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# The Seven Attributes of an Effective Records Management Program

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## Introduction

Records are a basic tool of government administration. Records provide information for planning and decision making, form the foundation for government accountability, and are often subject to specific legal requirements. Records are essential for effective and efficient administration, but if poorly managed they can become a liability, hampering operations and draining resources.

An effective records management<sup>1</sup> program helps an organization get the most out of its records. It also helps limit costs and the risks that can come with poorly managed records. An effective records management program has certain characteristics or attributes; The New York State Archives has identified seven such attributes of an effective records management program. Records managers can assess the effectiveness of their programs by the presence or absence of these attributes.

A government office has an effective records management program when the office . . .

- **. . . creates the records it needs, and none that it doesn't.** Records are efficiently created in the normal course of business for all functions sufficient to satisfy legal, fiscal, administrative, and other recordkeeping requirements.
- **. . . retains the records needed as essential evidence and gets rid of obsolete records.** Records are retained and usable for as long as required for legal or business purposes, and then efficiently disposed of or preserved as archives to support secondary uses.
- **. . . stores its records—especially archival records—safely and securely.** Records are stored and maintained in a safe, secure, cost-effective fashion to support retention, access, and archival preservation where applicable.
- **. . . retrieves information quickly through efficient access and retrieval systems.** Records systems provide effective and efficient retrieval and access to records, to support use by the creating organization and by the public as appropriate under law.
- **. . . uses the right information technology for the right reasons.** Appropriate uses are made of information technology to store, retrieve, make available, and use records.

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<sup>1</sup> For a definition of this and other records management and archival terms, see the glossary at the back of this publication.

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- ... **promotes and supports the use of archival records as a community resource.** Appropriate secondary use of records by public and other entities is supported and promoted.
  - ... **recognizes through policy and procedure that records management is everyone's job.** Ongoing records management goals and priorities are integrated through the organization and its operations as part of the normal course of business.

The following is an elaboration of each of these attributes, along with some indicators that can help records managers determine whether and to what degree each of these attributes exists in a program.

## Records Creation

Many records management programs manage existing records well. Unfortunately, records management often is not effective during the time that records are being created. This can lead to redundant records, lack of clearly identified official copies, and insufficient records for audits or litigation. An effective records management program is one **that creates all the records it needs, and none that it does not need.** Here are some indications of effective records creation:

- Records are sufficient for audits.
- Unneeded records and copies are kept to a minimum.
- Official copies of records are identified.
- Records are available for litigation.
- New York State Archives guidelines and other professional standards are used in records creation.

Warren County is a good example of a government with effective records creation as an integral part of its records management program. Adherence to county policies and state regulations ensure that county departments have the records needed for audits. The county also keeps an inventory of all records on computer—this helps track retention periods and locations of official copies of records. The records management department has completed needs assessments of recordkeeping in various departments, and has used one assessment to institute major improvements in the creation of social services case files. Lastly, guidance from the records management department helps the county control production of unnecessary records and copies.



## Records Retention and Disposition

Proper records retention and disposition is key to an effective records management program. It ensures that records are present when needed for litigation, audits, day-to-day business purposes, or historical research, but that unneeded records do not take up costly storage space. Regular and systematic disposition of records according to *Retention and Disposition Schedule for New York Local Government Records (LGS-1)* provides evidence that records which no longer exist were not destroyed to avoid their use as evidence in court or to evade Freedom of Information requests. Some indications that a good retention program is in place include:

- Archival records are identified early in their life cycle.
- Retention schedules are adopted and used in the normal course of business.
- Office retention schedules are developed and used.
- Records are systematically disposed of.
- Electronic records are retained and disposed of according to retention schedules.
- Plans are in place to ensure that electronic records continue to be accessible following technology changes.
- Disposition is routinely documented.

The Town of Ledyard in Cayuga County is a good example of a local government with effective records retention practices. As RMO, the town clerk oversees the legal disposition of obsolete records as an annual, routine business practice. This is particularly important because the town's inactive records vault has limited space available—there is no room for unneeded records, but there is room for records that might be needed for litigation, audits, or documentation of the rights and obligations of town residents.

