



**UNITED NATIONS**  
Department of Management  
Archives and Records Management Section

# **Guideline**

**January 2012**

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## **User Guide to Retention Schedule Implementation**

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Review date: 2012

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## Guideline

### Using Records Retention Schedule

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## 1. UNDERSTANDING RETENTION SCHEDULE

### 1.1 Introduction

The retention schedule is the basic tool of the records management program. It lists how long each type of record is kept, what the final disposition of the records will be when they are no longer needed for business purposes, and other special instructions or information about the records.

The retention schedule lists groups of records -- or *record series*. A **record series** is a group of related documents which are normally used and filed as a unit, and are evaluated as a unit for retention scheduling purposes.

*They are maintained to serve a specific purpose and are identified by a particular name (e.g., Budget Files, Contracts, Personnel Files). Records retention is applied on the record series level – not the individual document level.*

Records included on a retention schedule are originals or copies of common business papers (hard copy and/or digital data) made or received in connection with the transaction of United Nations business or containing information useful to the UN. A record can be represented in any medium, *i.e.:*

- Paper
- Computer
- Reports
- Completed
- forms
- Photographs
- Slides
- Data on hard drives, servers, disks,
- Tapes, etc.
- Microfilm
- Film
- Artwork
- Architectural drawings

Items which should not be included on the retention schedule are:

- Blank forms
- Extra copies of printed materials such as manuals or
- Informational publications, and official published UN documents which are maintained in the library and, for the most part are available on line through ODS.
- Office supplies

Files in an individual's workstation or office or on a personal hard drive or personal network drive are usually considered work-in process or personal reference materials. Completed work should be filed in a record series folder in the department's hard copy files on the unit's shared drive. Business unit records which are maintained in an individual's workstation because of their confidential nature (*i.e.*, personnel files) must be added to the retention schedule.

At the United Nations there is a retention schedule for records of a primarily administrative nature which are common to all departments. Each department at United Nations should also have a retention schedule or schedules covering the substantive records which are unique to the department's particular function.

## 1.2 Purpose

The purpose of the retention schedule is to establish and monitor the retention, transfer, storage and destruction of records. The retention periods are assigned according to the document's useful business life within UN, applicable statutes and regulations, and any United Nations policies. The retention schedule is a living document designed to reflect each department's records and procedures. It will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. Any department wishing to revise its retention schedule should contact ARMS.

## 1.3 Retention Schedule Description

Each retention schedule contains the following basic information:

- A list of the Records Series for the unit whose titles briefly describe the contents of the series.
- Each record series is preceded by a unique item number which identifies the series. It is made up of letters which identify the business unit or function, and numbers which identify the specific series. The record series are sorted in alphabetical order by series name.
- The item numbers are not necessarily sequential, since record series can be added and deleted over time.
- Record Series Descriptions appear under the record series names. These give more information about the content of the record series.
- Retention Periods for the records. The retention periods give the total time the records are to be retained, regardless of their location. If the records are to be retained for more than three years, they may be sent to ARMS to be stored for the period after they are needed for active

use. Retention periods are generally expressed as a code plus a number. The key to the retention codes can be found at the bottom of the schedule. The number is the number of years the records are to be kept after the event or trigger indicated by the code. For example, if the retention is C+2 and the current year is 2008, files in that record series for 2007 and 2006 would be retained.

- The retention period assigned to some records is triggered by an event (i.e., contract expiration, separation of an employee, etc.). The record year is the year from which the retention is calculated – the year in which the trigger event occurs.
- To the right of the retention codes is a Disposition Code. This indicates what will happen to the records when they have passed their retention periods and are no longer needed for business purposes. Most records will have a disposition code of “D” for destroy.
- A small portion of the records will be designated “A” for archival review. These records must not be destroyed. They will be reviewed by the UN Archives for inclusion the UN’s collection of documents to be preserved for their historic value.
- To the right of the disposition code are Notes which give additional information about the retention of the record.
- Following the notes is a column which may contain the letter “V” which indicates that the records series are vital records. Vital records are records the United Nations would need to continue its normal activities in the event of a disaster or emergency. Vital records are specially protected only for the period of time when their uniqueness warrants protection. For example, accounts receivables are vital records only until the payment has been received and booked. The method and time period of protection for vital records is determined by the Business Continuity Planning process in cooperation with the records users and creators. Vital records are not necessarily permanent records. Vital records protection periods are frequently shorter than the retention period of the record.
- The function or office listed in the Office of Record column is responsible for keeping and preserving the official copy of that record. All other copies are considered reference copies and can be destroyed when no longer needed. Unless there is another office or unit indicated in the Office of Records column, the office or unit on whose retention schedule that record series is listed is the Office of Record.

## 1.4 Retention code definition

At the bottom of the retention schedule are alphabetic codes which are used to express retention periods. The codes may be used alone or with numeric values to indicate retention requirements. The codes indicate the event which must be satisfied before transferring or destroying a record. For example:

- Contracts might have retention of T+1. This indicates that this record series is retained for 1 year after the contract terminates or expires.
- C Current year Maintain record until the end of the current year.
- B End of Biennium Retain until the end of the biennium
- P While Needed Retain while need to conduct United Nations business
- S Superseded Retain until superseded or obsolete
- T Terminated Retain until termination, expiration or completion.

