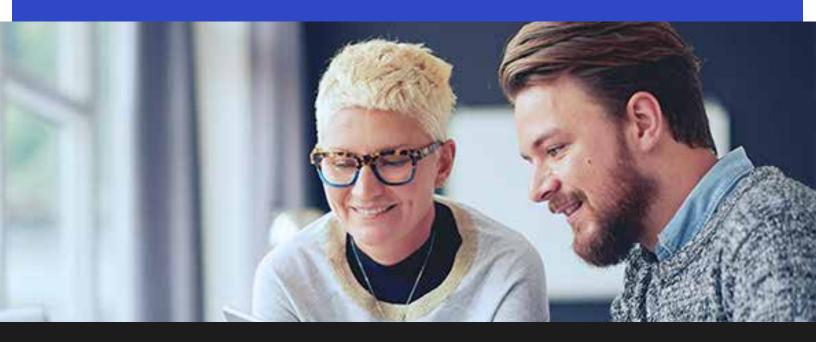# INFORMATION GOVERNANCE TIPS
AND BEST PRACTICES
FOR SUCCESS AS A RECORDS MANAGER

3 QUICK POINTERS TO GET STARTED IN YOUR NEW ROLE AS RECORDS MANAGER:

- Identify stakeholders & expectations
- Evaluate internal Records Management practices
- Implement changes slowly

INTRODUCTION

Whether you are new to your records management career, or just beginning at a new location or position, this is good information to get started. If you are a records manager seeking to break out of the corner you're so often put into, consider this painfully gained wisdom that you could use to your advantage. There is no one simple right or wrong method. Simply stated, when you begin, you don't know what you don't know…. but you must learn quickly.

When you are assigned the role of "records manager", it is typically considered "other duties as assigned" and given little to no priority. You are rarely allotted time, funding, or resources to perform said records management. If the records management directive comes from the top down, you are one of the lucky ones! You should have the support and funding necessary to make a difference. Information is as important as any other type of company asset.

There is a records manager in all of us. Everybody manages some type of record, whether it be emptying your post office box or email inbox. Unfortunately, records management is grey – there is no black and white. What works in one scenario may not work in another that is almost identical. Certainly, it is different by establishment or business function.

When I started as the City Deputy Recorder/Records Specialist in 1992, I was told "I would be out of a job soon because everything is going paperless" …. but the truth is, you still must manage digital records — and paper will never be completely distinct. Information doesn't have to be on paper to qualify as a record, nor in any format. It is the content itself that determines its records – and governance worthiness. This sounds simple and obvious, but many people are surprised by this concept.

Many times, records managers play a legal role and simply must decide what they think is best. Keeping good records helps companies protect institutional memory as well as maintain evidence of activities, transactions, and decisions. At times, Legal will push that having too many records will protect the organization more than not enough. They are not realizing the depth of liability that keeping records for longer than necessary can cause.

Put on your rose-colored glasses and envision – what do you want the end-result to look like. An effective records management system can save money on storage and improve an organization's efficiency.

IDENTIFY STAKEHOLDERS & EXPECTATIONS:

Your team is everything. Establishing relationships with coworkers, records managers, associations, and any other industry group or resource is critical to success. Make friends with legal, finance, and IT to help you implement progress.

TIP #1:
DETERMINE WHO, AT YOUR ORGANIZATION, IS RESPONSIBLE FOR RECORDS MANAGEMENT.

Are you in charge of the entire organization, or do different departments have liaisons with which you can coordinate? Is there someone in IT dedicated to records or information governance?

Meet with all departments and stakeholders individually. Meet with all records people, both individually and as groups. Conduct discussions. Weed out problem areas and ask what types of solutions they would like to see. Even if you are an employee, conduct yourself like an outside consultant. Users won't feel threatened by you if they can understand you have their best interests at heart and aren't looking to implement software or technology or make drastic workflow changes (extra work) for them.

I can say personally that I had no idea who really ran one city I worked at. I met with all the departments, we talked records, we looked at records, we looked at their software and their filing systems, etc. I thought I had a good idea for changes to implement that would increase our efficiency.... what I did not realize was that one person was very

powerful in the city and she loved paper and she loved to keep it forever – keep everything forever. I went in and directly stepped on the most powerful person's toes. Try tiptoeing away from that and saving grace. I did; but it took a few years.

Be humble. Don't offer advice or solutions yet. Just listen.

