The America Heritage Center
University of Wyoming

AN INTRODUCTION

TO RECORDS SCHEDULING AND MANAGEMENT

for non-profit organizations

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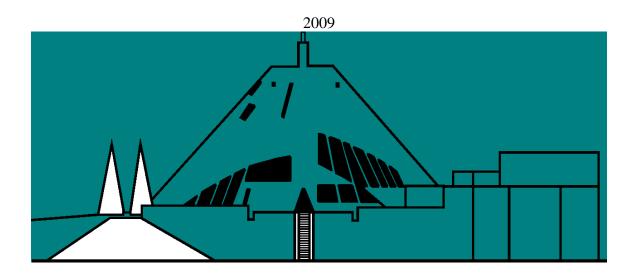
INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This booklet is intended to assist small, non-profit organizations that wish to improve control over their records. It is intended to be a brief introduction to issues involved in keeping records. At the end of the booklet is a small section with suggestions for where to go or whom to contact for further information.

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AN INTRODUCTION TO RECORDS SCHEDULING AND MANAGEMENT
for Non-profit Organizations

THE PROBLEM—TOO MUCH STUFF

The offices of most organizations share an overriding problem: not enough space. Not enough space for people. Not enough space for equipment. But especially, not enough space for the gobs and gobs of records.

File cabinets are stacked on top of file cabinets. Closets, basements, and attics are filled with file cabinets. Inside those file cabinets, the squeeze continues. Too many folders in the drawer, too many pieces of paper in the folders. Nor has the computerization of even the smallest organization resulted in the long-predicted "paperless office." In fact, the quantity of paper generated every year by government, business, and the non-profit sector is still increasing. At the same time, the problems once confined to paper are now evident in the electronic realm as well. Hard drives are overflowing. The files on those drives are not well-labeled or well-organized. Files "saved" to disks have been misplaced or never migrated (or left to warp on a radiator).

Finding particular reports or memos becomes more a job for a superhero than for mere mortals. Not only is there too much stuff, but it is usually organized haphazardly. Most filing systems suffer from one or more of the "danger signals" listed in Figure 1. These problems are dangerous because they impede the accurate creation and retrieval of information, as well as making it difficult to insure that historically important records are identified and preserved.

So, what to do? You and your staff are already overworked, and the thought of redesigning your filing system has--to say the least--limited appeal. But there are improvements that can be made with a very small expenditure of time, effort, and money.

THE SOLUTION: RECORDS MANAGEMENT

The solution is records management—the process of determining a useful filing structure, the relative value of the types of files kept by your organization, and a useful (and legally acceptable) method for throwing away or deleting files that are no longer useful. For instance, certain classes of records can and should be destroyed routinely three or seven years after their creation. These include (but are not limited to) bank statements, canceled checks, invoices, expense reports, time cards/sheets, duplicate copies of anything, publications received from outside agencies and organizations. Such records have administrative value (value to the daily operation of the organization) or legal value (a legal requirement that they be retained) only for a limited time, and have little or no long-term historical value. We can call these records "short-term," because they need only be preserved for a relatively brief time. While these records must be retained for three or seven years, most of them cease being useful in the daily operation of the organization after one or two years. When records are no longer regularly consulted by the organization they are said to be "inactive."

Figure 1

ORGANIZATION/CLASSIFICATION DANGER SIGNS

Filing system changes when employees change (this applies to tangible filing folders as well as computer file folders (or directory structures).

Information gets "lost" or misfiled.

Time and money are spent recreating information you already have.

Delays in finding requested information.

There are folders with only one document in them, or folders filled beyond capacity.

Information retrieval depends on an individual's memory.

Security measures aren't adequate to protect confidential records.

Requested information is not always complete and accurate.

The same type of record crops up in several locations in the filing system.

File folders are created arbitrarily, and there is no current file guide/index.

MAINTENANCE DANGER SIGNS

Records storage space problems (physical or gigabytes).

Frequent requests for more supplies, equipment, records personnel.

Physical records clutter office area; computer records clutter desktop

No one knows where all the office's records are.

File weeding is sporadic and arbitrary.

There are no written procedures and controls for file system and filing operations.

Some records get filed but are never referred to again.

Supplies and equipment are not appropriate to records housed in them.

There is no plan for what gets filed, and no plan for movement of records into and out of the filing system.

