

Updated for the Digital Age

ISO 15489



Fifteen years after the first international records management standard was published, a new edition of ISO 15489 allows for flexible, innovative approaches for developing effective records management programs for today's dynamic information environment. This article describes how the standard has left open all the possibilities of the digital world while also accommodating the persistent need to manage paper records.

Cassie Findlay

The publication of ISO 15489-1:2001 *Information and documentation – Records management – General* marked an important milestone in the development of more digital-friendly approaches to making and keeping records. Created by ISO Technical Committee 46 (Information and Documentation)/Subcommittee 11 (Archives/Records Management) (ISO/TC46/SC11), it was the first globally agreed international standard on records management, adopted worldwide by more than 50 countries, and translated into more than 15 languages.

However, much has changed since the first global consensus on the core business of recordkeeping professionals was published, so ISO/TC46/SC11 created a new edition, which was published last year as ISO 15489-1:2016 *Information and documentation – Records management – Concepts and principles* (ISO 15489).

A Revised Standard for a New Age

With the uptake of online business and increasingly advanced tools for collaboration, organizational and jurisdictional boundaries have become fluid. Data has become

Technology-Agnostic

Further, the standard was developed in a way that is “digital-minded,” but technology-agnostic to avoid referencing technology that will no doubt be replaced, which would make this edition time sensitive. Throughout the drafting process, the editorial committee worked to ensure that the standard was being written in a way that left open all the possibilities of the digital world and avoided constructs that were useful purely for managing paper records. Because of this, the standard is fit for the purpose of digital business, but is also applicable to organizations that are still doing paper-based recordkeeping.

What Changed

Those who know the first edition of ISO 15489 will find many familiar elements in this new edition, including the overall structure of the document. However, there naturally are some new elements.

Concepts and Principles

As the ways records are made and continue to change, some assumptions about how they should be managed

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the most valuable currency in many economies. Anxieties about information overload – as well as information loss – are at the forefront of our minds on both the business and personal levels.

In a world of rapid development and deployment of new technologies for data-driven business, cloud-based collaboration, instant messaging, augmented realities, and more, what is the role for recordkeeping professionals?

The complexities and dynamism of digital information, the risks that threaten its integrity and availability over time, and the growing variety of legal, regulatory, and business requirements surrounding it make understanding global perspectives about how information should be managed more crucial than ever before.

Not a Compliance Standard

The new edition of ISO 15489, like its predecessor, is not designed to be a compliance standard. Rather, it serves as a normative statement of what the work of records management *is*, establishes its core concepts and activities, offers a set of principles to guide approaches for creating and managing records in any context, and serves as a point of reference for developing locally appropriate, customized approaches. In this way, the standard leaves room for innovation in devising and implementing certain elements of a records management program.

are no longer helpful, as they bring too many constraints from past paper-based approaches. To build digital service delivery or accountable business systems in collaboration with other players, including information and communications technology and business, records professionals need to be armed with a flexible set of principles and options for their implementation. Therefore, the revised standard offers five principles to guide flexible approaches to implementing records management tools and techniques, depending on the nature of the implementation environment.

The standard explains and re-confirms the basic concepts of records management (records, metadata for records, systems for records, appraisal for managing records, records control tools, records processes) so records professionals can understand these essential elements and see how they can work in the digital world without losing sight of the needs of paper-based environments.

Appraisal as a Key Tool

The revised standard places a strong emphasis on appraisal as perhaps the most important tool in the records manager or archivist’s toolkit. Here, appraisal takes on a wider scope than is perhaps familiar to those working in some jurisdictions. Rather than being limited to the selection of records for permanent retention as archives, it

is broadened to include an analysis of business, requirements, and risk for making a wide variety of decisions about records. Such decisions may include whether to create records, what metadata is needed to contextualize and manage them, who should have access to them, and how long they should be retained.

Done regularly and accountably, with appropriate stakeholder consultation, the data this type of appraisal gathers is essential to a properly functioning program for making and managing records in any environment. This kind of strategic, proactive approach is particularly valuable for designing systems where there are records requirements and for dealing with the volume and complexity of digital records.