TIP #2:
IDENTIFY THE EXPECTATIONS OF THOSE STAKEHOLDERS.

Users typically want resources, rules, policies, laws, procedures, etc. They want a specific list of assignments, including instructions. It is almost easier to create your own records management program than work with something existing that may not be working. If the records manager before you thought out the process well and built-in room for change, your job will be a lot easier. If it is a stagnant solution no longer meeting user needs, the process to make changes could be painful (back to user/stakeholder buy in). Realize some people just like to complain and are not interested in solutions.

TIP #3:
CONSIDER AN INTERNAL RECORDS COMMITTEE.

If there is not one already, consider forming an internal records committee. This will bring attention to records, bring clout to the records management process, and ownership to the committee members. Hold monthly lunch meetings and serve lunch! People love lunch meetings when they get fed; and ideas flow freely in an informal setting. Discuss topics or areas of concern.

EVALUATE INTERNAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

TIP #1:
ASSESS & IIDENTIFY THE CURRENT RECORDS SITUATION.

Are the records managed in a central location or do they exist in various isolated information silos? Examine those information silos, content, and permissions. Determine how people perform research and who coordinates public records requests. You need to track your records requests and exact responses, as well as dates and recipient. If there is not a process in place to do so, you can implement something as simple as an excel spreadsheet. This can be coordinated by one individual, or a shared page for all records people.

TIP #2:
REVIEW ALL YOUR ORGANIZATION RECORDS SERIES.

Basically, take an inventory so you know what you are dealing with. Meet with individual departments and talk to them about "how" and "why" they use those records series.

Take time to evaluate. Maybe there is a reason you aren't aware of for doing things a specific way. Users tend to shut down or refuse the thought of change when a records manager starts making suggestions right away. Maybe that approach has been tried and failed before. Users get tired of making changes that don't produce results they would like to see. Ask lots of questions. Determine the key players/stakeholders in the records management program. Give yourself time to understand the dynamics, office politics, software, hierarchy, etc.

One example I can provide is that a former employer had maintained every single City contract since its incorporation. It did not matter if they had met their term, were outdated, had been replaced or superseded, etc. I went to the City Attorney and asked him about retention. He looked at me and said, "you said YOU knew how to manage records why are you asking me". The simple reason was that because every single City contract had been retained and none adhered to their retention policy, it had then become more of a "collection" than a "records series" and so I had legal questions as to what the correct process would be at that time. Legal never provided an answer and I couldn't bear to start destruction of an entire records series collection so current contracts were digitized and older ones sent to the State Archives for permanent keeping as a collection.

When I began in the field, it was relatively new. The State Archives had just mandated that each City establish its own "retention schedule". They wanted every type of record series identified and classified (public versus protected), as well as the length of time to keep it. Over the years, this became problematic and now classification is evaluated and determined at the time of records release. And 30 years later, we are still finding and identifying new records series.

There is continued discussion about the lifecycle of a record. It is "supposed" to include creation/receipt, use/send, file/store, retain/destroy, preservation. Is that the lifecycle in your current environment? Often the steps many do not follow the desired order, but you can still make it work. An effective records management system can save money on storage and improve an organization's efficiency. Realize some people just like to complain and are not interested in solutions.

Consistency across vendors and departments and proper training are also key components in the success of any records management system. Everyone needs to understand the records lifecycle and each step in the process.

IMPLEMENT CHANGES SLOWLY

Make no sudden moves. Take baby steps. Ask for feedback. Help users understand. Often, they fear change, not necessarily the change you are suggesting. Implement feedback or changes if they make sense. Realize there will always be roadblocks along the way – whether that be in the form of user buy-in and acceptance, funding, software, technology, management directives, etc.

TIP #1:

BEGIN TO BUILD A RETENTION SCHEDULE (OR REVIEW THE EXISTING ONE FOR POTENTIAL REVISIONS). USE THE INVENTORY OF RECORDS SERIES FROM YOUR INTERNAL REVIEW PROCESS.

This begins to build your own internal "rule book" for retention and disposition of records. Establishing records management as an integral part of an overall governance program must be collaborative. Issuing orders and expecting others to obey is a great way to get nowhere in a hurry, and especially if the management team is not backing you up.

The governance power must be centrally held. Allowances can and should be made for departmental variations, including vocabulary and administrative business purposes. These should be included into the overall program and not left to evolve on their own. If they are, they could destroy and order you are seeking to create.

Don't be surprised if people don't immediate enthuse over the program, or benefits of classification and retention.