OTHER DANGER SIGNS

Some records in an office become inactive only after a long time, and continue to have potential usefulness—or must be retained for legal reasons—essentially for the entire lifetime of an organization. These records can be referred to as "permanent," because the agency has to keep them safe and accessible for the indefinite future. Many other records in an office--reports, correspondence, minutes, etc.--may have long term "historical" value but cease to have administrative value after three to five years. These historical records form the "archives" of an organization. The archives is an organization's memory, ensuring that as staff changes and the organization evolves, its history is accessible. An organization's archives should preserve, in the smallest amount of records possible, documentation of its origins, purposes, major activities, significant accomplishments, and most important interactions with clients and/or other agencies.

Designating files as being short-term, permanent, and/or historical is the essence of establishing a "records retention schedule." At its simplest, a records schedule identifies how long each portion of an organization's records needs to be retained, and—perhaps more importantly—how soon each portion can be thrown away. Figure 3 is a sample general retention schedule for a small organization. Please note that this schedule covers only the most common types of records; most organizations will have records which are not listed here but which can be placed on an expanded schedule. Also, these retention periods are guidelines only; you should check with your organization's lawyers, accountants, and/or major funders to ensure that these guidelines (and schedules for any record types not listed here) conform to state laws, state revenue department rules, and funding agency requirements. Notice, however, that most of an agencies records probably need not be retained for more than seven (7) years, and many probably do not need to be retained more than three (3) years.

This means not only that all those ten-year-old receipts and canceled checks can be thrown away or deleted, but that each year, a year's worth of material—three to seven years old--can be discarded. It should be easy to destroy such records by following a record retention schedule except for the fact that most filing systems do not "break" files on a regular basis. "Breaking" a file means to start a new folder every year (or every five years) without fail. In this way, not only do folders not become overcrowded, but it is extremely easy to purge records according to a schedule. Please note that a "folder" can be physical or virtual; it is no accident that the most popular software uses an icon of an office folder to suggest a grouping of computer files.

Indeed, if files are broken by year it is a simple matter to remove short-term paper records each year (or whenever they become inactive), box them, and store them elsewhere than in file cabinets for the duration of their legal or administrative lives. Permanent and historical records, too, once they have become inactive, can be moved out of filing cabinets and into boxes. Preferably, long-term inactive records should be placed in boxes in the same order that they were maintained as active files. File cabinets, after all, are expensive, and under the proper circumstances (see below) boxed storage is adequately safe and accessible.

A roughly similar approach should be taken with computer files. First of all, however, it is important to adopt the approach of "foldering" computer files. Whether in email or word processing files, or powerpoint, or databases, both PC and Macintosh operating systems permit creation of virtual folders (conveniently, using icons that look like real folders). Such folders should be employed to organize material, first (definitely) by category, and then (ideally) by year. For example, emails can be organized by person and/or organization, by topic, by department, by funding agency, or the like. A similar foldering scheme can be employed with other types of files—see Figure 2, for example. "Subfolders" may also usefully be employed: for example, first by funding agency, and then by grant number. Then, ideally, within each folder or subfolder, there would be a further division by year. This annual division is somewhat less necessary than for hard-copy files, only because it is relatively easier to locate and move or delete computer items by date.

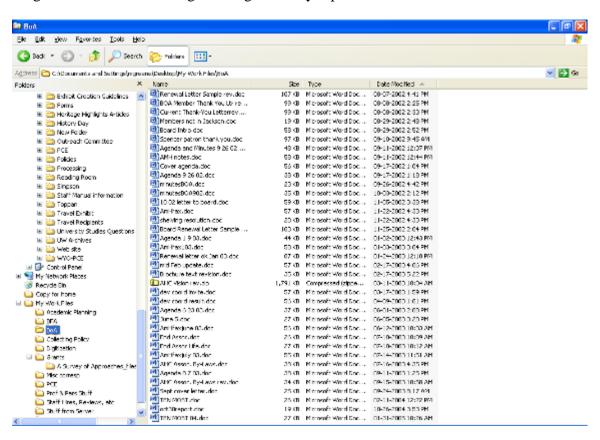Figure 2. Word Processing files organized by topical folders.

Figure 3.