Making, Keeping Authoritative Records

In the previous version of ISO 15489, records were described as having certain characteristics, the implication being that without such characteristics they were not records. We have seen some unhelpful interpretations of this in the past, with notions of “record” and “non record”

being used, for example, in making decisions on what to manage in formal systems.

In fact, any information or data representing some action or transaction and retained as such is a record – no matter how well or poorly structured, how it is managed, or how rich or lacking it is in the metadata that provides crucial context. In this version, a slightly revised set of characteristics is now ascribed to “authoritative records.”

Flexible Systems for Records Design

The ISO/TC46/SC11 editorial committee considered the question of a systems design and implementation methodology at length in the development of the revised standard. It agreed that readers might wish to use any number of methodologies, depending on requirements and trends in their particular context. So rather than recommend one, the analysis and other work that was contained in the *Designing Information and Recordkeeping Systems*, also known as the DIRKS methodology, now exist in other forms in this edition, primarily in the section on appraisal.

Generally Accepted Recordkeeping Principles®	ISO 15489:2016 Records management – Concepts and principles and ISO 30300 Management Systems for Records Series
<p>Principle of Accountability A senior executive (or a person of comparable authority) shall oversee the information governance program and delegate responsibility for records and information management to appropriate individuals. The organization adopts policies and procedures to guide personnel and ensure that the program can be audited.</p>	<p>ISO 15489-1 explains many elements vital to an effective information governance program, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies – what they should address and how they should interact with other elements of the program • Responsibilities – definition of the different roles that support the creation and management of records, including for non-traditional, collaborative, and online business environments • Monitoring and evaluation – of systems for records and records processes, including those provided by third parties <p>A management system for records, if adopted, enhances governance arrangements by defining detailed requirements and measurable benchmarks for:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Defined roles and responsibilities b) Systematic processes c) Monitoring and evaluation d) Review and improvement
<p>Principle of Integrity An information governance program shall be constructed so the information generated by or managed for the organization has a reasonable and suitable guarantee of authenticity and reliability.</p>	<p>ISO 15489-1 describes how a “reasonable and suitable guarantee of authenticity and reliability” can be achieved via the routine operation of systems for records and various records controls. It describes a model for metadata for records that supplies the necessary information from and about records to ensure that their authenticity can be tested.</p>
<p>Principle of Protection An information governance program shall be constructed to ensure a reasonable level of protection for records and information that are private, confidential, privileged, secret, classified, or essential to business continuity or that otherwise require protection.</p>	<p>ISO 15489-1 describes many “records controls” that are implemented via records systems, including access and permissions rules. Access and permissions rules are associated with the following metadata entities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Agents b) Business activities c) Records <p>ISO 15489 explains how to develop access and permissions rules and what executing these rules should entail. The standard recommends accountable management of versions of these controls.</p>

