Record and Information Management Guidance series

These Guidance Sheets are designed to help you understand important record-keeping principles and practices, so you can protect the valuable documentary resources of the UN and perform your own work more efficiently and effectively. Other guidance sheets in this series provide more detailed information about specific records management issues. The full list of guidance sheets is shown below.

Records and Information Guidance Sheet #1: **What is a record?**

Records and Information Guidance Sheet #2: **How do I know which records are valuable?**

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Records and Information Guidance Sheet #4: **How long do I keep records?**

Records and Information Guidance Sheet #5: **When and how can I destroy records?**

Records and Information Guidance Sheet #6: **How do I protect sensitive information?**

Records and Information Guidance Sheet #7: **How do I ensure records are secure?**

Records and Information Guidance Sheet #8: **How do I protect records from loss or damage?**

Records and Information Guidance Sheet #9: **How do I protect records in an emergency?**

Records and Information Guidance Sheet #10: **How do I assess the quality of my office's records systems?**

For more information about records management and record-keeping issues, contact the records professionals at the UN's Archives and Records Management Section (UN ARMS). UN ARMS is responsible for all aspects of UN record-keeping. UN ARMS establishes procedures to help United Nations officials create and use records effectively in the course of their duties, supports the efficient management of records in United Nations offices, and preserves and makes available UN records with archival value.

You can also find more advice and guidance on the UN ARMS website at https://archives.un.org .

What is a record?

Most of the information and documents you create or receive as part of your UN duties have short-term value and should not be kept longer than needed. However, a small portion of records must be kept as evidence, and an even smaller portion will be preserved as official archives. Managing records effectively is critical to effective, accountable, and efficient operations.

Non-records include reference information – useful data but with no evidential value – and documents – recorded information used on a daily basis that might become a record. Documents are "declared" to be records when they provide evidence of actions or decisions. A small portion of records are preserved as archives.

What is the concept?

Information is "data, ideas, thoughts, or memories irrespective of medium." Information sources are considered "non-records": they are useful but do not provide evidence. Examples include journals, newspapers, publications, or reference sources not created by the UN.

Documents are any "recorded information or objects that can be treated as individual units." Examples include works in progress such as draft communications or "to do" lists, and transitory records such as emails confirming a meeting or acknowledging receipt of a document.

Records are "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." Examples include final reports, emails confirming an action or decision, spreadsheets showing budget decisions, photographs or maps of field missions, which need to be kept as evidence.

Archives are those records that 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 very small but important subset of the UN's official records.

What does it mean to you?

If the item in question provides information only and does not provide evidence of an activity, decision, or transaction related to your work at the UN, you should destroy the information when you no longer need it.

If a document is superseded by other documents, such as a draft report that is replaced by a newer version, and the first draft is not needed as evidence, or if the document contains information that you need for only a short time – like a confirmation of the location of a meeting – you should destroy the document when you no longer need it.

If you created or received the document in the course of your work and it provides evidence of an activity, decision, or transaction, you need to keep it as evidence, according to established UN retention schedules. That document becomes a record and must be stored safely so it remains accessible.

UN ARMS is responsible for helping you manage your records in order to protect valuable evidence of UN operations. UN ARMS also ensures records with archival value are preserved and made available.

Why are records important?

The key difference between information, documents, and records is their level of accountability. We generate or receive **information** all the time, in articles, newspapers, radio reports, or books. If that information is useful but does not provide evidence of our actual official work, or our actions or decisions, we treat that information as a "non-record": it is informative but cannot be used to prove that we did or did not take a certain action.

Within our daily work, we all create, receive, and use **documents**. We send and receive emails, draft memos, or write reports. We need those documents for a few minutes, hours, or months, to help us to work consistently and productively and to keep track of progress in projects and activities. Documents become records when we use them to inform our colleagues and ourselves of what has been done or decided or when they provide examples of or background to previous work or evidence of our actions or decisions.

When a document provides evidence, we "declare" it to be a **record**. That is, we store the record in an official records system so that we can find and use it again easily. If the document is superseded or obsolete – an email confirming a lunch appointment is no longer needed when lunch is over – we do not need to declare that document as a record. We destroy that document so it does not take up valuable space in our records systems.

A relatively small portion of UN records (only 5-10%) have permanent value as **archives**, providing valuable information not only to UN personnel but also to member states, external agencies, and other researchers.

Why is records management important?