General Record Retention Schedule

RECORD TYPES[1]   RETENTION

Internal (that is, generated by your organization)

Agenda Packets (background material provided to Board members)	Historical--permanent
Annual meeting programs	Historical--permanent
Annual Reports (to members, granting agencies, federal agencies)	Historical--permanent
Constitutions, Bylaws, Articles of Incorporation	Historical--permanent
Directories (membership, resource, etc)	Historical--permanent
Financial Audits	Historical--permanent
Fundraising letters (generic copy)	Historical--permanent
Grant proposals (funded)	Historical--permanent
Minutes (Bd of Directors, committees, task forces)	Historical--permanent
News releases	Historical--permanent
Newsletters	Historical--permanent
Newspaper clippings (about your organization, if well organized)	Historical--permanent
Photos--of work situations, facilities, staff of note, important/ unique events (if labeled)	Historical--permanent
Posters, publicity flyers (one copy only)	Historical--permanent
Audio and video interviews with staff of note	Historical—permanent
Audio and video histories of the organization	Historical--permanent

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Director's correspondence and email	May be historical, retention depends on content
Project Files	May be historical, retention depends on content
Subject Files	May be historical, retention depends on content
Case Files	Permanent, may be historical
Donors--lists of	Permanent, not historical

[1] Record Type transcends format, and includes material in both hard-copy and electronic forms.

Figure 3., continued

RECORD TYPES	RETENTION
Personnel files	Permanent, not historical

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Grant Files (correspondence w/grantor, budget information, etc)	End of grant + 7 years?
Payroll files, rolls, ledgers	30 years
Bank statements, canceled checks	7 years
Contracts	7 years from termination
Time sheets/cards	7 years
Purchase orders	7 years

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Annual meeting and other event planning files	3 years
Audio and video tapes of annual meetings, board meetings	3 years
Donations--letters accompanying	3 years?
Grant Proposals (not funded)	3 years
Job announcements	3 years
Photos--meetings, awards, parties, other recurring events, and all unlabeled	3 years
Receipts, bills	3 years
Expense reports, reimbursement requests	3 years
Monthly ledgers/journals, quarterly budget reports	3 years

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| Job Applications | 1 year |

RECORD TYPE	RETENTION
External (that is, sent to you by other organizations)	
Publications (newsletters, reports, etc.)	1 year
Minutes, agenda packets	3 years
Programs, handbills, announcements, posters	Discard when outdated
Audio tapes, video tapes, photographs	Discard when outdated

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Please Note: This schedule covers only the most common types of records; most organizations will have records which are not listed here but which can be placed on an expanded schedule. Also, these retention periods are guidelines only; organizations should check with their lawyers, accountants, and/or major funders to ensure that these guidelines (and schedules for any record types not listed here) conform to legal, IRS, and funding agency requirements. Blank lines have been provided on this list to facilitate your adding additional record types generated by your organization but not listed here.

STORAGE OF INACTIVE, SHORT-TERM RECORDS

Storing inactive, short-term paper records in file cabinets is a waste of what is probably your organization's most scarce and expensive storage space. Once they become inactive, short-term paper records can be moved to less desirable and accessible locations. However, since it is necessary that the records be identifiable and retrievable for however long they must be retained, and since it is important to be able to easily identify records that have become eligible for destruction, some formalities should be observed when paper records are retired from the filing cabinets.

Records should be removed from the file cabinets in their original folders and in as close to their original order as possible.

Records should be placed in standard, lidded, storage boxes (see Figure 3, for examples), available from any office supply store. This type of box is slightly more expensive than scavenging for cast-off boxes at the liquor or grocery store, but they are: a) easier to handle; b) sturdier; c) stackable; d) reusable.

The boxes should be labeled with the following information: type of records (e.g., invoices, canceled checks, and payroll cards); earliest and latest year-dates contained in the box (e.g., 1994-96), and the person or (in larger organizations) the office that put the records in the box. Ideally, adhesive labels should not be used to record this information, because most of these labels have short-term adhesive that is rendered even less predictable by the storage conditions found in basements, attics, etc. The labels may fall off in as little as a couple of years. Therefore, it is best to use a permanent marker and record the information directly on the boxes.

Where to store these boxes? Short-term, inactive records can be stored in many places that are not suitable for storing records you want or need to keep for a long time: a basement (so long as the boxes are up off the floor and there are no silverfish); a garage (ditto); a rented "self-store" locker (ditto again); an attic (so long as there are no squirrels or mice living up there). Ideally, the boxes should be stored on shelves in any of these locations, but record storage boxes can safely be stacked up to five (5) high unless the environment is quite damp.

Preparing inactive, short-term computer files for "storage" is similar to working with paper files, with one important difference. The difference is that computer files require more conscious and consistent maintenance if they are to even survive long enough to be made inactive. Therefore, the first and most critically important step with electronic files is TO BACK UP ALL IMPORTANT FILES AT LEAST WEEKLY, and to store the backup material someplace other than the organization's office. All other preservation considerations and scheduling decisions are meaningless if a hard-drive crashes or a fire or flood destroys the computer(s). Whenever your organization makes significant software or hardware changes, you should be sure to copy into the new system or format ALL the computer records which still have a legal, fiscal, administrative, or historical value, EVEN IF THOSE RECORDS ARE INACTIVE.

