How to Conduct a Records Survey

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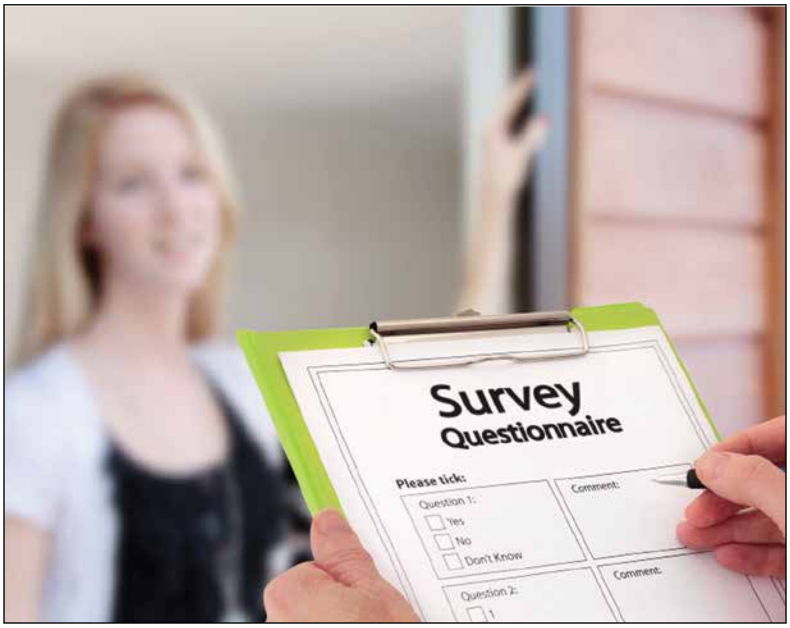

The *records survey*, a high-level assessment tool, focuses on identifying the various records categories that are created, processed, or received by the organization or a department within a larger organization. Use a records survey form or at least a standardized list of questions (with blanks for recording comments) to guide your interview.

If you are conducting the project alone at this stage, gather the information in a manner that conforms to your work style. If you are managing a team of analysts, standardize the information-gathering format. See Figure 1: Sample Blank Records Survey Form on page 43.

The purpose of the survey is to determine major records series or categories that end users create, receive, process, or maintain in their ongoing work. The survey is most effective when an individual trained in records survey techniques conducts interviews of key employees who use the records. A skilled records analyst can anticipate the record types usually created or maintained by a certain function and ask leading questions to trigger information about those records.

Questionnaire vs. Interview

Another method, called the *questionnaire method*, is sometimes used instead of or in advance of having a trained analyst conduct interviews. As indicated by the process name, a questionnaire or form is sent directly to the user. If your users understand the objectives of the survey, know how to calculate file volume and capacity, understand retention schedules and records management benefits, you might get reasonably good results. If you narrow the focus and train the users in completing the questionnaire, your results will be more reliable.

However, the authors do not advise solely using the questionnaire method or using the questionnaire without training the users. The analyst brings away from user interviews much more than the checked boxes and brief notes on a form. Impressions and awareness of the department's records needs and interactions with other groups, when interpreted in light of the analyst's knowledge and experience, cannot be replaced.

Interview Questions

When conducting the survey by the interview method, have explanatory comments and other forms of the questions in mind in case the end user does not understand the initial question. The additional questions and comments are intended to help you better understand the objectives of and the results desired from the survey. Use these questions as explanatory or follow-up information to ensure that you get comprehensive responses.

Who is being interviewed? List the organization name, name of the person interviewed, office location, telephone number, or other location information. If you know ahead of time that the individual being interviewed works with many records categories, look up the location information in the company directory, enter it on one form, and copy that form for additional categories.

Another method is to number and compile each end user's survey forms (1 of 15, 2 of 15, etc.) and complete the location information only on the first page. Put enough information on each page to ensure that you can trace it back to the right person.

Form RM02 Revised 1/2-013	**Records Survey Form**		
Company Name	Department/Unit Surveyed	Surveyed by	Page of
Person Interviewed	Room/Bldg.	Telephone #	Survey Date

Describe Dept./Unit Major Activities/Functions

List major record category (created, received, and/or used). Use one sheet for each category.
Category Name/Description

Check one or more record forms:

- ☐ 8 1/2" x 11" paper (letter size)
- ☐ 8 1/2" x 14" paper (legal size)
- ☐ Bound books, catalogs
- ☐ 3" x 5" cards
- ☐ 4" x 6" cards
- ☐ 11" x 15" computer printouts
- ☐ 11 x 8 1/2" computer printouts
- ☐ Roll microfilm
- ☐ Microfiche
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Computer disks
- ☐ Compact disks
- ☐ Computer tape/cartridges

How frequently are these records created?
☐ Daily ☐ Weekly ☐ Quarterly ☐ Unscheduled ☐ Other

How active are these records?
☐ Active (accessed frequently; weekly or immediately)
☐ Semiactive (accessed periodically; monthly or less often)
☐ Inactive (no need to retain in the active office area)

Who uses these records?

How long after creation (or other event) are the records needed onsite (in the office) for business uses?

Do you need the record after its office life? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, how long?