Managing records effectively does not happen by accident. The UN requires offices to follow internationally accepted records management requirements. The main purpose of records management is to support the United Nations' business, to make sure that official records are easily accessed as evidence and that redundant and superseded information is not kept any longer than necessary.

Records management is the specific field of management responsible for the efficient and systematic control of the creation, receipt, maintenance, use and disposition of records, including processes for capturing and maintaining evidence of and information about business activities and transactions in the form of records.

The many benefits of effective records management include the following.

- Authentic, reliable records allow personnel to make decisions and perform duties effectively and efficiently.
- Well-managed records provide evidence of UN policies, decisions, actions, and transactions, demonstrating the UN's accountability and supporting transparency and openness.
- Time is saved because filing systems are easy to use and well-structured and because records can be retrieved quickly and efficiently whenever they are needed.
- Records storage costs are reduced because redundant records are removed systematically, freeing up filing and server space.
- Duplicates and superseded versions of records are easily identified and destroyed as soon as possible, saving time and space and reducing the risk of confusion about which version is the most current.
- Superseded or obsolete documents are securely destroyed, with destruction decisions documented, so that the UN can always demonstrate the appropriate management of all documents and records.
- Vital records are identified and protected, supporting business continuity and disaster recovery efforts.
- The small volume of records with enduring value as archives are identified and managed appropriately

Records come in all formats

Documents may be created or received in many ways and can come in a variety of formats, both electronic and paper. Records include word-processed documents, email and text messages, spreadsheets, or PDFs; notes, memoranda, reports, maps, plans, forms, or templates; digital or film photographs, video tapes, audio tapes, CDs, DVDs, or other recordings; or data held in databases. Records may be found in paper filing cabinets, databases, electronic record-keeping systems, email software tools, computer hard drives, and network servers. Regardless of where records are created and kept, they need to be managed according to formal processes.

Records have to be "declared"

A document becomes a record when you decide you need it **as evidence of a decision or action**. To ensure the document is managed as a record, you have to "declare" it as a record, which means storing the record appropriately in an official record-keeping system.

For example, a draft of a report is a document – a work in progress – while it is being developed. If you make four versions of the report in a day and do not consult with anyone else, your four versions are documents. But when you present the fifth draft to an external committee for review, that draft is now being used to carry out an action or confirm a decision. The document has become evidence of the review process, and you need to declare the document as a record so that you can refer back to it later. You declare the record by storing it in an official record-keeping system so that you and others in the UN can access to the record when needed, and the record remains authentic evidence of the work you performed or decisions you made.

If the document does <u>not</u> contain any value as evidence, it should be removed from computer systems, files, or work areas and destroyed when you no longer need it. For instance, when you refer to a published article or review a newspaper clipping, you are using information, but that information is not an official record. All non-records (in-

formation and documents) should be disposed of according to accepted record-keeping policies and procedures, to ensure that official records are well protected and obsolete materials are eliminated.

The best way to manage information, documents, and records effectively – particularly in electronic form – is to establish an official records system, based on a formal classification scheme, with folders to hold records and documents separately. You may also want to set up a library system for reference information such as journal articles or news stories. Separating non-records (information and documents) from official records allows you to clean up your computer files regularly without risking the loss of official records.

Distinguishing official records from convenience copies

It is common for multiple copies of documents, in paper and electronic form, to exist across the UN. It is important to identify the office responsible for official records, which is known as the Office of Record. Other copies of the document are considered "convenience copies." The **Office of Record** is the office that originated the record OR the office that is directly and primarily responsible to take action on a task or transaction. For example, the Office of Human Resources Management is the Office of Record for official UN personnel files. Other offices may use copies of personnel records as reference, but those copies are convenience copies only.

The best way to manage official records and convenience copies is to ensure your office establishes and abides by UN retention schedules. These schedules help you identify whether your office is the Office of Record for a particular activity or whether another office is responsible for keeping those records. If the record contains evidence, and if your office is the Office of Record, and if you are the person in your office responsible for storing the record, you should keep it. If your office is not the Office of Record, you should consider the document to be a convenience copy, and you should keep it only as long as you need for reference.

Always follow UN retention schedules and UN ARMS guidance to help you manage your records.

> **Records are the UN's institutional memory. They are essential tools to help people across the UN system conduct their daily work effectively, equitably, and efficiently. Your efforts to manage your information, documents, and records properly will ensure the operations of the UN are as successful as possible and will help preserve valuable evidence of the UN's vitally important work.**