However, at the point electronic records become inactive, the approach to segregating and labeling them is familiar. Rather than have them take up important and expensive network server or internal hard drive space, it may be useful to "physically" transfer inactive files to external drives or CDs (external hard drives are preferable, for durability reasons). CDs should be clearly labeled with their contents, as should hard drives (with permanent markers). "Folders" should be renamed, if necessary, to reflect more clearly their contents. It does little good to have a folder labeled "JDs files," with subfolders "ARD Proj," "Background," "Documents," and/or "Misc." Several years after "JD's" departure it is possible nobody will remember who JD was, much less what his/her folder designations meant. It is important to identify material in ways likely to be understood by your successors. The physical storage of electronic material is different in several important respects from paper material, as presented further below.

Figure 3

RECOMMENDED STORAGE BOXES FOR PAPER FILES: Inexpensive storage containers for office files come in many shapes and sizes from office supply stores. The Historical Society recommends 2-piece (lift-off lids), 15x12x10-inch storage boxes with cut-out handles. These boxes are made by several companies, and are relatively inexpensive. They weigh approximately 35-lbs. when full, and so are relatively easy to move, and they will easily stack up to five high or fit most utility shelving. These 2-piece boxes will accommodate either letter or legal folders, and are manufactured with large blank labeling spaces.

TYPES OF STORAGE BOXES NOT RECOMMENDED. Common 15x24x10-inch boxes, when full, are too heavy for one person to move easily, and unless steel-reinforced, are much more likely to crush when stacked more than two high. The so-called "drawer files," which are basically cardboard versions of filing cabinets, are generally too weak to stand up to even infrequent use and are nearly impossible to move safely unless completely emptied.

STORAGE OF PERMANENT & HISTORICAL RECORDS
Storage of inactive permanent and inactive historical records is similar to that of inactive, short-term records, but differs in a few important respects. Removing the materials from filing cabinets and placing them in well-labeled record storage containers is the same for both kinds of records. However, for permanent and historical records, one additional step is necessary. Because these records will be in storage indefinitely, and because they are being saved permanently due to some continuing utility to the organization, these records must be made more accessible and more secure than inactive, short-term records. To ensure their accessibility, box inventories should be prepared in addition to the information written on the boxes.

Box inventories are simply brief lists of the files found in a particular box. Usually, the inventory consists of the following information:

1. Name of the person or office whose files are in the box;

2. Date the files were placed in the box;

3. Overall description of the files in the box (e.g., "Correspondence Files," or "Subject Files," or "Minutes");

4. Earliest and latest year-dates represented by the contents of the files in the box;

5. List of folder titles in the box (or list of item titles for audio or video tapes, photo albums).

6. Location of the box, if more than one storage space is being used.

The box inventory should be prepared at the time the box is filled, and should be filed in an agreed-upon place within the organization (a second copy should be placed inside the relevant box, for safety's sake). The inventories will be a quick and easy guide to current and future staff members giving an indication of what files have been placed in permanent storage and where they are. Being able to refer to the inventories will save considerable time otherwise spent in aimlessly rummaging through boxes looking for specific information.

A similar approach is useful for computer files. It is relatively simple to print out a screen view of the "file tree" for both email and other types of files, which can then be filed in the same fashion as inventories for boxes of papers.

The other principal difference in the storage of permanent and historical records as opposed to that of short-term records is where they should be stored. Basements, garages, self-storage rental spaces, and attics should not be used to store permanent and historical records unless there is no alternative. Better storage space for these records would be in closets, storerooms, or other rooms in your organization's main office

building. Ideally, storage space for permanent and historical records should be a space that is heated in winter, cooled in summer, generally dark, free from vermin, and as dry as possible at all times.

Permanent storage of computer files is substantially different than for paper records. It is not enough to find a well-located set of shelves onto which to place CDs or external hard drives. Records in computer form (in whatever media) should be stored ONLY in spaces that are cooled in summer and heated in winter (your living areas at home, your office at work, a bank safe deposit box, the home of a relative), never in basements, attics, or garages, or near electric motors or other sources of magnetic fields.

A WORD ABOUT**… Client Case Files**
Those organizations that provide social service, medical, or legal assistance to clients maintain client case files as a matter of course. Generally, these files remain active for as long as the client has contact with the organization. However, because clients may return to an organization after a long period without contact, the line between active and inactive files is often unclear.

