



“Ask the CRM” - Bob Dalton, CRM

Question:

How do you conduct a records inventory?

Answer:

I was asked this question by a department manager who was considering the development of a records management program for his department.

Ideally, you would hope that the organization would have records management program in place. However, if the organization does not have a program there is nothing that would preclude a department from establishing a records management program to manage *their* business records. The key to success is management support. The manager should be actively involved in the establishment of the program by being visible and supportive throughout the process. They should be the one that authorizes the program, communicates the purpose of the program, assigns the project manager and remains active in the process to insure cooperation by the staff.

Records Inventory Methodology

A records inventory is the first step in establishing a department records management program. There are two established methods for conducting an inventory:

1. The Questionnaire method: a form is developed, sent to each group within the department and used to collect the information. The department personnel complete the form and return the information to the designated project lead or the;
2. The Physical survey method; the form is developed and an actual physical inventory of the records is completed by a project team member.

Both methods require individuals completing the questionnaire and/or survey. These individuals are trained on how to complete the survey. The records management purist will lean towards the physical survey methodology as it may provide a more accurate survey of the active and inactive records being maintained by the organization. I have personally used both methods and/or a combination of methods. Remember, the inventory should locate, identify and describe all the records within the department at the records series level, regardless of format (electronic, paper, microfilm, CD/DVD, etc.). The record series level is a set of related records that are used and filed as a unit.

Either method will require an in-depth review by the project lead and/or the individual who will eventually create the retention schedule for the department to insure all the information on the record series has been collected. It has been my experience that either survey method will require some follow-up with the department staff to insure complete understanding of the records series.

I have also found it useful to draw a simple flow chart of the records flow when reviewing the forms with the owner of the records. The flow chart provides a visual presentation on the creation, disposition, final ownership of the record series and who receives copies of the document. The flow chart may also assist in providing information that shows the transition from a paper record into a digital format.

Resources

Resources that I have used in the past for assistance in producing an inventory have been:

1. Ricks, Swafford & Gow, “Information Resource Management: A Records Systems Approach”, 3rd Ed, 1992, South-Western Publishing Co.

2. Read & Ginn, "Records Management", 8th Ed., 2007, South-Western Publishing
3. ARMA International and SAA, "Sample Forms for Archival & Records Management Programs", 2nd Edition, 2002, ARMA & SAA. The book also contains a CD with a collection of sample forms for both Archives and Records management in word and PDF format. Well worth the \$28.00 for ARMA members or \$40.00 for non-members. You can save the formats and modify them to meet your specific needs.

You may also want to check out other resources on retention schedule development that are available through the ARMA bookstore at www.arma.org.

Remember the inventory is a crucial step in the development of an effective records management program and will be the primary document used in establishing the records retention schedule within the organization.

(To be continued next month)

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Note: My thanks to editor, Barbara Werelius, Records Manager and Guru at Tacoma Public Utilities, and a member of the Puget Sound Chapter of ARMA for her assistance in the development of this article. Other articles by Mr. Dalton can be reviewed and copied at his BLOG site: askthecrm.blogspot.com