

What Chief Information Officers should know about their responsibilities for records management, the development of retention schedules and the disposal of electronic records

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The electronic world is a world of unintended consequences, much like the starlings of Central Park or of Rome. When I read the article on “Flight Patterns” in the Sunday New York Times (April 23, 2007) featuring Richard Barnes’s photographs of the millions of starlings that fill the skies of Rome on occasion, it reminded me of the chaos texting, email, and a seemingly infinite variety of information delivery ‘systems’ have caused the Chief Information Officers of this world (not to mention Archivists).



We are faced with some daunting challenges with regard to what of the electronic record we should and must be saving, whether it is for legal purposes or for the necessary enlightenment of the public over time.

The State Archives is Maryland's historical agency and permanent records repository for government records, the ultimate repository of the people's records, as one Court Clerk has pointed out. An archives is the conscience of the public, the repository of its collective memory, recording the history of the State. The Records Management Division of the Department of General Services has responsibility for non-permanent or temporary records that can be disposed of after a period of time. The Archives and Records Management currently share responsibility for the creation of disposition and retention schedules. After records of an agency of State government are reviewed or

appraised by archivists and records managers, a determination is made for each type of record whether to keep the record and for how long; based on the record's administrative, financial or historical value. The deposition and retention schedules cite if the record can be destroyed immediately; transferred to Records Management for eventual destruction; or transferred to the Archives for permanent retention.

Although the vast majority of Maryland's permanent records exist in paper form and on microfilm, the past decade has witnessed the rapid growth of electronic records. The same basic issues of appraisal, access, and preservation of information that pertain to paper records also pertain to electronic records. Records once kept in paper or on microfilm now exist on a variety of computer information systems. Many of these are permanent records, but their electronic form is fragile and easily lost (witness the meltdown of Blackberry service and the untrackable nature of texting).



Developing strategies to preserve electronic records is a challenge to the agencies that manage the information, the information system professionals and archivists and records managers.

Satisfactory management of electronic records requires that records be actively managed throughout their life cycle: from creation, through all phases of access and use, to final disposition, whether that is permanent storage or eventual destruction. It is important to understand the distinction between the life cycle of records and the life cycle of information systems that create, manage and use the records and the life cycle of the media on which the records are stored. The life cycle of records often exceeds the life cycle of the information system in which the records are originally created or captured. Likewise, some storage media will significantly outlast the hardware and software necessary to retrieve and display the records stored on them. To successfully manage and maintain electronic records, it is important to determine if the records will be needed beyond the life of the system where they are currently stored and, if necessary, to plan for the migration of the records to a new system before the current system is retired.

Over the past three years we have created the finest electronic archives in the United States bar none, including the Library of Congress and the National Archives, thanks to the support of the Judiciary. In the creation of <http://mdlandrec.net> we have established the model, and the principle that any records that are created by government that are meant to be permanent, should, start their life cycle at the Maryland State Archives, while leaving the accountable source of their creation and daily administration with the agency charged by law with their creation and/or collection. We are working on improved guidelines and regulations to encourage this happen and will have new draft regulations in place for review by the end of the year. They include the requirement that agencies will:

(c) Provide for the ultimate disposition of the information, including transfer of permanent electronic records to the Archives as soon as they are created or born digital within a time frame agreed upon in the records retention and disposition schedule;

We have worked with the Legislature this session and will next, to reinforce the principle that permanent records born digital belong at their inception at the Archives for both security backup and disaster recovery, as well as for long term access to permanently valuable public information. We have already established a prototype web site for the complete automation of transferring both paper and electronic records to the Archives and are working closely with the Executive Department to make this routine with regard to Executive records, just as we have done with Land records. (<http://transfer.mdsa.net>)

The successful management and preservation of electronic records, however is not something that we can undertake alone. It will take the creative energy of IT professionals, archivists and records managers working together to preserve the essential information of government in a permanent format that is accountable, verifiable, and susceptible to a transparent migration from the media format of today to the media format of tomorrow in the most effective and cost efficient manner possible.

The first step is to carefully examine IT operations with regard to what must be saved permanently as the permanent public record and what form that record should take. The second is to use the Archives Records Retention and Disposal scheduling process and the Archives Electronic Archives as the “safe harbor” for discovery of public access to public information in its most elementary, live, electronic form.

I would hope that agencies would use the Archives as the ultimate disaster recovery resource and as the referral place for most, if not all, PIA (Public Records Information Requests). In doing so, we suspect that you will actually be able to keep your costs for Information Services at their current projected level and possibly even save money. We saved the Judiciary ca. 20% of their own projected costs for creating a permanent imaging system for land records, one which at the time we offered to help, did not have a required archival component.