The principal determinant of client case file status and retention for an organization receiving funds from state or federal sources are the requirements defined by their funding agencies. After the retention duration required by funding agencies has passed, client case files may continue to have administrative or historical importance for the organization. The bulk of these files, and the strict rules usually governing access to them, often make it impractical for an organization to make such files permanent or historical. If the organization has an agreement with a repository (see "Alternatives to Preserving Historical Records," below), it is possible that some or all of the client case files might find a home there, but the organization must be particularly careful to insure that its agreement with the repository accounts for any retention and access restrictions imposed on the case files by state or federal laws or regulations.

…Legal Risk
Case files are one example of the fact that certain types of records are inherently more important from a legal standpoint than others. For many non-profits, routine inter-office communications and even formal studies, reports, and plans, are not records which are mandated by law or likely to come under any form of legal scrutiny. The same is not necessarily true of an organization's minutes, case files, or financial records. Minutes may be required by the state statutes under which an organization is legally chartered; case files may contain items regulated by state or federal statute; financial records are subject to audit.

What this means in practice is that a greater level of care is necessary to guarantee the reliability of the record-keeping system and the authenticity of the records; greater attention must be paid to issues of security, access, audit trails, and the like. If such records are kept and generated in paper form, the organization of the files, accurate and timely filing (and re-filing), secure storage, and written retention schedules that are applied consistently are important methods to reduce legal risk. If such records are kept

and generated in computer form, it is also important to use reputable software (especially for accounting and tax preparation) and ensure that records are not only backed-up but also accessible (i.e., still useable by the current software on your computer) for as long as the law requires. (For further discussion of computer records, see "Non-Paper Records: Computer Records" below.)

…Documentation of the Recordkeeping System
Another important consideration—relevant both to issues of legal risk and to issues of administrative efficiency--for both paper-based and computer-based records systems is that the systems be well-documented and widely understood among your organization's staff. If there is only one person in the organization who knows how the filing system is organized, where inactive records are stored, and how the financial books are being kept, the organization may be in deep trouble if that person suddenly leaves for whatever reason. Similarly, if only one person knows anything about your organization's computer system and the records stored in it—who knows how the database was modified to produce special reports, what the cryptic file name abbreviations mean, or how to use the book-keeping software that's been tracking funds for the past four years—what is going to happen to the organization if something happens to that person? Any organization should have a means of ensuring that several staff members are keeping track of what records are being produced, used for what purpose, on what software, filed in which locations, etc. In addition to ensuring continuity of record keeping during personnel turnover, such distributed knowledge will ensure that your organization is much better equipped to handle any problems related to obsolescence, the migration of data, damage or loss of records due to fire or flood, and other difficulties.

NON-PAPER RECORDS**…Computer Files**
Computer records—on diskettes, on CDs, on internal hard drives, on external hard drives—are both similar to and different from paper records. For most non-profit organizations, computer records are just a different form of the same information found in paper records. This is particularly true if your organization uses computers primarily for word-processing, spreadsheet, and simple database applications. Computer records can become inactive, and most of them (like their paper counterparts) have only short-term value.

However, computer records are much more fragile than paper records, and greater care must be taken to ensure that—for however long they may be needed—they can in fact be used. Three things threaten the "legibility" of computer records: obsolete software, obsolete hardware, deteriorated media. In less than seven years (the useful life of many kinds of short-term records), software can change so much as to make the material recorded on a diskette, backup tape, or auxiliary drive useless. In roughly the same period of time the hardware necessary to access a particular media may become obsolete—it has effectively happened to 5.25" diskettes, and 3.5" diskettes are similarly doomed. At the same time, in as little as three to four years the physical media itself may become too deteriorated for even compatible hardware and software to read—this is particularly true for diskettes, but even CDs and external hard drives are nowhere near as durable as paper (notwithstanding manufacturer's occasional claims to the contrary).

To guard against these threats, a few straightforward steps are necessary. First, it is important that any files of continuing value be "migrated" from one major software system to another, as the office migrates. This requires some time on someone's part, but is essential if the files are to be readable down the years. Some experts now suggest that the easiest means of ensuring the readability of files through the years is a) to convert them to a truly universal format, such as *txt files, or b) to quasi-universal formats such as either *.rtf or *pdf files. For particularly **vital records**, those without which the organization cannot continue to function, it is still a good precaution to physically print them whenever they undergo substantial change—if they are printed, a laser printer should be used, because inkjet and deskjet printers do not create permanent documents.

