

Records Management Fact Sheet 8:

Managing Records During the Active and Inactive Stages of the Records Life Cycle

What is the Records Life Cycle?

The records life cycle is divided, by frequency of reference, into active and inactive (less active) stages. The active stage is concerned with frequency of use and timely availability of information contained in the records to support an organization's business operations. The inactive stage is principally concerned with the retention of records to meet longer-term program, legal or audit requirements.

The most significant feature of the records life cycle is the relationship between the age of a record and its reference activity. Most records are referenced frequently for a relatively short period of time following their creation or receipt. Reference activity diminishes dramatically as the records age. Somewhere on this continuum of time, or life cycle, the records migrate from the active to the inactive stage. This life cycle applies to records in paper, microfilm, or electronic formats. It is also valid for all recorded information including audio, video and specialized media.

One simple and practical way to understand the migration from the active to the inactive stage in the life cycle is that the transition occurs when the records no longer need to be immediately accessible. For paper records, this occurs when records can be transferred to a central file area or the State Records Center and need not be maintained in a file at your office. For records in electronic/magnetic formats, this occurs when immediate on-line access to your desktop is no longer needed or cost-justified.

People have varying perceptions about the need for immediate access to their records. Maintaining immediate access to records is almost always more expensive than storing records off-site or off-line. This is true whether the records are stored in paper form at an off-site location or, for electronic/magnetic formats, with some type of delay in retrieving records for display at the desktop.

How will understanding the Records Life Cycle Help Me Manage My Records?

Life Cycle and Media Considerations

Records may exist in many different media types or formats. The decision as to which media to use is an important business decision. During the active stage, the storage medium selected must permit convenient retrieval of records for reference, editing or distribution. During the inactive stage, the storage medium must provide cost-effective, reliable retention of records, often for long periods of time.

Paper, microfilm and electronic/magnetic formats each have distinctive advantages and limitations. Paper is familiar and convenient for reference copies. However, paper records can require large amounts of storage space and can be difficult to organize and maintain. Even if records are maintained in a paper medium for the entire life-cycle, understanding the active and inactive life cycles will help you determine when records can be sent to a central file area or the State Records Center.

Microfilm is well suited for records with long term or permanent retention, due to superior stability, compatibility and compactness. When system requirements are well developed, microfilm also provides good functionality for active records. Unfortunately, management and many users view microfilm negatively, seeing it as cumbersome and not up to today's technology.

Electronic/magnetic formats 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. The limited long-term stability of computer storage media, data migration issues and the dependence of computer-processed information, on specific hardware and software, adversely impacts electronic/magnetic formats.

Technological improvements allowing greater storage capacity and faster access to data has facilitated rapid growth in product offerings in electronic/magnetic record formats, which are becoming more popular with management. Technology is a means to an end and not an end in itself. The objective of records management should always be to choose the media formats that provide a proper business solution.

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Understanding how your records are used during the active and inactive life cycle will help you choose the media format(s) wisely and make a good business decision. Sometimes the best solution is a hybrid with electronic/magnetic, the media of choice during the active life cycle and microfilm or paper, the media of choice for the inactive stage.

Life Cycle and Retention Schedules

In Wisconsin, agencies submit retention schedules to the Public Records Board for approval, which propose retention periods for specific records. Agencies are instructed to select the shortest possible retention period, for each record series, which still allows the agency to efficiently perform its work. Approved retention schedules, called a Records Disposal Authorization (RDA), are used to grant authority to agencies to dispose of records.

The Public Records Board is concerned with the total retention period for the record series. This consists of both the active and inactive life cycle time periods. The RDA does not control the record's migration from the active to inactive stage in the life-cycle. The Board controls the total retention period.

Agencies can and should establish the time period for each stage of the record life cycle. This is an administrative function internal to each agency. The active life cycle time period and the inactive life cycle time period together constitute the total retention time period for the record series. Example: RDA approved with CR+5 year total retention. Agency establishes CR+2 as active. Therefore CR+3 is the inactive retention. Agency changes active retention to CR+1 year. Therefore CR+4 years becomes the inactive retention period.

Agencies sometimes identify a record series, with the active case files as one record series and the closed case files as another record series. Identifying record series in this manner unnecessarily increases the number of record series', both from an organizational and statewide perspective. It also unnecessarily limits agency discretion to change the active retention time periods.

The Department of Administration, Records Management Section, uses records management software to manage retention schedules and the storage of records in a manner that is consistent with RDA policy. This software has the capability to capture the retention periods for both the active and inactive phases in the life cycle. If agencies are interested in learning more about using this tool, they should contact one of the Records Management Section staff, listed below.

Life Cycle and Disposition of Records

As stated earlier, the life cycle of most record series' commonly ends when the total retention period is met, unless they are the subject of an open records request, litigation or audit. After that date, records should be disposed on an ongoing basis by applying the applicable RDA's. This helps agencies meet the legal criteria that records be "destroyed in the normal course of business".

The most common disposition is destroy. Non-confidential records can simply be placed in bins for paper recycling. Sensitive or confidential records should be destroyed using a confidential record disposal program. See Fact Sheet #4, for the different options on destruction of records in paper media. Fact Sheet #2 provides information on options for destruction of microforms.

A small percentage of state government records have secondary, primarily historical/research value or need to be transferred to another agency or the federal government. This condition on the disposition of records is identified during the records scheduling process and identified on the approved RDA form. For these important record series', the end of the agencies use or need for the records is not the end of the records life.

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To meet the established retention time period of these records ownership transfers to the State Historical Society or other designated agency. This occurs when the agency approves the destruction/transfer of records.

For those records stored with the State Records Center, a report is provided twice a year, identifying those records eligible for disposition. Once records are sent to the State Historical Society, transfer of ownership occurs when they accept the records. Once received, records are catalogued, processed and preserved for research purposes.

Permanent retention of records by agencies is inconsistent with the life cycle methodology and is not recommended. Agencies generally do not have the expertise or the resources to preserve records permanently, nor is this a core business function. If agencies keep records permanently, that contain historically valuable information, they are likely hindering the use and availability of this information by a wider audience.

It is advisable for agencies to maintain documentation of records that were either disposed of or transferred. A detailed audit trail is maintained for records that are disposed of or transferred, from the State Records Center.

I have questions. Who can I contact for help?

Contact:

- Your Agency Records Management Officer or Records Coordinator
- Harold Coltharp, Chief, Records Management Section.
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- State Archives Division, State Historical Society
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Note: Some of the information in this fact sheet was derived from the [The Document Life Cycle: A White Paper](#), William Saffedy. The document can be viewed on the Internet, at the Film-Based Imaging Center, <http://www.aiim.org/fbi>