

I. Introduction: Accounting for Electronic Records in E-Government

E-government, in all of its possibilities and permutations, is changing the way government conducts business and captures evidence of that business. Whether government agencies are delivering services via the Internet or just keeping track of contacts through a Web-based database, a range of electronic records challenges and opportunities emerge. This paper discusses those challenges and opportunities, and provides a flexible framework for making the most of new information systems for managing electronic records.⁽¹⁾

The primary uses of government records are to support and document specific business processes, provide evidence of governmental activity, support evaluation of programs, inform policy making, ensure accountability, plan facilities, as well as any other government activity.

In the course of doing business, records are created through a variety of government transactions such as vehicle registrations, professional licenses and procurement contracts. Records need to be captured and managed through their legal minimum retention period and preserved to maintain the history and accountability of the government agency.

Until recently, the vast majority of government records were created and retained in paper form. With increased automation and the move to electronic government services these records are often being created in or converted to an electronic format.

This paper focuses on the range of electronic records management issues that should be considered as part of the design and development of systems that are designed to automate government transactions between an agency and constituents such as citizens, businesses and other government entities (i.e. – electronic government applications). This document restricts itself to transactional records that are evidence of a business transaction, such as the records associated with applying for a hunting or drivers' license.

There are significant opportunities and benefits associated with the creation and management of electronic records through these transaction systems. The systems designed to enable electronic transactions can also be designed to receive, capture, manage and preserve the records created by the transactions. Those records may then be more accessible to both citizens and government employees, which can increase employee productivity, boost citizen participation and customer self-service, and improve accountability. These benefits, however, need to be weighed against new challenges. Among the challenges are technology obsolescence, security intrusions, and proper record capture and retention to satisfy evidentiary and historical requirements.

These guidelines provide a framework that will help government professionals design information systems that mitigate the risks and maximize the opportunities of moving from paper to electronic transactions. Records have a life cycle much like information systems do. Because those two life cycles are not necessarily synchronized, it is imperative that records management issues be considered and planned for as early as possible in the system development life cycle. Failure to address records management issues during the design of automated transaction systems will likely result in greater costs, increased risk of liability, diminished accountability, or lost records.

Every level of government, and every government agency, functions within their unique statutory, regulatory and business context. Therefore, each entity will have its own set of record needs and requirements. This report provides a flexible framework and tools that government professionals can adapt to their own environment. It includes guiding principles and specific tools that can help development teams understand when and how electronic records should be accounted for in the new system.

The content of these guidelines reflects the strong recommendation that the development of electronic government systems, and the specific identification of records management considerations, be an interdisciplinary endeavor. Cross-functional teams charged with planning and designing electronic government applications should at a minimum include IT professionals, policy and program staff, legal staff, and records management and archives professionals. This document is targeted for use by these agency teams.

(1) What is a record? Since this paper is dealing with electronic records created through transactions, we use the Center for Technology in Government's (1998) definition, which states that a record is "the complete set of documentation required to provide evidence of a business transaction."