



## When and how can I destroy records?

Destroying records is essential to maintaining effective records systems. But records should NOT be destroyed without full and formal authorization beforehand. Understanding the steps involved with, and consequences of, disposition and destruction will help ensure disposal actions are performed appropriately and in keeping with UN requirements.

Most records created by offices are not worth keeping permanently: only 5-10 percent of an organization's records have enduring value. In order to determine which records can be destroyed, it is necessary to establish formal records retention schedules. Retention schedules are comprehensive policies that identify how long records will be kept and whether they have enduring value and so should be transferred into the custody and control of UN ARMS for archival preservation.

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.

You must establish retention schedules before destroying any obsolete or superseded records. Otherwise you cannot be sure that your destruction decisions comply with UN requirements to protect evidence. Official permission to destroy records must be obtained before any action is taken. To obtain permission, consult with appropriate officials within your office before taking any action. Contact UN ARMS if you have any questions.

### Disposition versus destruction

Note that destruction is not the same as disposition.

- Disposition refers to the wide range of actions undertaken to manage records over time, which may include retention, destruction, or transfer to archival storage. All disposition actions must follow formal policies and meet UN requirements for record-keeping.
- Destruction is the act of disposing of records **permanently** by obliterating records so that the information in them can no longer be physically or electronically reconstructed or recovered. Destruction decisions must be formally approved before any action is taken.

### The importance of destruction

The destruction of obsolete or superseded records is an essential step in maintaining a credible, reliable, and effective records system. Keeping out-of-date records only creates confusion, making it difficult for personnel to know which records are authoritative and which records are no longer needed for business.

Obsolete or superseded records need to be destroyed in order to

- ensure official records systems are reliable and efficient
- reduce maintenance and storage costs
- demonstrate accountability and consistency in implementing destruction decisions
- improve the efficiency of paper and electronic records systems by removing unwanted records
- reduce the risk that sensitive or personal information will fall into the wrong hands.

The process of destroying official UN records must be: authorized in compliance with written retention schedules, irreversible, secure and confidential, timely, and as environmentally friendly as possible.

## **Destruction must be authorized**

No records should be destroyed until their destruction has been authorized by both UN ARMS and the office's senior management, though a formal approval process. The primary tool for authorizing destruction is the office's retention schedule. If your office does not yet have a retention schedule, work with UN ARMS and senior management to establish one. All actual destruction must be documented in writing, including capturing information about which records were destroyed, when, how, and under which UN authority.

## **Destruction must be irreversible**

The process of destroying records must be irreversible, so that there is no reasonable risk that the information may be recovered. The more sensitive the records, the more certain you must be of the irreversibility of the destruction process. Failure to ensure total destruction may lead to the unauthorized release of sensitive information. Deleting electronic records is not the same as destroying them. It is essential that you work closely with IT specialists at UN OICT and the records professionals at UN ARMS to guarantee that electronic records are destroyed permanently, whether they are stored on network drives or other electronic devices.

## **Destruction must be secure and confidential**

During the process of destroying records, they should be handled according to the level of security assigned to the records during their active life. The destruction of all records should be supervised by an officer of the United Nations or by an authorized agent, and the destruction of sensitive information should follow strict controls to protect confidentiality and security.

## **Destruction must be timely**

As soon as records are deemed obsolete or superseded and can be destroyed according to authorized retention schedules, their destruction should not be delayed. The regular and timely destruction of records is essential to maintaining an effective, transparent, and efficient records management system, which is essential for effective operations across the UN.

## **Destruction must be as environmentally friendly as possible**

Records should be destroyed in an environmentally friendly manner whenever possible. All media, including paper and digital materials, should be recycled if it is possible to guarantee that the data and information have been completely obliterated. Destruction decisions should also take into account environmental concerns. For example, pulping paper records is more secure than shredding and more environmentally acceptable than burning. But the UN must always prioritize security over other choices when destroying official records.

## **Documents must also be destroyed securely**

If documents such as transitory materials or works in progress are no longer required, they should be destroyed following the same principles outlined here for the destruction of official records, so that the process is irreversible, secure, and confidential.

If your office uses a contractor to destroy records, you must outline specific procedures for the transfer and destruction of records. These procedures must identify who will supervise destruction; what documentation will be kept of the process; how records will be handled; and which methods of destruction will be used.



**To understand how to protect sensitive information, see Record and Information Management Guidance Sheet #6. To understand how to ensure records are secure, see Record and Information Management Guidance Sheet number 7.**