How to Design, Develop, Deploy, and Maintain a Records Retention Program

A Records Retention Program is one of the major components of any comprehensive Records and Information Management Program. When your records retention program is followed, it provides your organization direction on how long records and information should be maintained, retained, and how to dispose of the record when the retention period has been reached. If the records retention program is not followed, your organization may be open to liability or legal non-compliance, which could result in loss of income, reputation and/or hardships for not only the organization and its leaders.

The risk of retaining records beyond their retention periods or prematurely deleting them will be minimized with the implementation of a sound Records Retention Program. The recommendations and resources in this toolkit will provide organizations with the necessary tools to design, develop, deploy, implement and maintain a Records Retention Program helping to mitigate some of that risk.

Step 1: Obtain Approval for the Records Retention Program

Think of your Records Retention Project as being a program. This means you will need to identify the scope for example include goals, deliverables, timeline, resources, risk and budget. After you have identified a scope, you will need to produce a project plan. To obtain the approval for the records retention program you will need to present the project plan and scope to management especially the departments within your organization where impact will be greatest. This ensures that everyone has a clear understanding of what the records retention program is trying to accomplish as well as outlining management responsibilities, potential liabilities and gaps or risks.

AIIM Tip

Communicating your proposed project to management and identified stakeholders in your organization will set the stage making it easier to obtain approvals and support to implement your records retention program. This component, in addition to executive sponsorship and support is pivotal to the success of this project. The initial communication should be done early in the project.

For more information:

- How Global Records Management Practices and Standards Are Evolving for Business Today (Webinar)
- It's Not Information Governance, It's Information Opportunity
- Harnessing Information for Business Opportunity
- Records Management
- Let's Be Better Records Managers
- Achieving Records Management Compliance
- 5 Reasons for Records Management

Step 2: Design the Records Retention Program

Before designing your Records Retention Program, you must know what you have. Performing a records inventory is an important first step in designing a Records Retention Program. There are a number of ways to conduct this inventory such as surveys and/or meeting with document/record owners in person. You can determine this by performing a records inventory. The inventory will result in a list of all the records, documents and files in your organization and where they are stored. As you are inventorying the records, it is important to appraise the identified records to assess the value of the records and the records series. Next, review the identified records against the retention periods specified by the regulatory agencies of the industry you serve, industry best practice and legal or governmental requirements for the retention of records and document the required retention periods for your identified records in your records inventory.

AIIM Tip

Once the inventory is completed, organize your records into record type categories and functional groups rather than departments, because departments can change. Conduct research to determine if your organization's industry is highly regulated and follow those regulations. Multiple retention regulations may apply to any given Records Series. When determining retention periods, it is best to use the longest time period specified to ensure all retention regulations are met.

For more information

- Think Brexit Saves You from EU Data Regulations? Think Again! (Webinar)
- Information Governance Too Important to Be Left to Humans
- How to Build a Global Records Program (Toolkit)
- Electronic Records Management Quick Study
- What is Records Management?

- What is a Records Inventory?
- Carrying out a Records Inventory
- The Importance of a Records Inventory
- Compiling a records inventory
- Records Inventory & Appraisal
- Developing Records Retention and Disposition Schedules

Step 3: Review and Develop Policies and Procedures Documentation

Document your program's policies and procedures. Begin by drafting retention and disposition procedures that outline each step of the process. Taking what you captured through the records inventory process in Step 2, create a user friendly Records Retention Schedule. To simplify your Records Retention Schedule, you may want to use codes such as: CY for Current Year, P for Permanent, H for Historical, FY for Fiscal Year and Numeric Value for a specific number of years. Work with your Legal Department (representative) to review and approve the proposed Retention Schedule. You should communicate and publish the Records Retention Schedule and make it accessible to everyone in the organization.

As part of your communication strategy to ensure that all relevant staff understands the purpose of the records program and their responsibilities, you will need to develop and conduct training and undertake regular post implementation reviews to identify ongoing training needs for the ongoing support of your records retention program.

AIIM Tip

Make sure your policies and procedures are maintained in a central location that is accessible. Maintaining records is everyone's responsibility; everyone needs to understand what to do and how to protect the organization's records. The program training should be part of the onboarding process for new employees and refresher-training sessions should be conducted on a regular basis.

For more information

- Automating Information Governance - Assuring Compliance
- After you have your Records Management Policy

- Policy and Procedure Management -A Lot Like Dating
- A Two-Tiered Governance Structure for Records and Information Management (RIM) - Including Electronic Records Management (ERM)

Step 4: Update and Revise the Program

It is not enough to develop the Records Retention program. We need to identify and establish the program KPI: regular monitoring of program elements and the policy framework (policy and supporting documentation) documentation review. You will need to revise the program elements periodically to keep it current and updated with the laws and regulations for the jurisdiction where your business operates and the industry you support. It is advisable to review the program annually. It is advisable to review the policy and the policy supporting documentation (Communication plan, change management plan, training plan etc.) at least every two years. It is also advisable to perform periodic spot checks and audits to ensure compliance.

AIIM Tip

Those who administer the Records and Information Management Policy and Records Retention Program should remain current with records and information management best practices and refresh their own training on a regular basis by attending quality-training and/or industry sessions. They should also remain current about the organization by monitoring blogs from industry experts and attending industry events.

For more information

- AIIM Electronic Records Management Training
- AIIM Information Governance Training
- 6 Important Chapters in your Records and Information Management Story
- Information Governance - Records, Risks, and Retention in the Litigation Age
- How to Gauge Your Records Audit Readiness (Toolkit)
- Defining Success for Records Management