## Records Storage and Maintenance

One sure sign that an organization has an effective records management program in place is that it stores and maintains its records securely and efficiently. Cost-effective, secure storage systems that provide quick and rapid retrieval will help ensure the ready availability of records in case of litigation and audits, as well as for future reference use. Some indications that a good storage program is in place include:

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- Inactive records are stored off-site in an in-house or contracted records center.
  - Proper shelving is used to store records.
  - Vaults are used for the most valuable records.
  - Electronic data backup procedures are in place and are routinely followed.
  - Disaster preparedness plans are in place.
  - Micrographics standards are followed.
  - Microfilm masters and computer backups are stored securely offsite.
  - Fire prevention systems are in place in storage areas.
  - Adequate environmental controls exist in storage areas.
  - Security rules and procedures are in place and followed.
  - Recording format standards are complied with.

Corning Community College provides a fine illustration of a local government that has an effective records storage program. The college has created a state-of-the-art inactive records center in a dedicated, secure structure on its hilltop campus overlooking the Chemung River Valley in Steuben County. Under the supervision of the college RMO, high-density mobile shelving, climate controls, a fire suppression system, and automated recordkeeping software have been installed. The physical facility is organized to support the protection of archival and permanent records holdings, as well as to ensure the prompt recovery of vital records in the event of a disaster. Part-time staff keep this facility running smoothly so that data entry and reports are kept up to date, and reference requests are satisfied and refiled in a timely fashion.

## Records Access and Retrieval

Organizations create, retain, and preserve records so that they can be used. If a user cannot locate a document, it might as well not exist. As such, an effective records management program should have in place systems—manual or automated—that can locate and retrieve records in a reliable and timely fashion to meet the needs of users. Some signs that a program possesses this attribute include:

- Satisfactory filing and locator systems with documented policies and procedures.
- Finding aids, such as indexes, are prepared and used.

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- Subject matter lists to meet Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) requirements are prepared and used.
  - Policies and procedures regarding access restrictions are developed and in use.
  - Filing equipment is used appropriately.
  - Local area network (LAN) policies and procedures are developed and in use.

The Town of Salina in Onondaga County exemplifies this attribute at several different levels. Inactive town records are tracked using an automated records management system that allows records to be easily located by series title, date, retention schedule number, box and shelf number, year of disposition, and department. Descriptions of the town's historical records series appear in a local publication, which has been distributed to local libraries, colleges, and school districts. Active office records are organized in a modern file system according to a town-wide master filing scheme that provides efficient and effective access to records still held in offices. The town also employs an automated search engine to locate portions of its board minutes by topic, eliminating the need to search page by page. An official town records policy and procedure manual documents these systems clearly and comprehensively to ensure consistent record practices.

## Appropriate Use of Technology

The opportunities afforded by technology to support records management are growing rapidly. We now have at our disposal a remarkable range of technologies for creating, using, and managing records: traditional paper filing systems, micrographics, databases, optical imaging, etc. With such a variety of tools available, it becomes critical that we choose the right ones for the right occasions and not be swayed in selection decisions either by fear of new technologies or by the desire to have the newest and brightest technology "toys." Ways of telling that a records management program has struck this balance include the following:

- Business requirements are identified through needs assessments.
- The capacity to support technology is identified through feasibility studies.
- Business process analysis is part of technology planning and implementation.
- Recordkeeping requirements are taken into account in technology implementation.

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- Industry and government standards for acquiring and implementing technology are complied with.
  - Adequate technical support is available internally or via contract.
  - Formal electronic filing structures and policies for electronic recordkeeping are in place.
  - Cooperation exists between records management and information technology services departments.
  - Adequate training is offered for staff in the use of technology.

