Records Survey

Introduction

Performing a records survey enables you to identify what records are held, by who, and where they are located. This information can be useful when creating a records inventory, information map, or retention schedule.

The method you choose will depend on the volume of records you need to survey, and the importance of accuracy to your recording. The most reliable form of survey is a physical survey. It might be used when it is important to gather detailed, accurate information. An alternative is a survey by questionnaire. This can be a sound, cost-effective method of obtaining information. However, if not all questionnaires are returned, it may be necessary to follow up with a physical survey.

First steps

Before carrying out any survey a notice should be sent to all affected managers and staff, identifying the nature of the survey, its objectives, its impact on their work, and when it will begin. To ensure the minimum of disruption to the work of the section an initial investigation to establish the whereabouts, ownership, volume and condition of the records may be effective. You should also collect and study the following items (if they exist):

- maps and plans of buildings, showing furniture and equipment
- copies of contracts with commercial storage companies, microfilming bureaux, or other organizations which offer records-related services
- inventory of equipment, including computers and photocopiers
- organisation charts that will give an understanding of the flow of information
- procedural manuals and forms
- copies of file lists or databases
- copies of previous studies

Physical survey

To conduct a physical survey, you must visit operational areas and look into each item of records storage equipment, ask questions and complete a standard survey form for each record collection you identify. Records Management have created a standard template which you can use, see: Records Survey Form document on the webpage. You should not examine every record; it is usually sufficient to sample a series or collection.

When the plan and timetable have been drawn up the detailed survey can follow. Four main actions form the key to finding out information from the survey:

- find every storage place with records and information, including tops of cabinets, shared and personal drives, disks, CDs, commercial storage, under desks, in attics and basements
- look at all the records and information discovered
- ask questions until understanding is complete
- record the information acquired for future analysis

Survey by questionnaire

Identify those individuals within the business area who create or manage records, and ask them to complete a Records Survey Form for each records series they hold.

Analyzing the results

You should analyze your survey results promptly, as otherwise they will quickly become obsolete. As well as enabling you to update your inventory, and assisting in the development of a filing scheme and retention schedule, information gathered in the survey will assist in the identification of the following:

- records which are valueless and should be destroyed immediately – see questions 20, 21, and 26-29 of the survey
- inactive records which could be removed from expensive office accommodation to storage – see question 21 of the survey
- filing equipment which could be emptied, removed or re-used – question 30 of the survey may identify partially filled equipment in which records could be consolidated
- records or information which could be consolidated, including the elimination or reduction of duplication – see questions 45-48 of the survey
- records containing personal data subject to the UK General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act 2018 – see questions 41-44 of the survey
- measures required to protect the records from loss, damage, etc – see questions 16-21, 26-29, and 36-38 of the survey.

About this guidance

Version control	Author/editor	Date	Edits made

3	Claire Friend	February 2018	Removed repetition. Reformatted for accessibility.
2	Susan Graham	May 2003	

If you require the guidance in an alternative format, please contact the Records Manager at Rob.Don@ed.ac.uk