

Identifying and Classifying VITAL RECORDS

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This is an excerpt from ARMA International's latest technical report, Vital Records (ARMA International TR 29-2017).

The vital records program is an important part of an organization's [records and information management] RIM/information governance (IG) initiative and is included as part of the organization's operational policies and procedures. In concert with a comprehensive records retention schedule, it is key to effective vital records protection throughout the records life cycle. By incorporating risk management techniques, the vital records program can determine the impact the loss of vital records could be to the organization. The program's ultimate goal is to allow the resumption or continuation of business operations at the highest level of quality possible.

Generally, the program is developed and maintained by one or more RIM/IG professionals, in conjunction with the organization's business continuity, disaster recovery, and/or emergency management teams. Some organizations with limited personnel or limited operational resources may need to determine the most viable approach to vital records program development and make modifications. For instance, in very small organizations, one or more of the aforementioned teams may not exist or may consist of one or two individuals with multiple, cross-functional duties. In such cases, the RIM or IG professional may be required to spearhead vital records program development.

Regardless of the organization's size, staffing level, or resources, new methods and techniques for the protection of vital records are identified and implemented, as needed. The vital records program is evaluated periodically and updated to reflect technological advances and evolving business requirements.

The process of developing a vital records program includes, but is not limited to:

- Assigning program-related responsibilities
- Identifying vital records, which consists of locating those records and preparing a vital records schedule
- Verifying the inclusion of vital records in the records retention schedules
- Developing a risk management process
- Developing strategies, policies, and procedures to ensure the protection of vital records
- Selecting methods and locations for offsite storage of vital records, beyond the organization's geographic boundaries
- Establishing policies and procedures to permit effective use of selected vital records in the event of a disaster
- Preparing a contact list of employees and vendors for the continuation of business in the event of a disaster, which includes guidance on preferred methods of contact
- Selecting hardware and software for managing physical and electronic vital records with their associated metadata

- Selecting methods and technologies for remote access to electronic vital records
- Establishing backup methods and procedures for electronic vital records
- Identifying restore time (including delivery, if applicable) for vital records
- Identifying individuals authorized to make decisions about the restoration of vital records in electronic and/or paper formats
- Developing training materials for use by affected groups in the organization (e.g., accounting, legal)
- Preparing a timetable by which to periodically evaluate the effectiveness of the vital records program in a changing business environment and to implement updates

Identifying Vital Records

Each organization identifies records deemed to be vital records. This identification is fully aligned with the organization's operational, legal, and regulatory recordkeeping requirements. Vital records are identified at the point of creation to ensure adequate management throughout their life cycle. A data atlas can expedite the task of vital records identification. In general, vital records:

- Are absolutely necessary to resume operations
- Are changed to a different record status (i.e., not a vital record) when appropriate
- Are identified as vital only for as long as necessary
- May exist in more than one medium or format (e.g., photographs, digital images, paper documents)
- Preserve the rights and obligations of employees, customers, stockholders, citizens, or other stakeholders
- Protect assets
- Safeguard the legal and financial status of the organization

To help identify vital records, an organization-wide chart identifying functions that are essential to the organization's continued operation can be developed. The recordkeeping requirements for each of the functions are analyzed, and the records crucial to each function are identified. These activities facilitate the establishment of a vital records inventory and can be used to produce the vital records schedule. (See Section 3.3 [of *Vital Records* (ARMA International TR29-2017)].)

Once inventoried, vital records are assessed to establish:

- Annualized cost of maintaining protection
- Degree of vulnerability
- Information or documentation necessary to reconstruct and/or gain access for business continuity purposes or to devise a business continuity plan
- Location and type of access
- Location and type of storage
- Owner
- Rate of duplication and/or dispersal
- Record series and retention schedule
- Reference activity (i.e., frequency and volume of requests)
- Software versions and/or systems, including hardware systems, required to gain access for business continuity purposes
- Title or name

Classifying Records

Records can be classified as *vital*, *important*, or *useful*. (See Table 1.) Records can move from one classification to another depending on the functional value as defined by the business process. Important and useful records (i.e., Classes 2 and 3, per Table 1) do not require special protection beyond normal business practices. Vital, important,

Table 1: Class 1, 2, and 3 – Records Classifications

Class	Definition
CLASS 1: Vital	These records contain information critical to the continuation or survival of an organization in the event of a disaster. Such records are necessary to continue operations without delay under abnormal conditions. They contain information necessary to recreate an organization's legal/financial status and to preserve the rights and obligations of stakeholders (e.g., employees, investors, citizens). The life span of vital records is contingent on the active business process. Vital records are characterized by one or more of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are related to the recovery of critical systems and equipment and would need to be produced quickly. • They are unique and not easily reproducible, or the cost of reproduction or replacement would be considerable. • Their loss or unavailability would cause significant loss to the organization and prevent resumption of priority business activities.
CLASS 2: Important	These records are determined to be of some value to an organization in restoring operations to a normal state in the event of a disaster. If destroyed, these records are replaceable at moderate cost.
CLASS 3: Useful	These records are useful to the uninterrupted operation of the business. They are replaceable, but their loss could cause temporary inconvenience.