Second, files must be backed up, whether off an individual's hard drive or off the organization's network, to guard against disasters—all other preservation considerations are meaningless if a hard-drive crashes or a fire or flood destroys the network server. This can most easily be accomplished using external hard drives, but those drives must then be stored off-site as noted in the storage section of this document, above. And it is crucial to remember that back up media—whether CDs or external hard drives—themselves have limited lifespans—they should be tested every year at least, and replaced every 3-5 years for safety's sake. On a related note, be certain to copy still-needed files from any computer or server that is being retired.

In addition to concerns regarding the durability of the software and hardware, computer files, similar to image and audio files, are only as useful and historically valuable as their identification. Even now that computer files can be given almost unlimited names, often they are labeled so cryptically that not even the creator can remember what the name means six months after saving the file. Multiply one cryptically named file by potentially thousands on a typical computer hard drive or organization network, and the utility of the material comes quickly into question. This problem is multiplied by the tendency of creators not to organize their files into folders, as previously noted.

For computer files to endure and be useful, several things are required: a) migration from one major software release to another, for those files with enduring importance; b) proper backup and storage of backup media, and frequent replacement of that media; c) organization of files into the electronic equivalent of hard-copy folders; d) intelligible naming of files.

…Photos, Films, Video & Audio Tapes

Sound and visual records are often an important part of an organization's administrative work and its history. Like computer records, however, sound and visual records are different from textual paper records in several respects. Sound and visual records, as used here, includes photographs (prints, slides, negatives, transparencies), motion picture film, audio tape, and video tape.

There are three important questions to ask about sound and visual material to help in deciding whether it should be considered for permanent or historical retention:

1) Is it—or can it be, with reasonable effort--identified and labeled? Typically, only sound and visual materials that are identified and labeled are worth preserving. Moreover, it is almost always wishful thinking to suppose that "someday" "someone" will be able to identify and label material that is now unidentified; unless your organization has a reasonable chance of assigning someone the task of identifying unlabeled material within the next year or so, it is probably best to consider that material of short-term value.

If unlabeled sound and visual material is already a problem, it should alert the organization to take steps to ensure that such material created in the future is identified and labeled at the time of its creation. Note what is going on in a photo, who is in it and where the picture was taken. Date the photo as closely as possible. Write the information on the back of the photo with a soft 6B drawing pencil, which is available in art-supply shops. Be sure to use people's full names and titles if you know them. Similar information should be recorded for audio tapes. For movies, write the identifications on the leader; for video tapes, on a label affixed to the cassette itself (not just on the slip case). Note when it was shot, by whom and what the event is.

2) Is it—or can it be made so with reasonable cost/effort—useable? Badly faded or water damaged photos, moldy audio or video tapes, audio or video tapes with significant creasing or flaking of the magnetic layer, video tapes in badly outdated formats—these are probably costly if not impossible to make useable. Unless the material is of extraordinary importance to your organization, such material should not generally be preserved against a hoped-for future when "someday" "someone" will be able to rescue them. If it is a very important item for the organization's work or history, contact a museum or historical society for advice on how to salvage the content.

3) Is the information completely or adequately duplicated elsewhere in the organizations records? There is almost never a need to keep duplicate copies of sound and visual material, unless there is an active and immediate need to distribute such copies within or outside the organization. Similarly, if a staff member shot two rolls of film of the organization's new building, many of those images will be essentially duplicative, even if technically not identical. If board meetings are tape recorded, and then the minutes are transcribed (verbatim or in large measure), it is possible that the tapes need not be preserved, especially if the organization considers the written minutes the "official" record of the meeting.

One important caution accompanies this general rule: not all sound and visual material are created equal, in terms of their durability. Storage conditions being equal, for example, photographs will last longer than video images; black and white photos will last longer than color photos. Motion picture film will endure much longer than a copy made to video tape, even though the video copy may be easier to play.

If the answer to any of these three questions is "NO," it is likely that the material in question should not be considered permanent or historical. As previously indicated, this

judgment applies equally to computer files.

Storing Sound and Visual Material.
Generally speaking, sound and visual material is more sensitive to storage materials and storage conditions than are paper records. Therefore, sound and visual material that does have long-term value should be stored in the same "office-like" environment as permanent and historical paper records (see "Storage of Permanent and Historical Records," above). Specialized storage containers are recommended.

Photos. It is very important to save photo negatives. Many people think negatives are a nuisance, but they are the originals and they allow creation of new prints if a print is destroyed. Negatives last well if they are not handled. Keep them in polyethylene or polypropylene sleeves.

