of well-written RDA's for electronic records?

Several are included as attachments to this fact sheet. Other examples are available on request.

I need help. What help is available?

There are a variety of resources available to assist you.

The SHSW has an Electronic Records Program. Some assistance is available. Contact Dennis Bitterlich at 608 261-1008 for more information.

There are many web-sites on the internet devoted to electronic records issues. A list of Web sites is attached.

If there is a demand for introductory level assistance the DOA Records Management Section and State Historical Society may co-sponsor this type of training.

Attachment A: Sample RDA's

- A1. Birth Registration System-Electronic
- A2. Environmental Sanitation-Automated

Attachment B: WEB Sites that Contain Information Relating to Electronic Records

Contacts:

Your Agency Record Management Officer

Your IT Customer Service Representative

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Dennis Bitterlich, State Historical Society of Wisconsin
608 261-1008

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Attachment B: WEB Sites that Contain Information Relating to Electronic Records

1. State Historical Society of Wisconsin Web Site
Guidelines for the Management of Electronic Information

<http://wisconsinhistory.org/libraryarchives/erp/wisguide/chapter4.asp>

2. Cohasset Associates Web Site

<http://www.cohasset.com/>

3. DOA Records Management Section Web Site

<http://www.doa.state.wi.us/genserve/home.htm>

<http://www.doa.state.wi.us/section.asp?linkid=127&locid=0>