

Digital disposal

Disposal has traditionally been a process performed once a record is no longer needed for active business operations. In the paper world, records are often retired from active use and then set aside for a number of years before disposal assessments are performed.

This traditional approach, however, cannot be sustained in the digital business environment. Digital records are challenging to manage and sustain for long periods of time and key business information may not survive if you wait until they are no longer active.

If your organisation has business, legal and community requirements to keep certain types of business information for long periods of time, it is critical that you proactively know at the start what digital business records need to be sustained and what can be thrown away.

Disposal must become a proactive and strategic tool to identify and manage key business information with ongoing organisational value, and enable the regular, routine destruction of information with no ongoing business relevance.

Do we have to destroy, can we just keep everything?

It is not financially feasible to keep all your digital business information indefinitely:

- Organisations create extensive amounts of information each year and this volume is growing at substantial rates. Indefinite retention of all business information will result in unmanageably large data stores.
- Record migration and preservation activities, which are needed to sustain records in the medium to long term, are complex and expensive processes.
- The costs of digital storage containers are decreasing but the costs of the storage software necessary to manage business information are rising rapidly.
- Keeping more information will necessitate more information management and governance work, which will again increase costs.
- It is not possible to sustain all business information indefinitely so not applying controlled disposal means data will ultimately be destroyed in ad hoc, uncontrolled ways.

Strategies for building effective digital disposal

It is important that organisations take control of digital disposal. To do this you can:

Use your retention and disposal authority as a proactive recordkeeping tool

- Use your retention and disposal authority to identify which records across your organisation need to be retained for 10+ years.
- Determine which business systems, file shares, email networks, electronic records and document management systems (EDRMS), legacy databases or other environments these records are likely to be located in.
- Determine which new or emerging business systems are likely to contain these records.
- Ensure digital records are created in systems that allow the easy identification of records that need to be kept for 10+ years.

Apply disposal in all organisational systems

Disposal is not just a process to be applied to records contained in EDRMS. It should apply to all records created and managed in your organisation, including those in business systems, the cloud and other digital business environments.

Build strategies for existing business systems

Use your retention and disposal authority to identify which specific transactions or processes in your systems have long term retention requirements. To best protect long term information, ensure you document the configuration of the system and its metadata structure. Proactively identifying your long term information will enable you to support the

systems that contain this information through migration and other high risk processes. As a management strategy, you should consider the regular export of long term value information from transactional business systems into stable corporate records system.

Become involved at system design

- When you hear of a new system being developed, give advice on the retention requirements that will apply to the information contained within it.
- Require that system developers facilitate retention and export requirements as much as possible in system design, and enable routine, authorised data purging.
- In complex collaborative environments like SharePoint, flag the business units, processes or libraries that generate or contain high risk, long term data. Document the system configuration in these areas. Ensure the records are protected against unauthorised removal and managed with effective metadata.

Use appropriate formats

For records of long term value, be strategic with format selection. Try to choose stable, long term formats wherever possible for record creation. If this is not possible, then flag long term records created in less durable or more complex formats and migrate them to more stable formats as soon as possible.

Protect metadata

Metadata is critical to support business information through time. When developing strategies to retain your long term business information, ensure that you develop plans to support the ongoing connection between business information and the metadata that sustains it.

Collaborate with ICT colleagues

When your ICT colleagues are assessing or implementing business systems, communicate with them and flag:

- the retention requirements that apply to the business performed in the system
- the different types of business information that reside in the system
- the short term data that can be routinely purged from the system
- the long term information that will need to be carried forward out of the system
- the metadata that is necessary to support information integrity and usability etc.

Destroy records when appropriate

In order to make the strategic retention of records of high value or high risk possible, regularly destroy records of short term value. Do not defer digital record destruction: it is a strategic information management tool that will enable you to focus on maintaining key organisational information resources.

We need to start dealing with digital disposal challenges now

Dealing with digital disposal is complex. It requires cross-profession collaboration, planning and staffing and needs to be tightly aligned to risk and business requirements. While difficult and costly, it is necessary to conduct digital disposal in order to effectively manage high value information. To keep creating vast data stores without any real management structure behind them means you will continue to create immense legacy data problems that will need to be dealt with in the immediate future.

Further information

State Records NSW gives comprehensive disposal requirements and advice at: <http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/recordkeeping/topics/disposing-of-records/> Regular posts on digital disposal issues are also available on the Future Proof blog. For further advice contact State Records NSW at: govrec@records.nsw.gov.au

<http://futureproof.records.nsw.gov.au>
Future Proof: protecting our digital future