There are two primary ways to store photographic prints–using the filing system in archival boxes or using photo albums. Use file photos in archival boxes if there are a lot of photos to arrange. The pictures can be organized in files by subject, person, or year. It is important to use acid-free folders and boxes. The acids in paper products can be harmful to photos.

Albums allow you to display pictures more easily, but also tend to be more expensive than filing. Some of the best pre-made albums are manufactured by Webway, a Minnesota company. Again, seek out acid-free papers and notebooks made from archival board. Or you can buy clear plastic pages made from polypropylene (or polyethylene, or polyester) and insert the photos. Do not use vinyl pages or notebooks–they emit harmful vapors and shorten the life of photos. Traditional "black paper" albums, and the popular "magnetic" photo albums should be strictly avoided. (Magnetic albums allow easy arrangement of photos on a page, but photo corners allow easy arrangement too and will not damage the photos.)

In general, do not take apart existing photo albums. At their best, they present a good chronology, and often contain useful captions or identifications recorded on the pages. If the photos in an old album have become loose because of detached or missing photo corners, replace the photo corners. The exception to the do not-take-apart rule is magnetic photo albums. They contain a sticking material that is detrimental to photos, and they need to be taken apart. However, if the adhesive has set and made the photos difficult to remove without tearing, leave the album intact. If such an album is of great importance to your organization, contact a museum or historical society for advice on how to salvage it.

Slides: Slides are very susceptible to dust. They should be stored in covered boxes or carousel trays. Non-vinyl slide pages can also be used.

Motion Picture Films. Movie film should be stored in reels, and either in boxes or in film canisters—lying flat rather than on edge if at all possible. The films should be labeled on their leader strips, and on the canister. It is important to realize that motion picture film is much more durable than video tape, so that even if a video tape copy of a film has been made, the film itself should be retained as the original.

Video and Audio Tape. Video and audio tape, like computer diskettes, are "magnetic" media, and so must be stored away from strong magnetic fields because of the possibility of altering or even erasing the image and sound on the tape over time. Store video and audio tape on edge and wound to end rather than to the beginning. Tapes in permanent storage should be visually inspected every five years (no visible damage and evenly wound)—otherwise in several decades these "permanent" tapes will be irreversibly deteriorated. If there are tapes that the organization will be using actively (in-house training videos, for example), it is important that one copy be designated the "master," and played only to make "use" copies; the use copies should receive the wear and tear, leaving the quality of

the master relatively undiminished.

Digital Image Files. Issues relating to computer files of all types have been addressed above, but there are a few additional matters of concern when it comes to digital image files. <u>Digital images are probably the most fragile photographic material that humans have ever devised.</u> They are subject to all the threats to which electronic text documents are prone, and the files are often compressed, so that actual visual information has been subtracted and therefore lost. At this time, if you use a digital camera to take pictures or a scanner to convert traditional photos to image files, the files should be saved to a hard drive, network, or CD as *.tif files—the rawest and therefore least compressed form of image file. However, *tif files are very large; to share the image with others, make a copy of the digital image as a *.jpg file.
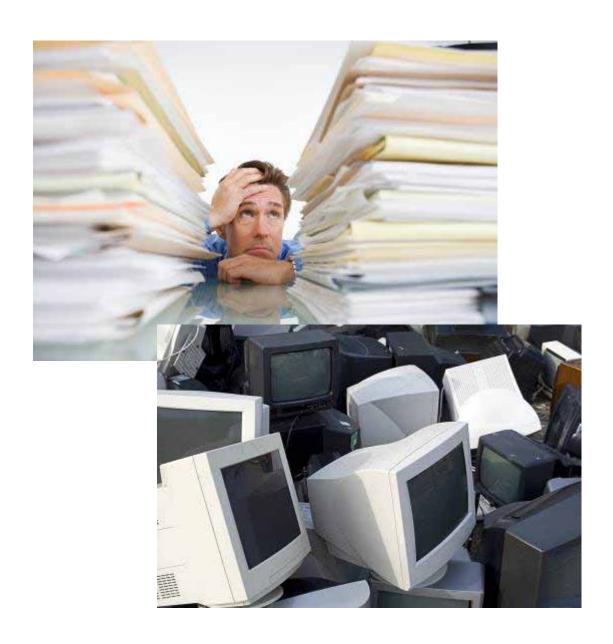
The "photographic" prints you make on your office printer—even if it is a laser printer and even if you use "photo quality" paper—are not permanent. Indeed, even prints ordered from a commercial lab are not permanent, because color prints, regardless of manufacturers' claims, are not permanent. *The best approach for a permanent record is the old-fashioned film-based camera that creates negatives to produce prints--f*or the best preservation, shoot a roll of black and white film.

