How do I know which records are vital?

Only a very small portion of all your records are "vital" – that is, truly critical to help your office resume operations during or after an emergency or disaster. Protecting those vital records from harm will help your office return to normal operations quickly after any emergency.

Everyone thinks their records are vital – without our records, we could not carry on our daily work. In reality, however, only a very small portion of the UN's records can be defined as "vital." That small selection of records needs to be managed securely in order to ensure the information and evidence is immediately available whenever needed, particularly in an emergency or other abnormal circumstance.

> **Vital records** are those official records that, in the event of a disaster, are essential for the recovery of vital operations and the ongoing business of a UN office. Vital records are a very small subset of the agency's records, without which it could not function effectively.

Only a very small portion of your office's records – usually no more than 2-4 percent – are vital. To consider which records are vital, ask yourself how effectively you could resume and maintain operations for up to 30 days, or ensure the security of personnel, operations, or facilities, without access to some of your records.

Identifying core functions

Decisions about which records are vital should ultimately be made by an office's senior management, in consultation with UN ARMS and the UN's Business Continuity team. But all operational personnel can and should support the identification of vital records. The first action is to identify the most critical business functions, by answering the two questions below.

1. What functions do you need to keep performing to maintain **critical operations** in an emergency?
2. What functions do you need to keep performing to meet core **UN obligations** in an emergency?

Remember, you are not responsible for the vital records of other offices. Focus your efforts only on the protection of your own office's vital records, by identifying your office's critical operations and core obligations.

Identifying vital records

Once business-critical functions have been identified, identify the records needed to ensure you can do the work that supports those functions during and after an emergency. Consider the following points:

- Most of your vital records will be in active use. Only a small portion may be older records, and most of those older records should be safely stored in repositories or in the care of UN ARMS.
- Many vital records need to be as current as possible, such as personnel contact lists, so you need to establish ongoing processes for protecting those vital records so that they are updated regularly.
- Vital records may be copies: your office's copy of a field directive from UNHQ, for instance, may be vital to maintaining a field mission in an emergency, even though it is not the signed original.
- Some vital records may have to be kept in original form for legal reasons, such as signed paper copies of contracts where only the original provides legally binding proof of the agreement.
- Remember that you will be able to obtain copies of many records after the emergency from other UN offices; only identify as vital those records you must be able to access immediately.

Distinguishing vital, important, and useful records

Because only a very small portion of all your records are critical in an emergency, it is essential to identify clearly and precisely those records necessary to keep your operations going without delay under **abnormal** or **extraordinary** conditions.

Distinguish between vital, important, and useful records, as shown below.

Vital Records:

- contain information critical to the continuation of your office in an emergency
- are required to keep working under extraordinary circumstances
- contain information essential to confirming your office's legal and financial status
- are essential to protecting rights and confirming obligations for the UN, its personnel, and citizens
- are essential to recovering or protecting critical systems, equipment, facilities, or work spaces
- are unique and irreplaceable, or would be extremely expensive to reproduce
- would lead to <u>severe</u> negative consequences if unavailable.

Important records:

- have some value to the office, such as helping to restore operations during or after an emergency
- would inconvenience the office if lost or damaged but their loss would not halt operations
- can be replaced at moderate cost.

Useful records:

- are useful to keep the office's business going but are not critical in an emergency
- would inconvenience the office only minimally or temporarily if lost or damaged
- can be replaced at moderate cost.

Conducting a records risk assessment

Next, you need to evaluate actual or potential risks to records. What emergency could you experience and how would that emergency compromise the safety and security of records? What are the physical, environmental, or technological conditions that could lead to a disaster, and how likely are they to happen and affect the work of your office? What records do you need in order to restore operations immediately?

For example, an earthquake may cause extreme damage, but your office may not be located on an earthquake zone. The consequences are high, but the threat is low. Or your office may be located in a building near a river or ocean, so the threat of flooding in your area is high. But your offices are located on an upper floor, so the consequences of water damage for your particular office are low.

By establishing the probability of loss or damage and assessing the impact, you can determine what particular risks your office faces and how serious their effects may be. You can then take action to reduce the chance that those threats will cause major damage. The analysis of risks and identification of actions is documented in a business continuity and disaster response plan. This plan should include specific steps for

- duplicating vital records and storing them offsite
- protecting records from harm by replacing hazardous equipment and repairing unsafe facilities
- developing formal agreements with local emergency management authorities
- assigning specific responsibilities and training all personnel in emergency response procedures.