Table 2: (Class 1) Vital Records – Priorities for Access

	Definition	Access
Vital A	These records are essential in the event of a disaster.	The physical, protective storage location allows the coordination of disaster support information, resources, and activities (on-scene operations) to occur. Electronic replication methods are available for immediate access to information. Backups can be restored quickly.
Vital B	These records are essential for resumption and continuation of business in the event of a disaster.	The physical, protective storage location allows the coordination of disaster support information, resources, and activities (on-scene operations) to occur. Electronic replication methods are available for immediate access to information. Backups can be restored quickly.
Vital C	These records are essential for legal or audit purposes.	The physical, protective storage location may be quite distant from the disaster area. These records are not usually needed immediately. For electronic records, replication methods are available for immediate access to information, if needed.

and useful records each play a role in the resumption of business in the event of a disaster.

Determinations are made about which vital records are immediately necessary in case of a disaster. Access procedures, protection methods, and allocation of recovery resources are assigned, as appropriate. (See Table 2.)

Compiling a Vital Records Schedule

A vital records schedule is a detailed list that is used to ensure recovery of vital records in case of a disaster. It includes essential attributes of the organization's vital records, including name, location, and method of protection. (See Section 6 for a discussion of protection methods.) The activities involved in the preparation of a vital records schedule include, but are not limited to:

- Inventorying the organization's information assets
- Identifying and prioritizing vital records
- Incorporating vital records into the records retention schedules

- Selecting protection methods

The vital records schedule includes:

- Catalog of amount and frequency of reference activity for each vital record
- Classification and access prioritization of each vital record, as noted in Tables 1 and 2
- Descriptions of actions to be taken to create duplicates or recover files for vital records restoration
- Identification of protection method used for each vital record and any recognized vulnerability associated with the method
- Identification of types of electronic vital records software, including versions deployed, as well as hardware utilized
- Identification of types of vital records media
- Location of backups
- Location of each vital record
- Name of each vital record
- Names of the individuals responsible for obtaining

the vital records backups when needed for recovery

- Record series identification numbers or codes specific to the vital records program
- Specification of the timeframe by which recovered vital records are to be available

Once complete, the vital records schedule is verified for accuracy, approved by the organization's executive management, and refreshed, as needed, to remain current.

See Appendix C for a brief example of a vital records schedule. **E**

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Appendix C: Example – Vital Records Schedule

Record Identifier	Record	Location	Media	Electronic Application	Reference Activity	Protection	Classification and Priority	Recovery Responsibility and Timeframe for Records Availability
V1000	Emergency Management Personnel Contact List	Human Resources	Digital	Database	Medium	Nightly backup to secure cloud via XYZ Data Vault, Inc.	Class 1 Vital A	Information technology administrator obtains data from contingency storage and restores database files – timeframe = not more than 24 hours
V1001	Vendor Contracts	Central Files	Paper	N/A	Medium	Microfilm originals stored at ABC Records Storage Co.	Class 1 Vital B	Records manager obtains originals from contingency storage, creates duplicates; central files supervisor places duplicates in vault – timeframe = not more than 5 days
V1002	Current facility drawings	Central Files	Paper	N/A	Low	Duplicate on file in Corporate Offices in New York.	Class 1 Vital A	Records manager obtains copies of duplicates from corporate offices; central files supervisor places copies in vault – timeframe = not more than 48 hours
V1003	In-progress billing records	Accounts Receivable	Digital	Spreadsheet	High	Nightly tape backup of local area network (LAN), stored at Backup Storage, Inc.	Class 1 Vital B	Network administrator obtains data from contingency storage and restores files to LAN – timeframe = not more than 72 hours
V1004	Building lease agreement, original	Central Files	Paper	N/A	Low	Duplicate on file with external legal counsel (law firm in New York.)	Class 1 Vital B	Records manager obtains copy of duplicate from law firm and places copy in vault – timeframe = not more than 72 hours.