

ELECTRONIC RECORDS

OCTOBER 2021

10 reasons why electronic records need special attention

In recognition of Electronic Records Day 2021, here is a list of reasons why Everyone should be thinking more about electronic records.

1. Managing electronic records is like caring for a perpetual toddler: they need regular attention and care in order to remain accessible.
2. Electronic records can become unreadable very quickly. While records on paper have been read after thousands of years, digital files can be virtually inaccessible after a few years.
3. Scanning paper records is not the end of the preservation process: it is the beginning. Careful planning for ongoing management expenses must be involved as well.
4. There are no permanent storage media. Hard drives, CDs, magnetic tape, or any other storage formats will need to be tested and replaced on a regular schedule. Proactive management is required to avoid catastrophic loss of records.
5. The lack of “physical” presence can make it very easy to lose track of electronic records. Special care must be taken to ensure they remain in controlled custody and do not get lost in masses of other data.
6. It can be easy to create copies of electronic records and share them with others, but this can raise concerns about the authenticity of those records. Extra security precautions are needed to ensure e-records are not altered inappropriately.

Notes: Personnel should be trained in data integrity policies and agree to abide by them. Management should ensure personnel are trained to understand and distinguish between proper and improper conduct, including deliberate falsification and potential consequences.

In addition, key personnel, including managers, supervisors, and quality unit personnel, should be trained in measures to prevent and detect data issues. This may require specific training in evaluating the configuration settings and reviewing electronic data and metadata, such as audit trails, for individual computerized systems used in the generation, processing and reporting of data. For example, the quality unit should learn how to evaluate configuration settings that may intentionally or unintentionally allow data to be overwritten or obscured through the use of hidden fields or data annotation tools, supervisors responsible for reviewing electronic data should learn which audit trails in the system track significant data changes and how these might be most efficiently accessed as part of their review.

Management should also ensure that, at the time of hire and periodically afterwards as needed, all personnel are trained in procedures to ensure GDP for both paper and electronic records. The quality unit should include checks for adherence to GDP for both paper records and electronic records in their day-to-day work, system and facility audits and self-inspections and report any opportunities for improvement to management.

GOOD DOCUMENTATION PRACTICES (GDP)

The basic building blocks of good data are to follow GDP and then to manage risks to the accuracy, completeness, consistency, and reliability of the data throughout its entire period of usefulness – that is, throughout the data life cycle.

Personnel should follow GDP for both paper records and electronic records in order to assure data integrity. These principles require that documentation have the characteristics of being accurate, legible, contemporaneously recorded, original and attributable (sometimes referred to as ALCOA).

7. The best time to plan for electronic records preservation is when they are created. Don't wait until software is being replaced or a project is ending to think about how records are going to be preserved.
8. No one system you buy will solve all your e-records problems. Despite what vendors say, there's no magic bullet that will manage and preserve your e-records for you.
9. Electronic records can help ensure the rights of the public through greater accessibility than ever before, but only if creators, managers, and users all recognize their importance and contribute resources to their preservation.
10. While they may seem commonplace now, electronic records will form the backbone of the historical record for researchers of the future.

Remember, your Archives and History Department are here to help you and to answer any questions you may have. We work every day to make sure that electronic records remain accessible for generations to come!