Do you know of any legal requirement for retaining these records? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, please explain:

How are the records currently organized?
☐ Numeric by ____________ ☐ Alphabetic by ____________
☐ Other ____________ by ____________

Is the number or name by which the records are organized already associated with the record when it is created or received?
☐ Yes ☐ No If yes, please explain:

Estimate the file volume in linear file inches:
Current Volume ____________ LFI Expected total volume accumulated each year ____________ LFI

Comments (use additional sheets as necessary):

Figure 1: Sample Blank Records Survey Form

Is the individual being interviewed representing a larger group of employees? If so, make a notation indicating which work group. In very large organizations, one or two individuals may be designated to provide information for a larger group of employees with the same general responsibilities.

What is the major activity or function of the organization or subgroup within the organization? This information helps you understand the relationship of the records and their contribution to the workflow of the organization. Get a comprehensive description – "processes accounts payable invoices, customer complaints; interfaces with vendors and company personnel regarding accounts payables" – is a much better response than "accounting."

What is the records category name? *Remember to use a separate form for each major group of records created, received, maintained, and processed by the individual.* Ask the user to describe the record category. By knowing what users call the records, you are collecting key retrieval terms for incorporation into the file classification/taxonomy and/or retention schedule. Verify that the user is describing only one records series.

For example, "accounting records" is too broad. Ask for specific examples, such as "accounts payable invoices" or "customer complaints," and complete a records survey form for each series.

What is the usual records format? Check one or more formats on the survey form. Modify the survey form provided [with this article] if it does not include the record formats, choices, and questions appropriate to your organization.

Ask whether the record format is satisfactory. Has the user experienced any problems with using the records that can be attributed to its format? If so, determine the cause. For example, *microfiche files* (4" x 6" film containing an eye-readable header and reduced images, usually arranged in a grid pattern) that are difficult to find could be attributed to:

- An inadequate indexing system for the microfiche
- An inadequate eye-readable header
- The absence of controls for removal of a microfiche from its normal location
- A format that impedes access to documents

When the format indicated is electronic or digital, ask for specific system and application names, which will assist in ESI **data mapping**. (See Chapter 5 [of *Managing Active Business Records]* for more on data mapping.)

How frequently are the records created? Are records created daily, weekly, or on no set schedule? High-volume records may be candidates for an image or online application, particularly if they also have high reference requirements and/or are accessed by many people in remote locations.

How active are the records? How often is a record referenced or recalled after its creation or receipt by the organization? The survey form gives three choices:

- *Active* (accessed frequently such as weekly or immediately)

- *Semiactive* (accessed periodically such as monthly or less often)
- *Inactive* (no need to retain records in the active office area or server)

Who uses the records? Do only one or two individuals use the records, or are records shared throughout the department or company? Do other departments also use the records? Answers to these questions can provide support for formal charge-out systems and can help determine the appropriate level of centralization of physical records. These answers may also highlight an opportunity for changing the record format from paper to image (microform or electronic image) or online application.

How long after creation (or other significant event) are the records needed in the office or in an active server environment for business use? This period of time identifies a preliminary office retention period for the records. Significant events that signal the beginning of a records retention "countdown" include events such as termination of an employee, expiration of a contract, or completion of a project.

Record the event that triggers retention as well as the time that the record is required in the office after that event has occurred. Even if the documents are needed in the office only a relatively short time, if reference volume is high, dispersed, and immediate need exists, changing the format of the record should be investigated.

Are the records ever needed after their initial use (office life) has expired? If so, how frequently and over how long a period? This information indicates whether the organization may need offsite or offline storage of the records.

Does the user know of any legal requirements for retaining these records? Users, especially in regulated industries, are often aware of current laws or regulations.

Knowing legal requirements early in the process can save research time and facilitate development (or verification) of the retention schedule. Verification and review by a company attorney, however, is important before establishing or changing official retention periods.

How are the physical records currently organized? Are they in alphabetic, numeric, or alphanumeric order? By what data element are they organized (such as alphabetic by customer name, etc.)?

Is the current organization of records effective, and are the records easy to find? If users can easily find information, recommend continuing this organizational method. As the old saying goes, "If it isn't broken, don't fix it." However, you will need to compare your interview subject's perception against the perception of others who use the same records. Determine whether a user who is new to the department would also find it an "easy-to-locate" records series.

Is the name by which the records are organized (sequence key) already associated with the record at the time it is created or received? Using an existing key – its natural order – as the document's normal sequence is often the best way for users to find it. If a natural order of the record is identified and the current filing order is different, consider changing to the natural order.

However, if customer files are currently arranged alphabetically by name, but every document filed includes a printed customer number, customer number may be a better filing order, especially if the customer records series is very large. Do not just assume that the natural order should always be used.

Can retention schedules be used in lieu of a records survey? If the company or organization has a retention schedule, this schedule may serve as a validation tool, negating the need for conducting a formal records survey. This validation should demonstrate that the retention schedule is comprehensive, includes full descriptions, and identifies any regulatory citations that identify legal requirements for length of retention for the series. Propose, as additions to the retention schedule, any records series not listed on the schedule but discovered during earlier stages of the project.

Even if you have a retention schedule, you need to conduct a records survey if the retention schedule has not been recently reviewed.

Analyze the information gathered from the records survey or validated retention schedule. Records survey results can provide preliminary file classification/taxonomy and retention information and can assist in mapping digital records systems. **END**

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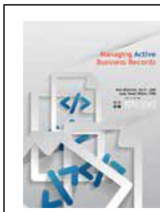

Editor's Note: *Managing Active Business Records*, from which this article was excerpted, is available for purchase from the ARMA online bookstore at *www.arma.org/bookstore.*