

Retention Schedules

Filing systems often get neglected until they outgrow their space. Papers accumulate in existing files, and new ones are added until suddenly there simply is no room for more. Then, a frantic purge is needed, or more filing space must be added. Both of these undesirable remedies can be avoided by developing a systematic process for removing unneeded records from the filing system – a retention schedule.

THE URGE TO PURGE

A retention schedule is simply a documented plan that defines when keeping certain records is no longer needed. How long you keep information depends on your type of business, the nature of the records themselves, applicable legal restrictions and the value of the information to the future of your business.

Even within a business, some records must be retained longer than others. Tax records and financials should be kept longer than active project records. Other important legal documents and contracts may need to be kept permanently, while routine records can be eliminated after the work has been completed.

Before throwing out important records, spend time looking at the different types of records you keep. Create categories of records, then examine each category to establish the length of time records in each category should be retained.

DOCUMENT MIGRATION

Active files need to be readily accessible while their contents are needed for current business activity. Completed projects or transactions may not need to be stored on-site in your filing area. They can be moved to inexpensive off-site storage, digitized for electronic storage or disposed of entirely if there is no real value to keeping the information. Files may stay in the active filing area for a period of time after work has been completed. Then they may move to archive storage until a predetermined date when they can be destroyed.

KEEPING UP WITH RECORDKEEPING PRACTICES

A retention schedule is only as good as its managers. Time must be set aside monthly, quarterly or at a minimum, yearly to move files through their useful existence and then out of your filing system. With regular attention, you can be confident that your most valuable information is safely stored, your filing system stays sustainable and your unneeded paper gets recycled.

