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Government



Cultural Affairs and Sport

How to organise, manage and care for your archive:
A guide for community organisations in South Africa

This guide to archiving for community organisations has been compiled by the Western Cape Archives and Records Service (WCARS) Cape Town, South Africa. This guide has been made available free of charge as part of WCARS public programming activities. It is made freely available for non-commercial use, display, broadcast, performance and distribution. Attribution in the event of copying, display, broadcast, modification or reuse is requested.

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How to organise, manage and care for your archive:

A guide for community organisations in South Africa.

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Part Four

Records management: the modern way of managing information and “active” records before archiving.

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What is records management?

Records management begins with the management of records while they are still in offices, even before they reach the archive. Managed records are considered to still be "active." That is, they are still of everyday use to the office and its work.

These "active" records still need to be managed while they are in the office to ensure that they can be located when needed, and that their organisation is systematic and transparent to ensure accountability of the office. When documents cease to be useful, they are either discarded or transferred from the offices to the archive. The categories of documents to be kept for the long- or short-term are pre-determined and written down.

Records management is now considered an integral part of the management of any business or organisation. Records management happens in government, in private businesses of all sizes, as well as in private organisations, charitable groups and NGOs.

Records management is a fairly recent phenomenon in archiving. It arose after World War II (1939-1947), when the growing amount of paper documents produced by government offices meant that archives were struggling to cope with the amount of paper coming to them.

Records management: the modern approach to organising and managing "active" records and information

Records management is a holistic approach that begins to manage information (that is, both physical and digital records) even before they are archived. Records management aims to manage the entire life cycle of a record from its creation, its use as a current or "active" record in an office, and then to manage its transfer to an archive, or manage its disposal if it is not intended to be kept and sent to the archive.

Modern records management protocols work to identify which records will be kept for archiving, and which will not (section for retention) before it reaches the archive.

However, for many archives that have built up collections over the years as materials were added or donated, adopting a records management approach may not be the most practical way to get started. A better approach is to first organise the existing archive, and then look at putting records management strategies into place that will link the newly created documents in the organisation's offices with the archive, once they have ceased to have relevance on a daily basis.

The lifecycle of a record

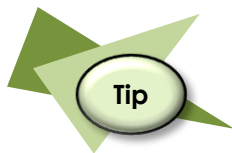
Modern records management sees the management of documents as the management of a life cycle: documents are made (or born), they have a life of usefulness, and then they cease to be useful on an everyday basis (or die).

Once records no longer have an everyday use, they are usually transferred to an archive. In the records management system (or records "life-cycle"), this usually means after a certain amount of time has passed. The time can vary from 20 years to 5 years, and even be just six months for certain disposable (or "ephemeral") records like receipts. Different types of records can be assigned differing periods of retention. Different periods of retention mean that at regular intervals, records are gone through and either disposed of, or transferred to an archive.

Why consider a records management programme?

The focus of this Guide is on managing your archival records rather than your organisation's "active" records. However, it might be useful to implement a records management programme in your organisation in the long term. Or, if your organisation already manages its records in an organised way, to work with the person responsible to align their system with the archive. This ensures a systematic and consistent flow of significant records to your archive.

Records management is a field on its own. As with the management of an archive, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the concepts and terminology of records management. The sections that follow give a brief overview of the main components of records management to be aware of.



It is helpful to get a broad understanding and then see what you can implement with the time and resources available. A records management programme, feeding into your archive, can be built up slowly piece by piece, and as it makes sense for your organisation.

Components of a records management programme

A records management programme usually has the following:

- Records Management Policy: to guide your effective management of the records.
- Registry Procedure Manual: to effectively process incoming and outgoing information, including what to keep and what to dispose of.
- File Plan: to guide the filing system for *correspondence* generated in the office.
- Schedule of Other Records (also called Records Control Schedule): to guide the filing system for *records other than correspondence* generated in the office.
- Transfer of record to the archive. Transfer of records occurs when records have become too old for everyday usefulness in an office. Transfers occur at regular intervals, which are usually dictated by the file plan's indication of when certain records are deemed to have "matured" to the extent that they now require transfer to the archive.

Why have a records management policy?

Policy documents formalise in writing the approach to how an organisation's records will be managed in a clear, concise and transparent manner.

The records management policy will be shaped by the nature of the organisation's work and should evolve with the organisation.

Key components of a records management policy

- **Scope and purpose:** Clearly defines which types of records the policy applies to. For example, membership forms, financial documents and volunteer agreements. Outlines the overall purpose of the policy emphasizing its role in ensuring compliance, promoting transparency, and supporting efficient operations.
- **Record classification and retention:** Establishes a system for categorizing records based on type, activity, or subject matter. Develops a retention schedule specifying how long different types of records must be kept before being archived or disposed of, aligning with legal and regulatory requirements.
- **Security and access:** Defines procedures for protecting sensitive information and ensuring secure storage and access to records. Outlines who has access to specific types of records and how access is granted.
- **Responsibilities and training:** Assigns clear roles and responsibilities for various aspects of recordkeeping, such as creation, classification, storage, and disposal. Implements training programmes to educate volunteers and staff on their responsibilities and the policy's importance.

Registry Procedure manual

Traditionally, managing incoming and outgoing information on paper in an organisation has been situated in one location (a “registry office”) but this does not have to be the case in a modern world.

Compiling procedures for the management of handling incoming and outgoing correspondence, and the filing of documents and the correspondence will help to standardise the procedures and provide clear processes for handling correspondence, streamlining operations and ensuring timely delivery of information. This guide is usually called a “registry procedure manual”.