Westchester County provides an excellent example of a local government that has integrated its records management and information technology programs. The county records and archives program has effectively used modern technology to provide access to and protection for many county records by reformatting them via microfilming or electronic document scanning. Information about the archives and its collections is available via the Internet. Departments consult with the records program when considering new records/information systems. Perhaps most importantly, the placement of records management within the information services department has helped ensure effective coordination between records management and information technology throughout Westchester County government. An official town records policy and procedure manual documents these systems clearly and comprehensively to ensure consistent record practices.

## Archival Records

An important sign of an effective records management program is the preservation of archival records and the promotion of their appropriate use by the public. Most records lose all value when the purpose for which they were created has been realized. However, a small percentage hold value beyond their original purpose—for historical or genealogical research, exhibits, publications, teaching aids, long-term legal documentation, or other activities. These archival records can be useful to the public, other governments or agencies, teachers, writers, and other people or groups that require documentation in their work or avocations. Some indications that this component of records management is in place include:

- Public outreach programs exist.
- Records reference use areas are available for the public.
- Policies and procedures are in place for use of records by the public.

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- Information sharing with other governments or organizations is done to develop and distribute finding aids so access to archival records is improved.
  - Records are used for exhibits and education.
  - The Internet is made available for public access to and actual use of records.
  - Marketing strategies are in place to encourage public access to and use of records.

Since 1982, the Town Clerk's Office of the Town of Hempstead has provided support for the management of the town's historical records. This work has included the preservation and restoration of historical volumes, documents, and maps. It has also included the development of finding aids, allowing for easy access to more than 200 cubic feet of archival material held by the town. To further improve access, the guide to the town's archival collections has been posted on the town's website, and the archives are open to the public Monday through Friday.

## Records Management Program Integration

Records management officers (RMOs) and records managers are key players in the development and operation of an effective records management program, but they should not be the only members of the records team. Everyone who works in government (or in any other organization that keeps records) has a role in records management, because everyone has some involvement with records in some aspect of his or her work. That involvement may be drafting or reading a memo or letter, completion of a form, maintenance of a log, processing an application, or any number of other modern office activities. Well-managed records require cooperation and effort from everyone involved in the life cycle of those records. Consequently, perhaps the most important attribute of an effective records management program is that ongoing records management goals and priorities are integrated throughout the organization and its operations as part of the normal course of business. Some signs of this integration include:

- Records management policies and procedures are in place and are updated regularly.
- Records management is integrated into all policies where applicable.
- Records policies and procedures are routinely and consistently communicated to staff.



- A disaster preparedness plan is in place and is reviewed regularly.
- A records management advisory council is appointed and active.
- Local records management legislation is in effect.
- Records management activities receive regular and adequate funding beyond grants.
- A records management plan is in place and is followed.
- Records management staff are hired and retained.
- Staff frequently attend New York State Archives workshops, professional conferences, and other educational events.
- A records management officer is appointed at the appropriate level in the organization.

The Town of Manlius in Onondaga County provides a good example of a government that has integrated its records management program into all aspects and levels of the organization. Through a combination of involving staff outside the RMO's office in successful grant projects and effective persuasion, the town has have been able to pass and systematically implement records management policies and procedures via resolutions. Cooperation has grown as department heads recognize the benefits of improved records services and participate in an active records advisory council. Staff members actively participate in State Archives and other records training events and have sponsored several workshops at the town hall. In essence, success has bred success, and the entire Town of Manlius has benefited from and supports its developing records program.

The New York State Office of the Attorney General provides another good example of a government records management program that possesses this attribute. The agency has developed comprehensive records management policies and procedures that cover both paper and electronic records, temporary and archival. For example, the office has adopted and disseminated to program managers a policy that identifies records with possible archival value; these records would then be appraised by the State Archives for their value. The agency posts many of its records policies and procedures on its internal network for easy access by staff. Other policies and procedures are sent yearly via memo to all program units. The RMO works closely with staff in the various program areas, each of which has a particular individual assigned to serve as records management liaison.