WHERE TO BUY QUALITY PRESERVATION SUPPLIES
Some basic storage supplies are fairly easy to come by. Adequate records storage boxes are available at any office supply store (though boxes of archival quality, should your organization be able to afford those for permanent or historical records, must be purchased from the suppliers listed below). Some photo shops and some stationery stores carry photo corners, archival-quality plastic pages and non-vinyl photo albums. Please note, however, that there is no control over the use of the term "archival," and many products claiming to be archival are not. To be certain, it is usually best to order such supplies from a reputable supplier such as:

Light Impressions, Rochester, NY
     1-800-828-6216; http://www.lightimpressionsdirect.com
University Products, Holyoke, MA
     1-800-628-1912; http://www.universityproducts.com
Gaylord Bros., Syracuse, NY
     1-800-448-6160 (ask for their "archival products" catalogs);
     http://www.gaylord.com

It is important to note that archival quality supplies are more crucial for some applications than for others. Sound and visual materials will probably benefit most from archival quality storage materials. Paper records will do pretty well with basic office-supply products (archival boxes and folders will last longer, and provide some additional protection, but tend to be much more expensive and may not be within the financial reach of many organizations). However, the MOST IMPORTANT factor in the longevity of records—of whatever type—is the storage conditions (cool, dry, dark). Even the best storage supplies will help very little to protect materials stored in a damp basement or a

sweltering attic.

ALTERNATIVES FOR PRESERVING HISTORICAL RECORDS
Ideally, an organization should preserve its own historical records—that is, its own archives. However, sometimes this is not possible. Historical repositories may be willing to preserve all or part of an organization's archives. Historical repositories include state historical societies; some state archives (others preserve only government records); special collections or manuscripts departments at most universities and some colleges; county and local historical societies; some public libraries; and some independent research libraries. Such repositories have varying collecting policies and

capabilities.

The American Heritage Center is itself such a repository, and welcomes inquiries about the possible donation of certain types of organizational records (see the end of this booklet for contact information). Our staff may be able to provide the number and contact person for other repositories, and speak in general terms about issues an organization should consider if it is contemplating donating records to a repository.

In general, however, there are four important policies to be aware of regarding the relationship between repositories and an organization's archives. First, most repositories will only accept organizational records as donations; that is, the organization must give up ownership of their records. Second, a repository may not wish to preserve an organization's entire archives. Repositories preserve records to serve a broad research clientele; some records which may be important to an organization may not be important to a repository's researchers. Before agreeing to donate records to a repository, an organization should make sure it understands which records the repository wishes to preserve.

Third, most repositories will agree to restrict researcher access to some or all of an organization's records for a specific period of time, but eventually records donated to a repository will be open for public research. Fourth, once material is donated to a repository, it does not circulate--in order to insure that it is preserved as long as humanly possible. Access to donated papers is governed by the repository's written policies regarding availability, photo-duplication and publication. Your organization should become familiar with such policies, and discuss any special needs or concerns with the repository before completing the donation agreement.

Your organization should also be conscious of a repository's capabilities to provide safe storage and make materials accessible. What are the repository's hours of operation? How is the repository staffed (volunteers may be less familiar with collections, and less able to provide reference service to your organization, than paid staff)? Will your organization's records be organized and cataloged according to accepted archival standards and in a timely manner (though please understand that organizing and cataloging collections is not a simple process and your records may not be the only ones that the repository must work on—expect a delay of 6 to 18 months depending on the size of the repository). Are the storage areas secure, clean, dry, cool, and are there emergency (fire, flood, tornado) measures in place? (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4. Secure, Climate-Controlled Stacks of a Modern Archival Repository

If you have questions about any of these issues, do not hesitate to discuss them with the repository. Additional resources are the Society of American Archivists pamphlets "Guide to Donating Your Organizational Records to a Repository" (http://www.archivists.org/publications/donating-orgrecs.asp) and "Deed of Gift: What Donors Should Know" (http://www.archivists.org/publications/deed_of_gift.asp).

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS?
Libraries and book stores may carry a variety of books aimed at helping organizations organize their files. Another source for records management information is the chapter of the Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA) in your area (information on local chapters is available at http://www.arma.org/). Some metropolitan areas have organizations of archival professionals, as do some states, and many geographic regions. You can find a list that will help you identify an organization that serves your area at http://www.archivists.org/assoc-orgs/directory/index.asp. The officers of the organization may be able to assist you.

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