Key components of a registry procedure manual

Here are some crucial elements to consider:

- **Scope and purpose:** Clearly define the types of documents handled by the registry, including physical and electronic formats. Outline the overall purpose of the manual, emphasizing its role in streamlining communication, ensuring document security, and promoting efficient information retrieval.
- **Receiving and logging procedures:** Establish clear steps for receiving documents, including mail, hand deliveries, and electronic transmissions. Define logging procedures, capturing essential details like sender, date, and subject matter for accurate tracking.
- **Distribution and routing:** Outline routing procedures for incoming documents, specifying how they are categorized, directed to responsible parties, and delivered timely. Define protocols for handling urgent or confidential documents.
- **Filing and storage:** Establish a clear filing system for physical documents, outlining categorization methods and storage protocols. Address electronic document storage procedures, including backup and security measures.
- **Retrieval and access:** Define procedures for retrieving documents efficiently, considering both physical and electronic archives. Define access levels and authorization protocols to ensure information security.
- **Retention and disposal:** Establish a retention schedule specifying how long different types of documents must be kept before disposal or archiving, aligning with legal and regulatory requirements. Outline safe and secure disposal procedures.

The file plan and the records control schedule

The core of a records management system is a “file plan” and a “records control schedule”. Together, the two guide how all documentation in an office are organised.

A file plan is a document that guides the filing of *correspondence only*. Within the file plan, records are arranged in a hierarchical subject structure in the file plan.

An additional guide, called a “schedule of other records” (also called “records control schedule”) is a filing system for *records other than correspondence* generated in the office. The other, non-correspondence records are usually organized by document type, including: minutes, photographs, registers, publications and follows a similar organizational structure as the file plan.

Records are also assigned a numerical or alpha-numerical coding that corresponds with each file in the hierarchical file plan and the records control schedule. This numbering or coding system helps track of the files and their contents.

A good file plan has the following characteristics:

- It is accurate. Records are created to support and document specific work processes. The file plan should be structured to accurately reflect the work of the organisation.
- It is simple. File plans should be uncomplicated and use recognizable language.
- It is stable over time. The work performed by an organisation can change over the course of time. Ideally, a file plan should be stable enough to manage changes over the long term without requiring major revision.
- It is overseen by a single competent individual to oversee the implementation and maintenance of the file plan over time, and to avoid any *ad hoc* alterations that could lead to confusion.

Drawing up a File Plan

First steps: getting a broad overview of the organisation or office's work

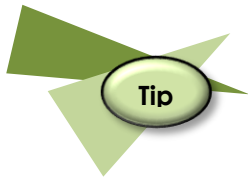
A file plan is usually organised into broad sections: (1) operational information (correspondence about an office's functions or work) and (2) correspondence about an offices administrative functions.

Operational functions support the mission and mandate of an organisation. They are often specific to a given office, for example public health, community support for elders, community support of the youth, educational, recreational activity-based, religious community and worship, etc.

Administrative functions can be understood as "housekeeping" tasks for an organisation. They are necessary functions but are not usually done in direct support of the organisation's mission and mandate. For example, most offices perform the following administrative functions:

strategic planning, personnel management, financial management, building and grounds maintenance.

The file plan for each broad section – operational and administrative – should ensure that all records of the same function are placed together. Function-based file plans organize records based directly on the work processes that an organisation performs to fulfil its mission, vision and to achieve its goals. For example, finance, human resources, buildings and grounds. function-based file plans are considered to be the most stable and long-lasting.



Looking at the structure, function and activities of the organisation can help to create the file plan and to map out its day-to-day operational work and its administrative work.

Second step: creating a hierarchical order for records

Once the broad sections of operational and administrative are mapped out, a file plan is then ordered hierarchically:

- Under each function, records are then organized by activity: that is, a major action, or task, undertaken to complete a given function. For example, under Finance, might be Budget, Reports etc. Most functions have multiple activities, which can be applicable to a single function or to several functions.
- Under each activity, records series are organized. A record series is a grouping of records managed together to support and provide evidence of an activity. For example, under Budget Reports, might be Annual and Quarterly Reports as records series. There may be only a single records series associated with an activity, or there may be multiple records series.
- Finally, within each records series, individual records (files, documents, etc.) may be classified and stored.

Third step: assigning numbers or alpha-numerical codes to your organized files

The file plan must include the following for each file:

- A classification number or alpha-numerical coding (e.g., ABC-123) for each file.
- A title for each file which describes the contents (for example, "building maintenance 2023").
- The retention period (also called the "disposal period") assigned to each file or type of document (for example, if building plans are to be kept indefinitely, if certain receipts are only kept for 2 years).

Put files with the same retention period together, so you can easily separate out what must be transferred to your archive and what can be destroyed after a specific period.

If there are functions that overlap, create a description note for each in the file plan or records schedule to ensure staff can intuitively and consistently classify, file and retrieve records. Document the function titles and add any explanatory notes needed.

If you include the date in the file name, use the format `yyyymmdd` (e.g., 19 June 2020 = 20200619) for recording dates. That way your files will be kept chronologically using electronic file management tools. It is advisable to avoid capital letters or spaces: this can cause problems when moving files between different computing environments.

Records management for electronic or digital records

Once your paper-based records are in order and systematically classified, you can also mirror this filing system with the electronic records using a content management system.

From this brief overview of records management, it should be evident how the management of “active” (or “live”) records can mirror the organisation and management of archival records.

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