

Natalie DeAngelo

534 Records Management

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Records Retention Program- Museum

In our ever-changing, developing, and expanding world, we are faced with an abundance of information that needs to be managed. Institutions of all kinds are recognizing the need for competent records management of all of their vital and non-vital documents, not simply to protect against litigation or to increase revenue by reducing costs (though records management can do such things) but for more effective running of day-to-day activities within the organization as well as foster positive interactions with other organizations. But there are still a number of institutions that forgo a records retention program: it may be regarded as another expense, as time and effort is needed to create and implement a program; it is seen as a challenge, as one needs to educate themselves on the standards of retention programs and retention periods for a number of different types of records; it may be seen as a luxury, or simply not needed. Whatever the reason why one might not have a records retention program the same risks are present and even imminent that could stand to destroy an organization.

Having a records retention program really comes into play when an organization faces an audit; both having and not having the right documents can determine an organization's fate. Audits are a reality in all organizations, and though they can make or break one, there are steps to ensuring the best possible outcome of an audit, as being proactive is one of the best defenses against litigation. First and foremost, before any steps can be taken to handle an audit of one's recordkeeping practices, the management in an organization must see the benefit to a records retention program. Making sure management buys into records management policies is

paramount to surviving an audit. Once there is acceptance of the need for records and information management, it is useful to determine the types of audits an organization might receive; knowing what information is likely to be requested can help ensure their maintenance and allow for easy access when needed. In order to provide easy access to the proper documents, a retention schedule is needed that defines how long records are to be kept, where they are stored, and their ultimate disposition. Also, security measures should be taken to ensure who has access to vital information, making sure that the appropriate people have passwords and combinations to retrieve and protect organizations documents. With a retention program in place, regular internal audits of management practices is essential to ensure continuing adherence to retention schedules and storage and access policies. Taking such precautions can better prepare an organization for audits, but can provide a number of additional benefits (Simons, 2009, p. 41).

We have already talked about why having a records retention program is essential to all organizations, but have yet to discuss how a retention program is formed and its constituent parts. First let's consider the record, the reason RIM exists and is implemented. A record, more-or-less, is information created and stored in a fixed medium and maintained as evidence of an individual or an organization (Hoke, 2011, p. 28). A record can be a physical item, such as paper, magnetic tape, photographs; it can also be electronic, born digital or made digital, like emails, databases, and are only machine readable. In terms of records management, records can fall into 4 possible values associated with records: administrative, fiscal, legal, historical. Depending on which value is ascribed to a record can determine how long the record is retained, where it is stored, and its ultimate disposition. In order to discover what value a record in an organization possesses, a records survey needs to be conducted of all the records within the record creating

departments. Conducting an inventory is the first step in creating a retention program. The steps needed to prepare for the survey are as follows: “gaining commitment from management; establishing a work schedule; communicating with staff and management; staffing and training for the project; stating the objectives and strategies of the project; designing the inventory form” (Robek, 1995, p.27). The importance of creating a retention program should be made clear to all members who would be involved in making sure policies are followed and records are stored based on the retention schedule of the organization. We know the benefits to having a retention program, and the potential dangers an organization might face without a program in place. After the survey is conducted, the information gleaned is integral to creating a retention schedule that defines the record series, retention periods, storage, and disposition of current and all future records created within the organization.

The retention schedule is one of the most important parts of a retention program as it creates transparency, accountability, and serves as a clear guide for all members of an organization how to appropriately handle their documents. “It provides for the identification of records that must be maintained for business purposes, and the systematic destruction of records that no longer serve any useful business purpose” (Robek, 1995, p. 42). Even further,

establishing and implementing records retention schedules provide very visible benefits, since these activities: help ensure an organization meets all legal/fiscal retention requirements for all records, regardless of media; identify records requiring enhanced protection or control; identify the record custodian for all multi-copy or official records; reduce the floor space dedicated to the storage of active records by allowing the disposal of inactive, duplicate, or obsolete material; establish timeframes in which records are to be transferred on a scheduled basis from active to inactive storage areas; provide the go-

ahead to purge unnecessary records from inactive records storage areas (Fischer, 2006, p.26).

Along with the records survey, cooperation between management and staff that handle and create records is needed to discuss the needs for a retention schedule. Forming a committee can help an organization determine the specifics of a retention schedule to suit their needs as well as get everyone on board with the program. When all important members are included, it can foster motivation to not only create a retention schedule but educate them on how to appropriately uphold it.

Retention Schedule Format	
Retention schedules are usually presented in columnar format for ease of use and understanding and should include the information indicated below.	
Column Heading	Description
Records Number or Code	A unique identifier for each record. An example of a unique identifier might be a two - or three-letter department code and the sequential number assigned each record within a department.
Record Title	The name of the record or record series
Description	A description of the record series, its contents, function, and purpose
Retention Category/ Code/Citation	Cross reference to citations/legal research
Total Retention	The total time period the record is required to be retained
Active Retention	The time period the records are to be retained in active or onsite office filing areas. This will be dependent on volume, growth over time, and frequency of access requirements.
Additional Comments	Designation of vital, historical, or confidential records, as well as additional explanatory notes or clarifying comments, may be included in this column.