TIP #2:

IF THERE IS NOTHING IN PLACE, WRITE A PLAN TO IMPLEMENT A SOLID RECORD MANAGEMENT PLAN BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE. IF THERE IS A PROGRAM IN PLACE, REFER TO STEPS 1 & 2.

Identify the scope – what are you trying to achieve? What would you like to see as the result? What problems are you trying to solve or improve? Circulate your "draft" plan to your stakeholders or internal records committee and ask for feedback.

The process to do this is cyclical:

- IDENTIFY EXPECTATIONS
- EVALUATE CURRENT PRACTICES
- SLOWLY IMPLEMENT CHANGES (MAKE ADJUSTMENTS ALONG THE WAY)

When writing a policy, it can evolve and change over time – the trick is getting it written down and following a policy in writing. Lessons can be learned, and changes will be made. The disciplines that policies and procedures adhere to extend far beyond simple classification and are the basis to successful information governance as well.

Reasons to implement records management include:

- Employees spending too much time waiting or searching for files;
- Important document being inadvertently discarded or misplaced;
- Filing systems no longer adequate to house the growth of records;
- Crowded office space or too many filing cabinets;
- No set policy about how or what to keep;
- No protection in place for vital records records being stored individually by department in unmanageable or undesirable locations (such as basements or attics or non-used buildings subject to elements);
- Being uncertain about the current system (if any) and how it functions (or doesn't).

Preservation is key because many types of media can degrade over time or equipment becomes unavailable and records are rendered unreadable. It seems like the younger generation seem less familiar with this concept and more readily believe the current best practice can last forever. Yet if the content is not or cannot be migrated, they will not hold up during a legal discovery process and should be destroyed before they set an organization up for failure to produce (including fines and sanctions).

Records destruction is a critical component of a healthy management program. Besides representing a legal liability, "keeping everything forever" leads to an ever-increasing demand for systems and financial resources as the information pile grows (regardless of what Legal thinks). There is a harm of keeping things forever. What you want is a policy that is clear, a process that is clear, and the proper documentation showing that you followed that policy and process.

Remember the need to create a record of the actual records destruction. This creates an audit trail that can validate the date, time, and means or reasoning (retention schedule/policy) by which they were destroyed.

As with any policy or procedure, records management is not free from complications and issues. Records management has been in place in public and government agencies, healthcare, and public companies for a long time, but it's just starting to catch on in the private sector. No matter how ingrained it is within in any system, there will always be compliance and legal issues.

The following issues can also be problematic:

- Security, data protection, and privacy, as hackers and data breaches become more advanced;
- Transparency and accountability, as freedom of information laws and other laws become more prevalent;
- Adoption and implementation, because not everyone sees records management as a top priority;
- The merging of systems, as companies acquire each other, merge, and grow together;
- The failure to recognize internet and social media posts as records as the dissemination speed of social media increases; and
- Improper filing and creation of access when converting older physical records to electronic ones.

A big mistake often made is assuming a technology will fix all the problems you have. The technology should be the last step in the process of records management because any company should first do an analysis of workflow and basic needs before turning to technology. Further, some technology does not allow for disposition of records once their retention period is past. If you cannot get rid of something, you will not be following your retention schedule.

TIP #3:
USE ALL AVAILABLE RESOURCES.

Begin to collaborate and work with available resources. Records Management Training, Education, and certifications are more readily available than ever before. There are now degree programs, certifications, and professional organizations dedicated to records and information management. The field is rapidly changing and so is the associated technology. Even though the media is changing, the requirements for managing that information still exist and the company still needs access to use it.

The Records Management industry includes acronyms that change frequently. Learn to speak the language. Attorneys, Clerks, and IT have differing terminology. They are different yet the same in many ways. Communication amongst these groups can be frustrating even though you typically have the same end goal.

To help records management professionals, several international organizations exist to provide education and support about records management. These can include ARMA International (The Association of Records Managers & Administrators) which offers conferences, publications, resources, professional development webinars, and more available both for members and non-members. Most areas have local chapters that meet monthly and the relationships you can form by attending those meetings are invaluable. Other groups include AIIM (Association for Intelligent Information Management), NAGARA (National Association of Government Archives & Records Administrators), and ICRM (Institute of Certified Records Managers). You can meet all kinds of people working in either the same or different industries. You learn that most of us face the same (but different) kinds of challenges.

Use all your gifts and talents to weave your own magic!