



## How do I know which records are valuable?

Not all records created in the course of UN work need to be kept permanently. Only about 5-10 percent of any organization's records have enduring value as permanent archives. But some records must be kept for a set period, from several months to several years to fulfill legal, administrative, financial, or historical obligations. Deciding which records have value is not a "yes or no" question.

The official records of the United Nations are its institutional memory. The records we create and use as part of our daily activities help us to: work consistently and productively; keep track of our projects; inform our colleagues of our actions or decisions; and provide background about previous work or decisions.

**Records** are defined as "information created, received, and maintained as evidence and information by an organization or person, in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business."

When considering which records are valuable, the first task is to distinguish between information and records. Information is reference material, often from other sources, that is useful but does not provide evidence. Documents are recorded information that is created or received as part of daily work, such as draft communications, "to do" lists, or emails confirming a meeting. Official records are documents that are kept because they contain evidence and so may need to be referred to or used again, by you or by someone else within or outside of the UN. Determining the value of records, a process known as records appraisal, is complicated, and UN personnel are not expected to make appraisal decisions themselves.

### Assigning value

The decision about which records to keep, and for how long, is so important that the UN Secretary-General has assigned responsibility for records appraisal to a team of qualified and experienced records specialists: the UN's Archives and Records Management Section or UN ARMS. These professionals work with offices across the UN to determine the value of each office's UN records based on the following criteria:

**Administrative value:** Do the records provide evidence necessary to help UN offices conduct day-to-day business? Records with administrative value might include agency policies, operational guidelines, or records of the design and implementation of core office systems.

**Fiscal value:** Do the records establish an audit trail by documenting money received, managed, or spent? Records with fiscal value might include budget policies, the UN's general ledger, or records of contributions from member states.

**Legal value:** Do the records document the rights or responsibilities of the United Nations or its personnel? Records with legal value might include signed contracts, land title documents, or records related to policies about peacekeeping missions.

**Research value:** Do the records provide important evidence of the UN's activities, programmes and policies, or otherwise serve as the organization's institutional memory? Records with research value might include records of the Secretary General, records related to peacekeeping or capacity building, or records of historical milestones in the UN.

## Developing retention schedules

Using these criteria to appraise the different values in official records, UN ARMS personnel work with UN offices to develop records **retention schedules**, which are comprehensive policies that identify how long the office's records will be kept and whether some of the records have enduring value as archives and so should be transferred into the custody and control of UN ARMS at some point in the future for permanent retention.

Records retention schedules identify: (1) the Office of Record for different categories of record, (2) the number of years that different records should be kept in the office (the active phase), (3) how long they need to remain available to the office (the semi-active/inactive phase), and (4) whether they should be transferred to UN ARMS for preservation as archives or destroyed because they have no further value.

Archives are those records which have been selected for permanent preservation because of their administrative, informational, legal and historical value as evidence of official business of the UN. Archives are a small but important subset of the UN's official records.

## Managing records day to day

UN offices work directly with UN ARMS to make long-term decisions about the value of official records. It is critical, though, that everyone in your office manages the records in their care properly, so that valuable records are safe now and into the future.

To manage your records effectively, take the following steps.

- Distinguish between information and records as soon as possible after creating/receiving them: keep records safe for ongoing use and remove non-record information as soon as possible.
- If you are legally responsible for official records, store them securely in authorized record-keeping systems, such as approved physical or electronic records storage repositories.
- If the records you receive are convenience copies – sent to you for information purposes only – destroy them as soon as you no longer need them. Do not store them in official records systems.
- Be sure all records, whether paper or electronic, are stored in records repositories according to your office's records classification system or file plans.
- Assign clear and understandable names to all records, especially electronic records, so they can easily be found and retrieved from storage systems.
- Do not destroy official records without formal approval from the appropriate representatives within your office, in consultation with UN ARMS.
- If your office does not have a formal classification system or a records retention schedule, contact UN ARMS for help. These tools are critical to the successful protection of all your valuable records.

**Remember...** Good records management helps you protect your valuable records by formalizing the process of identifying, classifying, and storing records and by removing obsolete information and documents as soon as they are no longer needed. Working closely with UN ARMS will help you manage all your official records safely and efficiently.



To understand which records are vital, see Record and Information Management Guidance Sheet number 3. To understand how long to keep records, see Record and Information Management Guidance Sheet number 4.