(Fischer, 2006, p.28)

There is unfortunately very little to be said specifically on retention schedules for museums in the RIM arena, but that is not to say that museums do not have and implement

retention schedules. The ones that are publically available online are simple, straightforward, and organized. They cover the general subject areas found in all organizations: administrative, personnel, finance, benefit, legal, and general records. Any additional and specific records to the museum are included within those subject areas. Perhaps the lack of discussion on retention schedules specifically for museums is due to a number of museums being without schedules, or perhaps that museums may have a general tendency to hold onto most of their records by the nature of museums' sensibilities. Whatever the reason for the information void surrounding museums and retention programs, it would be a benefit to address the needs of museums in terms of retention schedules. Better records retention might allow museums to expand their collections, their buildings, and better educate visitors by providing a richer and more educational experience as a result of the positive changes.

Let us consider that a small, but well-known, natural history museum is looking to adopt a records retention program to better manage their documents and records. The museum would logically take the steps of forming a committee, conducting a record survey, and ensuring all management and record creating departments buy-into the necessity of having an upholding a retention program. Where the museum would face its greatest challenge would be in the creation of a retention schedule, which would be tailored to their specific record series as to reflect the 4 values of records as they are regarded in order of importance. Based on my particular interest in museums and what I would gather about their propensities and value structure, it would seem appropriate that the 4 values of records would rank thusly: *historical, administrative, legal, fiscal*.

It would seem an easy choice to see historical value being held in the highest regard of an institution that deals nearly exclusively in artifacts of the past that tell a history of their own.

However, it was a decision made without strong consideration of the other values. When one considers historical value of records in any other context, records have historical value when they can preserve the unique history of the institution itself; it is far less characteristic of the specific items and services the institution deals with day-to-day (that is the value in administrative records). Obviously, history is a large reason why museums exist, and thus a museum's own history would be of great importance that records that contribute to or preserve evidence of the museum's history would be of greater value than records of administrative, legal, and fiscal value. History is the main driving factor behind a museum's mission, so its historical records should be held in high regard.

A museum cannot run, however, on its historical records alone. There is a lot of information to keep track of that needs a great deal of attention and is likely referred to frequently and by many members of staff. The actual task of managing exhibits and displays, keeping track of what items are on display and which are in storage, keeping track of special events or scheduled tours is important to ensuring daily tasks run smoothly and that visitors have the best possible experience while at the museum. Records with administrative value are typically important in terms of the 4 values, as they contribute directly to daily operations of an organization. They are shared widely among staff and tend to involve staff directly. Whenever a museum makes an acquisition or an item is received on-loan from another museum or private collection, those documents created or associated with such actions are essential to keep track of and retained clearly and in an organized fashion so they can be referred to as necessary. Because there are many changes that occur on a frequent basis within museums (even smaller museums!) administrative records are a close second in importance in maintaining effective records management.

One of the main reasons for retention programs is to protect an organization and its staff from unwanted litigation as a result of the records they possess. There are agreed upon standards, created by the ISO or International Organization for Standardization, that dictate the minimum retention periods for all varieties of records that an organization might create or handle. In terms of a natural history museum, aside from personnel files, benefits and insurance files, and similar files that occur across all types of organizations, records of legal importance would deal with the artifacts and items displayed. If an item has been recently created, or is on-loan to the museum from a private collection, documents that record ownership of said item are essential to not only protect the museum, but the creator or loaner of the museum piece. Legally, a record would be of extreme importance in terms of any insurance claims made against the museum. For example, if an item is deemed missing or stolen, but there is a record of the item being deaccessioned and returned to its owner, the museum is absolved of responsibility of replacement or compensation for the item that was no longer in their custodianship as evident by the record of return. And if the unfortunate event occurs where an item is damaged or stolen, a number of records could prove to legally protect the museum from further damages, and provide legitimate claims to insurance companies that could help return the museum to normality.

Finally, while often of highest importance in for-profit organizations and service companies aimed mainly at generating revenue, the fiscal value of records would likely be the least important in terms of the other three. Though integral to any organization, fiscal documents would likely be of less concern in a non-profit organization like a museum. Many museums are not interested in generating profit, as they mean to enrich their visitors' through their collections and share unique and rare artifacts of humanity's past. Often museums have a rather small entry fee, or even forgo charging admission (like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City).

Typically museums receive the bulk of their funds from grants, endowments, and donations that allow them to oversee the running of the daily activities, allow for the maintenance of the physical building, and allow for the payment of salaries to the staff. Such records that keep track of fiscal matters are important, but those that possess any of the other values assigned to records would likely receive greater attention and use. All in all, despite favoring records of one value over another based on the goal or purpose of an organization, all 4 values are essential in records management and any records possessing such value need to be maintained and stored carefully and in accordance to a proper retention schedule.

A sample retention schedule that might suit a museum as discussed above is provided. It can be a daunting task to go about implementing a retention program and especially drafting a retention schedule to manage all manner of records for an organization. But with useful sources and templates to follow, combined with research and understanding of records management and its importance, an organization can protect itself from unwanted legal action, reduce costs and increase efficiency, and see the development and growth of said organization and increase its success. While it is possible for an organization to survive and even thrive without a records retention program, the number of organizations with the same success that also practice records management is far larger, and stand to remain successful because of the protection and precautions provided by an effective records retention program.

References:

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