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<p>Principle of Compliance An information governance program shall be constructed to comply with applicable laws and other binding authorities, as well as with the organization’s policies.</p>	<p>Appraisal work, as described in ISO 15489, enables the consideration of the full breadth of requirements affecting records, as well as risk factors that may be associated with meeting them. This includes everything from organizational or business unit needs for records to the wider societal expectations affecting decisions about records. This type of appraisal produces more than decisions regarding retention; it is designed to produce decisions on matters, including access to records, records formats, metadata, and more.</p> <p>A management system for records established in line with the ISO 30300 series can help ensure that approved appraisal decisions are appropriately incorporated into policy, procedures, and assigned responsibilities.</p>
<p>Principle of Availability An organization shall maintain records and information in a manner that ensures timely, efficient, and accurate retrieval of needed information.</p>	<p>Timely, efficient, and accurate retrieval of records depends on many support mechanisms that are specified in ISO 15489. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well-defined and structured metadata for records, from an authorized metadata schema • Rules for access rights and permissions that are up to date and authorized • Systems for records capable of executing metadata for identification, retrieval, access control, and format identification
<p>Principle of Retention An organization shall maintain its records and information for an appropriate time, taking into account its legal, regulatory, fiscal, operational, and historical requirements.</p>	<p>ISO 15489 describes the business and risk analysis activities that make up appraisal for managing records. The findings of these activities are used to make determinations on a range of matters relating to records, including the decision to create, how to manage, and when to destroy.</p> <p>One of the key records controls described by ISO 15489 is a set of records retention rules in the form of the disposition authority. A disposition authority is one of the products of routine appraisal work. These rules should be applied to records across all environments and updated as requirements change, ideally as machine readable, executable rules in systems for records.</p>
<p>Principle of Disposition An organization shall provide secure and appropriate disposition for records and information that are no longer required to be maintained by applicable laws and the organization’s policies.</p>	<p>The process of the application of disposition rules is described in ISO 15489, including advice on dealing with the complexities of records content and records metadata as part of such processes. Good practices on accountability for the application of disposition rules are also described.</p>
<p>Principle of Transparency An organization’s business processes and activities, including its information governance program, shall be documented in an open and verifiable manner, and that documentation shall be available to all personnel and appropriate interested parties.</p>	<p>ISO 15489-1 describes the requirements for keeping appropriate documentation of the activities associated with the creation, capture, and management of records, placing particularly strong emphasis on keeping records of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The analysis and risk assessment work done as recurrent appraisal activity • Versions of records controls • Details of the configuration of systems used for keeping records, and changes to these over time

This edition of ISO 15489 also has a stronger emphasis on metadata for records, which is explained as a key concept and is also referenced throughout the standard as the fuel that drives the recordkeeping engine. Without it, context is absent, relationships are broken, and systems fail to function properly and accountably.

An important support to this more flexible approach to system design is the way in which records controls are described in this edition. It is envisaged that such control tools will be more likely to exist as independent, modular services, able to be deployed in a variety of environments where records may require management.

Of course, in some instances such tools will be incorporated into dedicated records management applications, but the editorial committee was keen to leave the door open for innovative approaches that would assist records professionals in applying these management rules in any environment.

What About ISO 15489-2?

When the previous edition of ISO 15489 was issued, there was no other guidance available on the approaches it described, so ISO/TC46/SC11 created a complementary technical report, ISO/TR 15489-2:2001 *Information and Documentation – Records management – Guidelines*. Because ISO/TC46/SC11 has since created a wide range of more targeted records management guidance that covers much of this guideline's scope, the committee decided not to revise and reissue it. Instead, it will fill any remaining gaps in these other publications. This positions this new edition of ISO 15489 at the center of a suite of detailed guidance on a variety of aspects of managing records.

How to Use ISO 15489 with ARMA's Principles


ISO 15489, along with the ISO 30300 Management System for Records (ISO 30300) series of standards, support implementation of an approach to information governance and records management that is in line with ARMA International's Generally Accepted Recordkeeping Principles® (Principles).

ISO 15489-1:2016 describes the core activities involved in the successful creation, capture, and management of records over time. The ISO 30300 series creates an information governance regime in that it links the management of records to organizational success and

accountability by establishing a framework comprising policy, objectives, and directives for records.

The table on pages 28-29 outlines how ISO 15489 and the ISO 30300 series can be used in designing an information governance and records management program that adheres to the Principles.

For More Information

ISO 15489:2016 *Information and documentation — Records management — Part 1: Concepts and principles* and the other resources mentioned in this article are available at www.ansi.org or www.iso.org. 



About the Author: Cassie Findlay is a recordkeeping professional who has worked as a records manager, archivist, digital preservation manager, and recordkeeping consultant. She was the project lead for the review of ISO 15489, wrote the chapter on digital recordkeeping for the Australian Society of Archivists' (ASA) textbook *Keeping Archives*, and has won many industry awards for writing and standards development. Findlay has served on committees and in leadership roles with ASA and the International Council on Archives and is a co-founder of the recordkeeping and archives discussion group, the Recordkeeping Roundtable. She holds a master of information management (archives/records) degree from the University of New South Wales and a graduate diploma in management. Findlay can be contacted at findlay.cassie@gmail.com.



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