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## Records Management Advisory Services for Local Governments and State Agencies

The State Archives has developed a variety of records management services to help local governments and state agencies respond to the challenge of managing records. Knowledgeable, experienced records management professionals are based in Albany and in nine regional offices around the state. A Regional Advisory Officer, who acts as a no-cost consultant, trainer, and technical advisor to local governments and state agencies, manages each region. Albany-based staff provide additional expertise on micrographics, electronic records, and archives management. In addition, the Archives makes grants available to assist local governments in a variety of projects. The State Archives offers advisory services on any issue in records management, including

- Archival Records
- Business Process Analysis
- Disaster Planning and Recovery
- Files Management
- Imaging
- Inactive Records
- Managing Electronic Records
- Micrographics
- Needs Assessments for New Recordkeeping Systems
- Records Inventory
- Records Management Software
- Security and Access

## For More Information

If you work for a New York State agency or local government, and you are interested in receiving free records management advice, obtaining free technical publications, attending free records management workshops, or determining a schedule for state agency records, contact the State Archives' central office in Albany or the regional office that serves your region of the state.

### **Government Records Services**

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**State Archives Regional Offices\***

**Region 1**

55 Hanson Place, Suite 724  
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Phone (718) 923-4300 or 923-4301  
Fax (718) 923-4302

**Region 3**

Records Center  
Building 21, Suite 102  
1220 Washington Avenue  
Albany, NY 12226-2152  
Phone (518) 485-6233 or 485-6235  
Fax (518) 485-6236

**Region 4**

Northway Plaza, Suite 1308-A  
Route 9, Quaker Road  
Queensbury, NY 12804  
Phone (518) 798-5717 or 798-5759  
Fax (518) 798-6119

**Region 5**

Utica State Office Building  
207 Genesee Street, Room 404  
Utica, NY 13501  
Phone (315) 793-2780 or 793-2781  
Fax (315) 793-2782

**Region 6**

Binghamton State Office Building  
44 Hawley Street, Sixteenth Floor  
Binghamton, NY 13901-4406  
Phone (607) 721-8428 or 721-8429  
Fax (607) 721-8431

**Region 7**

The Brookside School  
220 Idlewood Road, Room 102  
Rochester, NY 14618  
Phone (585) 241-2827 or 241-2828  
Fax (585) 241-2826

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**Region 8**

Mahoney State Office Building  
65 Court Street, Room 313  
Buffalo, NY 14202  
Phone (716) 847-7903 or 847-7904  
Fax (716) 847-7905

**Region 9**

301 Manchester Road  
Poughkeepsie, NY 12603  
Phone (914) 485-2633 or 485-2634  
Fax (914) 485-2635

**Region 10**

Suffolk State Office Building  
Room 2B-46B  
Veterans Memorial Highway  
Hauppauge, NY 11788-5501  
Phone (631) 952-6864 or 952-6866  
Fax (631) 952-6867

\*These addresses may change. For up-to-date information on the Regional Advisory Officer who serves your part of the state, visit the State Archives website at [www.archives.nysed.gov](http://www.archives.nysed.gov)



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## Glossary of Basic Records Management Terms

**access.** permission and opportunity to use a record

**active record.** a record used frequently (for paper records, at least once per month per file drawer)

**administrative value.** the usefulness of a record to an organization in the conduct of its daily business

**archival record.** a record that should be kept permanently because of its administrative, legal, fiscal, or research value; also called “historical record”

**archival value.** the long-term usefulness of a record for historical or other research that determines whether a record should be kept permanently

**archives.** the facility that preserves records with historical value; archival records in general

**arrangement.** the act or result of placing records in a particular order or sequence

**automated access.** access provided to records through electronic databases or other electronic means

**back up.** to copy an electronic record to ensure its information will not be lost

**backup.** a copy of an electronic record maintained to protect the information from loss

**BPA.** See “business process analysis”

**business process analysis (BPA).** an intense, detailed, and logical analysis of each step in a business process to determine how best to improve the process

**closed file.** a file into which no more documents may be added

**confidential record.** a record that is not open to the public, usually to protect the privacy rights of individuals; sometimes called a restricted record