Prioritizing access to vital records

The next step is to rank vital records as Priority A, B, or C. The establishment of priorities allows you to determine the required levels of access you need to those different categories of vital record in an emergency. You can then decide which records need to be kept closest to your daily operations, and which records should be duplicated or stored offsite for safety. The records professionals at UN ARMS can help confirm the most appropriate mechanisms for protecting different levels of vital record.

Priority	Access	Examples	Vital Records Storage Options
Vital Records Priority A	Immediately required to support emergency operations	• business continuity plan • facility plans and drawings • core procedures or regulations • emergency contact lists • confirmation of personnel security and access authorities	Store paper records close to the physical disaster response site for immediate access. Duplicate vital electronic records for immediate access to critical information in electronic form.
Vital Records Priority B	Essential for the resumption of normal business after an emergency	• in-process financial or legal records • current contracts or agreements • current contact lists for stakeholders or associates	Store paper records close to the disaster recovery site to support the resumption of operations. Establish processes for restoring backups of vital electronic records quickly.
Vital Records Priority C	Essential for legal or audit purposes but not immediately required in an emergency	• existing but non-current contracts or agreements • unaudited financial records	Store paper records or electronic copies securely in a safe location outside of the office area, to ensure records are safe and accessible when needed.

You will need **Priority A** vital records at your disaster response site. This site is the location where your office normally conducts its daily operations and where most of your personnel, facilities, and records will be located at the actual moment of an emergency. You will need immediate access to those records, and you will then likely move them from the disaster response site to a safer disaster recovery site as needed.

You will want to keep **Priority B** vital records at the disaster recovery site: this is the location where you will relocate your operations after an emergency. You and other office personnel will likely remain in that place until you can return to your original location or establish a new base of operations.

Priority C vital records should be stored in offsite locations sufficiently distant from your base of operations to reduce the chance they will also be damaged in the same emergency. These records need to be safe, but they do not need to be accessed immediately. It is wise to establish offsite storage somewhere well removed from your regular office, to limit the damage from an emergency. Digital storage may include keeping offsite backups in facilities located in another region of the country.

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Protecting vital records

It is good record-keeping practice to keep all records, not just vital records, as secure as possible. But you can take extra steps to protect vital records so they are always safe in case of an emergency. Protect master copies of vital records in your office by establishing the following daily record-keeping procedures:

- Always secure paper vital records in a fire-proof or bomb-proof safe, lockable storage cupboard, or lockable desk drawer.
- Establish and maintain formal procedures for updating vital records regularly – such as contact or personnel lists – so that you are always sure the vital records in storage are the most current versions.
- Establish and maintain formal procedures for backing up and securing vital records in digital form so that the records can be recovered easily in the event of a computer system failure.
- Maintain all records systems as efficiently as possible, so that vital records can be easily located and managed in an emergency and are not confused with other, less valuable records.

Remember, backing up electronic records requires copying not just the records themselves but also the operating systems and application software used to create them. Be sure to work closely with specialists in UN OICT and UN ARMS to establish best practices for protecting vital records, regardless of their format or medium.

Offsite storage of vital records

One of the most secure methods of protecting vital records is to store authentic copies – or originals if appropriate – in a safe and secure remote location. They should be stored in a safe and secure facility, far enough from your office to escape damage in an emergency but close enough that the records can be retrieved or the information in them accessed as quickly as needed after a disaster.

Any offsite location used for vital records storage must meet the following standards.

- It must be secure, allowing access only to authorized personnel. Robust locks, alarms, and other security protections must be installed and maintained.
- It must have the same rigorous disaster prevention measures in place for your office accommodation. Storing vital records in conditions worse than your office places the records at extreme risk.
- It must be able to store, protect, and use vital records in all formats or media. You must ensure you have access in the offsite location to the software or technology needed to read and use those records in an emergency.
- It must be able to protect records from adverse environmental conditions for the life of the records, no matter how long or short that may be.
- It must provide telephone, Internet, and other connectivity to support easy access.

Remember… Managing records effectively ensures that you can access vital records in an emergency, but good records management also helps you reduce the risk of confusing important records with superseded documents or not having access to up-to-date versions of records. The advice in these Guidance Sheets will help you identify and manage vital records, allowing your office to return to normal operations quickly after any emergency.