

Establishing a Records Appraisal Workflow

Maik Schmerbauch, Ph.D.



Although many standards and other publications advise on the ways to properly manage physical records, theoretical knowledge from reading about it is no substitute for practical experience. This case study describes the workflow established for a records and information management (RIM) project to appraise and manage the

inactive records of the procurement unit in a United Nations (UN) agency in Germany.

Setting the Stage

RIM as its own operating section was established in the middle 2000s as a result of the release of the UN's formal archive and records management program, which had been authorized

by the secretary general. It declared: "Archives and Records Management Section shall be responsible for establishing policy and setting standards, including the design of record-keeping systems and procedures for the management of the records and archives of the United Nations, including their use, storage, retention and disposition and access rights."

Before the RIM unit became operational, each unit of the secretariat conducted records management with unique filing techniques according to its professional requirements and stored its records in a separate repository. Shortly after the secretary general's proclamation, RIM was staffed, minimally, and the department created its own policies and procedures based on the international recordkeeping standard ISO 15489-1:2001 *Information and documentation – Records management – Part 1: General*.

RIM therefore had to manage information to ensure that it was accurately documented, that business records were managed efficiently, and that they remained suitably accessible during their retention periods. In addition to performing its daily records and document management operations, the young RIM section functioned as the records center for inactive records with a retention requirement and as an archive for records classified for permanent preservation.

RIM conducted several records appraisal projects for such departments as human resources and the procurement unit as part of the general administrative program, which for two decades had secured inactive records in a single storage repository – a room with shelves but without archival order or any appraisal or

classification procedures. Anyone who required access to the inactive records had to search for them manually.

In 2013, after RIM had conducted several smaller appraisal projects, the procurement unit requested professional help on its entire inactive physical records collection. Afterwards, RIM developed a qualified project proposal and delivered it to management, which acknowledged the need for the project and provided the resources.

Getting Started

After the project proposal was developed, RIM and the procurement unit negotiated the project workflow, time schedule, and resources. Project managers and temporary RIM professionals were added, as was a staffer from the general services department who helped with records transport and destruction.

Upfront, RIM developed the retention schedule and the records classification scheme (RCS) according to UN standards, but tailored for the organization's special requirements. The organization-based RCS for the procurement unit was numerical, and in addition to describing per position a special procurement records series, it described the series content and its confidentiality and security requirements.

The RCS covered 15 main records series with their related retention

requirements. Retention for inactive records had been set by the retention schedule, with a special trigger – for example, 10 years after their expiration date. As shown in Figure 1 “Retention Schedule Excerpt,” the retention schedule for the procurement department included the metadata schedule number, title, retention period, disposition, notes, trigger, and the related offices of creation of the records.

Developing the Workflow

The workflow developed by RIM contained these eight steps:

1. Locate all inactive procurement records in the storage repository and in the clerks' offices.
2. Conduct a complete first inventory for an overview.
3. Create storage according to records series classifications.
4. Set records retention with appraisal according to the series for preservation and destruction.
5. Transfer the records for preservation into RIM repositories and conduct physical disposal of the records whose retention periods had expired.
6. Clarify the future retrieval process in the archival database.
7. Train the procurement employees on the practical RIM processes.
8. Review the project and compose a justification report for all stakeholders.

FUNCTIONS (Level 1)	ABBR.	No	ACTIVITIES (Level 2)	No	SUB-ACTIVITIES (Level 3)	Scope Notes	Title instructions
Procurement	PRO					Records and non-record copies related to the office procurement activities	
		01	Contract Management			File here: Case folders for non-record copies of contracts, leases and institutional or corporate agreements. Records related to the management of the contract, including correspondence with the vendor.	Title will consist of: Name of Contractor and/or Type of Contract [.] Year
		02	Purchase of Goods and Supplies	01	Files for the acquisition of goods and supplies under \$4,000	File here: Records relating to Requisitions and purchases including bids, proposals, quotations, invoices payment records, etc	Title will consist of: Name of contractor and/or PO number [.] Year
				02	Files for the acquisition of goods and supplies over \$4,000	File here: Non-record copies relating to Requisitions and purchases including bids, proposals, quotations, invoices payment records, etc	Title will consist of: Name of contractor and / or PO number [.] Year

Figure 1: Retention Schedule Excerpt

The project can be viewed as a prototype for continued improvement and success at the UN and is applicable to other public and private organizations.

Step 1

The process of locating all functional procurement business records was conducted in close consultation with every procurement staff member in order to have a clear knowledge of the inactive records and their locations. The procurement records were located in the procurement storage repository and on shelves in staff offices. The records had been kept by procurement in containers, binders, hanging folders, boxes, and loose paper collections. The next step was to conduct a basic inventory of all these records.

Step 2

All inactive records from the offices were transferred into the inactive procurement repository and a written inventory was produced by the project manager. The inventory covered the running number of the folder range and the written text on the folder labels. Besides indexing, the project managers reviewed each folder for clarification – that is, they pulled out folders covering only non-records when it was absolutely clear or they denoted empty folders with no content. (These exceptions were collected for later disposal.) As a result, RIM got a first qualified impression of the kind of records with the inventory lists.

Step 3

The classification procedure was performed with the RCS. Eight main records series – 60 linear meters (approx. 197 linear feet) of physical records – were classified in periods

from the early 1990s to 2013; of this, about seven linear meters (approx. 23 linear feet), or about 12%, consisted of non-records. The inactive records consisted of the series of procurement contracts, competitive bids, vendor files, procurement procedures, invoices, procurement committee files, procurement staff files, and several records classified as working and reference files.

Step 4

The retention scheduling and appraisal process had to be conducted separately for every records series. All records were appraised according to their retention into 1) records for permanent or temporary preservation or 2) records that were already due for destruction.

As an example, typical procurement records series are the contract files. These confidential classified files were the basis for the organization's mostly long-term procurement activities with vendors. The contract files contained the official signed contract with the special procurement terms, as well as the contract-related records such as the processed selection criteria, contract extensions, and additional explanations of vendor and clerk correspondence. The retention of the contract files records series was set at 10 years and the trigger matched the contract expiration and end date.

Step 5

After the appraisal procedure, the procurement records were transferred in blue, acid-free folders to RIM for permanent and temporary storage in

blue-acid boxes; they were labelled with the special metadata of the records series requirements and with a single signature. The preserved records were stored professionally in a RIM repository. The non-records and expired records were professionally shredded.

Step 6

Next, RIM organized the future retrieval and request process for the procurement clerks. All metadata from the transfers were implemented in the RIM electronic archival database, where every request could be further processed.

Step 7

For the future professional management of active and semi-active records, the procurement clerks were trained to manage their records throughout their life cycle according to RIM requirements, relying largely on the retention schedule and RCS.

Step 8

Afterwards, the RIM project manager wrote a project report for all stakeholders. It covered all developments and had information about the project's progress and all important project-related metadata, such as statistics of records series.

Looking Back

The process and its steps were successful. The project was completed within its estimated time frame, and it raised the visibility and esteem of RIM and its stakeholders. Other organizational units contacted RIM for support with their active and inactive records. The project can be viewed as a prototype for continued improvement and success at the UN and is applicable to other public and private organizations. **END**

Maik Schmerbauch, Ph.D., can be contacted at schmeichi@web.de. See his bio on page 47.