



## How do I protect sensitive information?

At some point in their work with the United Nations, all personnel will deal with sensitive information, that is, information that requires a level of confidentiality. Sensitive documents need to be handled appropriately in order to protect them from loss, damage, unauthorized disclosure, or modification.

### Understanding sensitivity classifications

As required in the UN Secretary-General's Bulletin on information sensitivity, classification and handling (ST/SGB/2007/6), all documents created or received by the UN need to be assessed to determine if they contain sensitive information. The inappropriate disclosure of sensitive information can place the UN, its operations, and its personnel at risk. In order to mitigate these risks, the UN has developed a formal classification process for identifying which documents need to be protected according to different levels of sensitivity, as defined below.

**Strictly confidential:** information or material whose unauthorized disclosure could reasonably be expected to cause EXCEPTIONALLY GRAVE DAMAGE TO or IMPEDE THE CONDUCT OF THE WORK of the United Nations.

Inappropriate disclosure of strictly confidential information might: endanger the safety or security of any individual; violate individual rights; invade individual privacy; endanger the security of Member States; prejudice the security or proper conduct of any operation or activity of the United Nations; or long-lasting and/or far-reaching impairment of a United Nations mission, operation, or programme.

The results of disclosing strictly confidential information might include: the death or physical injury of a United Nations employee or third party; the violation of an employee's right to medical privacy; danger to troop movements within a mission area; sabotage resulting in significant damage to a peacekeeping mission's communication channels; or the collapse of a local population's confidence in a peacekeeping operation.

**Confidential:** information or material whose unauthorized disclosure could reasonably be expected to cause DAMAGE TO THE WORK of the United Nations.

Inappropriate disclosure of confidential information might: harm the United Nations, Member States, or individuals, where the damages incurred could potentially be repaired through negotiation, good offices, or other means.

The results of disclosing confidential information might include: strained relations between the United Nations and a non-governmental organization; or lack of confidence between the UN and a vendor.

**Unclassified:** information or material whose unauthorized disclosure could reasonably be expected NOT TO CAUSE DAMAGE TO THE WORK of the United Nations.

The disclosure of unclassified information will not result in any damage to the United Nations, Member States, or individuals.

The results of the disclosure of unclassified information might include: the media's knowledge of a principal's participation in a conference; or a Member State's knowledge of how its contributions to a trust fund have been used.

## Types of confidential or strictly confidential documents

The following types of documents might be considered CONFIDENTIAL or STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL, depending on the precise nature of their content.

- a) Documents created by the UN or received from third parties under an expectation of confidentiality.
- b) Documents which, if disclosed, will endanger the security or violate the rights of any individual.
- c) Documents which, if disclosed, will endanger the security of member states or prejudice the security or conduct of any activity of the UN, including peacekeeping operations.
- d) Documents covered by legal privilege or related to internal investigations.
- e) Internal documents shared within or across UN offices or agencies, including draft documents, if their disclosure would undermine the UN's ability to make free and independent decisions.
- f) Documents containing commercial information, if their disclosure would harm the financial interests of the UN or other parties involved.
- g) Documents sent from UNHQ to field offices or to offices away from headquarters, which – because they must be sent across large distances electronically or physically – may be lost or mishandled.

## How can you protect confidential and strictly confidential records?

Follow these tips for protecting sensitive documents, both paper and electronic, under your care.

1. You cannot override someone else's decision about the sensitivity classification of a document. The task of declassifying a document is assigned to specific senior officers in each UN office; check with the appropriate officer if you have questions about a document's classification.
2. If you believe a document you have created should be identified as CONFIDENTIAL or STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL, mark the document appropriately as soon as possible after you create it.
3. If you believe a document you have received from a third party should be identified as CONFIDENTIAL or STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL and it has not been classified already, mark the document appropriately as soon as possible after you receive it.
4. If you receive a document that has already been classified by another UN officer as CONFIDENTIAL or STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL, you must manage that document securely.
5. If you encounter a document marked with obsolete terms such as UN RESTRICTED or EYES ONLY, note that those terms have been replaced by CONFIDENTIAL or STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL. You should treat the document as sensitive until you have further clarification about its level of sensitivity.
6. Store all documents securely at all times and monitor the use of sensitive documents when they not stored. Do not leave documents unattended when you leave your work area.
7. Ensure all records creation and storage facilities – including filing cabinets, computer systems, records storage rooms, or other spaces – are maintained securely at all times.

**Remember...** Information may be sensitive even if documents are in draft form. As a safeguard, you should consider all documents to be STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL or CONFIDENTIAL until their classification is confirmed.



**To understand how to ensure records are secure, see Records and Information Management Guidance Sheet number 7. To understand how to protect records from damage, see Record-keeping Guidance Sheet number 8. For detailed guidance on information sensitivity, see UN ARMS Information Sensitivity Toolkit at <https://archives.un.org/?q=content/information-sensitivity>.**