**conservation.** the repair and stabilization of damaged documents

**cost-benefit analysis.** any method for examining the cost advantages that can be realized by modifying the way records are managed

**disaster recovery plan.** a written, approved course of action to take when disaster strikes that ensures an organization’s ability to respond to an interruption in services by restoring critical business functions and records

**disposition.** the authorized action to dispose of records by destruction or transfer

**document.** a single record item; a container of information in any medium, generated in the normal course of business, that facilitates the management of that information (such as a letter, an e-mail message, or a completed form)

**duplicate.** an extra copy of a record

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**electronic document imaging.** the production of digital images of documents, usually in order to improve access to the records

**electronic record.** “information evidencing any action, transaction, occurrence, event or other activity produced by or stored in an information technology system and capable of being accurately produced in a tangible form” (from the New York State Electronic Signatures and Records Act)

**electronic records management.** the process of applying records management principles to electronic records

**file.** (noun) a collection of related records that are treated as a unit, sometimes used synonymously with “records series” and sometimes referring to the contents of one case or file folder

(verb) to arrange documents into a logical sequence

**files management.** the process of designing and managing an efficient organization for active office records so they are easy to find, arrange and use

**filing system.** a pre-defined plan using numbers, letters, or keywords to identify and organize records in a systematic scheme

**finding aid.** a tool (such as a series description, catalog, or index) that is designed to help users find information within archival records

**fiscal value.** the usefulness of a record in documenting monetary decisions and activities

**FOIL.** the Freedom of Information Law

**forms management.** a system that establishes standards and procedures for the creation, design, and revision of all forms within an organization

**Freedom of Information Law (FOIL).** the New York State law that outlines the rights of the public to access public records

**geographic information system (GIS).** a computerized database system used to gather, manipulate, display, and analyze spatial data (including maps, three-dimensional models, and tables)

**GIS.** See “geographic information system”

**historical record.** See “archival record”

**historical value.** The value of a document to support historical research; similar to “archival value”

**imaging.** the process of electronically capturing the visual appearance of a paper document; informally called “scanning”

**inactive record.** a record accessed infrequently (for paper records, less than once per month per file drawer), but one that is not yet ready for disposition

**index.** an information guide that identifies the location of specific pieces of information within a document or a set of documents (for example, an index to a set of minutes could list topics and when they were discussed or an index to personnel files could list the names of people included)

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**indexing.** the process of designing a guide to identify and locate specific pieces of information within the records of an organization

**Internet.** the master network of interconnected computer networks that allows the rapid transfer of information in electronic form between computers over large distances

**LAN.** See “local area network”

**legal value.** The usefulness of a record to support an organization’s business agreements and ownership rights, and to document the rights of citizens.

**life cycle of a record.** the concept that the value of a record changes from its creation through its active and inactive stages to its final disposition

**local area network (LAN).** a network within a limited geographic area (usually under one mile) that allows personal computers to communicate directly with each other and share data

**locator system.** an access guide for finding inactive records (examples include databases, shelf addresses, box numbers, and card files)

**microfilm.** a photographic reproduction of documents in miniature on fine-grain, high-resolution film

**micrographics.** the science and use of microfilm in all its forms

**migration.** the periodic transfer of data from one electronic system to another to retain the integrity of the data and to allow users to continue to use the data in the face of changing technology; sometimes called “data migration”

**needs assessment.** a report that systematically examines a records management problem, evaluates solutions, and recommends a solution

**nonrecord.** an information format (such as an outside publication, blank form, or instruction manual) that is not an official record and that therefore does not require retention

**obsolete record.** a record that has met its retention period, is no longer useful to the organization, and may be destroyed

**office retention schedule.** an abbreviated records retention schedule that includes only those records in a particular office and, in addition, indicates when those records should be transferred to inactive storage

**official copy.** an original record or a copy of an original record that is used to meet the minimum retention period for that record

**offsite storage.** a secure location, remote from the work location, where inactive or vital records are stored

**onsite storage.** storage for inactive or vital records on the premises of the organization

**original.** the final version of a document, as opposed to copies or duplicates made of it

**permanent record.** a record that must be retained permanently because of legal requirements or its continuing research value; also called “archival record” or “historical record”