## 1.5 Records Management Tips

- File to Make Records Management Easier. Make new folders each year with the year marked clearly on the label. For digital files, make subfolders for each year. This makes it easy to know how old the files are when it comes time for transfer and disposition. You can then destroy or transfer files folder by folder, instead of opening each folder to extract materials which have passed their retention periods.
- To preserve items which are used and active for many years in subject files, administrative files or other files of a general nature, re-file them in the current year's folder as they are used. Unused items will age naturally in the previous years' folders.
- Don't Allow Files to be *Orphaned*. Files left behind by staff who no longer work at United Nations or have transferred out of a department, or by a department which has moved to a new location, are called Orphaned Files. There should be no files in any business unit whose current purpose, contents and owner cannot be identified. When there is no owner or person to take responsibility it is difficult to manage them. Staff do not feel empowered or comfortable disposing of them, since no one really knows what they contain. This can pose a problem, because if the contents are unknown the risk is then unknown.

## 2. RECORDS TRANSFER & DISPOSITION

### 2.1 Calculating Retention

If the record series is retained for the current year plus a number of years, you can apply the retention in one of two ways in the example, below:

- C+4: Retain documents in this record series which are dated in the current year (2008) plus the four prior years (2007, 2006, 2005 and 2004). Records dated 2003 and earlier can be destroyed.
- C+4: Retain documents in the record series which are dated in the current year (2008) for an additional four years (2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012). Records can be transferred to storage when not needed for active use and destroyed in 2013. If the record series is retained until an event occurs (*i.e.* contract expiration, separation of an employee, etc.), calculate the retention based on the example, below:
- T+2: The retention is expressed as the number of years the record series is retained *after* the event takes place. If the event takes place in the current year, T = 2008. Retain this file for an additional two years (2009 and 2010). The records can be destroyed in 2011.
- The retentions which are given on the retention schedules are the total time the records should be retained. Records with retention period of more than 3 years can be transferred to storage when not needed for active use.

### 2.2 Records Destruction Holds

An exception to the usual destruction procedure is made in the case of a Records Destruction Hold. In the case of litigation, an investigation or some other situation, it may be necessary to retain specific records until the issue is resolved. These records may not be transferred or destroyed until notice is given by the proper authorities. Specific instructions about records which must be preserved beyond their usual scheduled retention will be distributed to all employees via e-mail, and a list of records currently on hold will be posted on the ARMS web site. Consult the ARMS, if you have any questions about whether a record may be destroyed.

### 2.3 Extended Retention

If the department wishes to retain any records beyond their approved retention periods contact ARMS to receive approval to assign a new destruction date.

## 2.4 Disposition of Hard Copies

- *Records Transfer and Destruction Procedures:*  
The records coordinator (or designate) is responsible for assuring that the records are properly prepared for storage and identified so that they can be easily retrieved if needed. Complete instructions for transfer and destruction of records can be found on the ARMS web site:

<http://archives.un.org/ARMS/content/records-transfer-disposal>

- *Records in Offices*  
Records in offices can be disposed of from the offices. ARMS can arrange for the appropriate containers to be available to accommodate common business records, as well as confidential records. Departmental staff place records to be destroyed in the appropriate trash containers.
- *Records in Storage*  
Periodically ARMS will issue each office will a list of records in storage which are eligible for destruction. Prior to transmitting the list, ARMS will review it to make sure that none of the records listed are currently subject to a destruction hold. The records coordinator reviews the list in consultation with their responsible officer. Records which must be retained beyond their approved retention periods, should be indicated on the list. The reason for holding the records, and the length of time the records will be required beyond their original retention must be indicated. The destruction authorization list should be signed by the responsible officer and returned to ARMS, which will arrange for the secure destruction of the records.

## 2.5 Digital Records

Digital records must be included in the periodic review of records eligible for destruction. If there are digital files which duplicate the paper records to be destroyed, be sure to delete or destroy the digital records as well. Do not forget to check local hard drives, all locations on the UN's network and any removable media such as zip drives, thumb drives and CD ROMs. CD's should be physically destroyed by shredding. If digital records have been stored in folders arranged by records series and year, the entire folder can be deleted.

**Please note: Record destruction holds apply equally to hard copy and digital records.**

### **3. RETENTION SCHEDULE REVISION PROCESS**

3.1. Each department should review its retention schedule annually:

- Records now being received or generated in the department which are not listed on the retention schedules, should be added
- Records which are no longer received, generated or maintained in the office, should be identified for deletion from the retention schedule.
- Changes to retention periods should be noted.
- The status of a record as vital, notes regarding the record series, and changes in the office of record should also be reviewed closely and changed if necessary.

3.2 The proposed revisions will be reviewed by ARMS, the UN Office of Legal Affairs, and Internal Audit Division of OIOS, as appropriate.

3.3 ARMS will approve revisions to the retention schedule and issue the approved retention schedules on its website.