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**policy.** a broad document that specifies a general rule for records and information management in an organization

**preservation.** the combination of procedures and environmental standards designed to maintain records in a usable form

**procedure.** a detailed document that specifies step-by-step rules for records and information management in an organization

**RAO.** See “records advisory officer (RAO)”

**record.**

**1. informal definition:** recorded information, in any format, that is created by an organization or received in the formal operation of its responsibilities

**2. legal definition for local governments in New York State:** any book, paper, map, photograph, microphotograph or any other information storage device regardless of physical form or characteristic which is the property of the state or any state agency, department, division, board, bureau, commission, county, city, town, village, district or any subdivision thereof by whatever name designated in or on which any entry has been made or is required to be made by law, or which any officer or employee of any said bodies has received or is required to receive for filing

**3. legal definition for state agencies in New York State (plural):** all books, papers, maps, photographs, or other documentary materials, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made or received by any agency of the state or by the legislature or the judiciary in pursuance of law or in connection with the transaction of public business and preserved or appropriate for preservation by that agency or its legitimate successor as evidence of the organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities, or because of the information contained therein

**record copy.** the official copy of a record

**records access officer.** the individual in a government office in New York State responsible for verifying and authorizing public use of government records

**records center.** a centralized area for the maintenance of inactive records

**records center carton.** a box, usually made of corrugated cardboard, that is designed to hold approximately one cubic foot of either legal- or letter-size records, and that measures 10” x 12” x 15”

**records inventory.** a process to locate, identify, and describe the records maintained by an organization

**records management.** the systematic control of all records in an organization throughout their life cycle

**records management officer (RMO).** the person responsible for overseeing a records management program for a state agency or local government in New York State

**records retention schedule.** a list of records series titles that indicates the length of time to maintain each series; more formally called a “records retention and disposition schedule”



**records series.** a group of related records (i.e., minutes of a board, payrolls, and purchase orders) that are normally used and filed as a unit and that normally have the same retention requirements

**regional advisory officer (RAO).** a representative of the New York State Archives who provides records management advice to local governments and state agencies in one of nine regions in the state

**research value.** the usefulness of a record to support historical and other research

**restricted record.** See “confidential record”

**retention.** the process of keeping records for the amount of time required given their administrative, fiscal, legal, or historical value and use; also called “records retention”

**retention period.** the amount of time a record must be kept to meet administrative, fiscal, legal, or historical requirements

**retrieval.** the process of locating a record and taking it to the place where it will be used

**risk assessment.** an evaluation of the probability of an adverse event occurring, and an estimation of the possible extent of the damage, in order to help minimize the organization’s exposure

**RMO.** See “records management officer (RMO)”

**scanning.** See “imaging”

**secondary use.** any use of a record other than the use for which it was originally created, including any use for historical research

**security.** protecting records by controlling which users can access which documents and for what purpose

**series.** See “records series”

**State Archives.** the New York State Archives, the state agency that provides records management and archives services to local governments and state agencies

**telecommunications.** generally, the communication of information through electronically transmitted signals; specifically, the communication of information over the Internet or other electronic networks

**temporary record.** a record with short-term or limited value and approved for destruction either immediately or after a short retention period

**tickler file.** a collection of pending items arranged by the date of action and kept to remind someone to resolve the contents of the items on time

**version control.** a method for monitoring the changes a document has undergone; the systematic management of different drafts or revisions of a document to ensure that the record copy of a document can always be distinguished from an earlier draft



**vital record.**

**records management definition:** a record essential to protect the financial well-being of an organization, its legal rights, and the rights of its citizens and employees; a record without which an organization could not carry out its business

**birth, death and marriage definition:** a birth, death, or marriage record maintained by the official registrar of a New York State local government or by the New York State Department of Health

**workflow.** the path that a record takes and the processes that occur as a record travels through an organization

**working copy.** a preliminary version of a document, not the final record or master copy