



Records Management – It's a Lot More Than Filing

When discussing Records Management many people think of coloured file folders in some type of alphabetical or numeric arrangement within one or more file cabinets. The impression is that if it looks organized it must be. However, we are not dealing with mere pieces of paper; we are concerned with what is critical business information, the effective and efficient organization of which contributes greatly to the success or failure of the company/organization.

Developing, implementing and maintaining an effective Records management program involves many aspects; the two key ones are a uniform method of organizing information throughout the company (file classification) and determining how long records are to be retained (retention schedules). We also face a new challenge, ubiquitous emails that never stop.

File Classification – is the development of a consensus among all users as to how information is to be organized on a corporate, rather than personal or departmental, perspective. This means that information of a similar nature will be organized the same way regardless of who holds it. This would mean, for instance, that the contents of a “budget file” would be defined as containing certain documents and anyone who had a document of that type would file it in their budget file. This enables consistent use of and access to information across the corporation and facilitates implementation of all other RM program components. Gaining the consensus MUST include the input and buy-in of all affected departments.

Retention Schedules – are based on legal, audit and operational requirements and are tied directly to the classification scheme. Rather than indicating how long each document has to be retained we develop a retention period for the entire file (budget, employee, etc.). Identifying the legal requirements is by far the most difficult part of developing retention schedules. Looking at every possible law to determine whether or not it requires certain records to be retained could take many months. There are, however, commercial databases that specialize in records retention requirements. A Google search should result in a few hits to review. Remember, however, that determining the operational requirements for access to the information is just as important as the legal research. You do not want to take away information before people are finished with it.

E-Mails – the management of emails is one of the biggest problems today in almost all corporations/organizations. It is not unusual to find people with more than 1,000 emails in their Inbox or Sent Items folders. We often get asked how long emails have to be retained. To be blunt, that is like asking how long MSWord or Excel documents have to be kept. The answer in all cases, including emails, is that it depends on the subject matter of the document. Something dealing with a contract would obviously be kept longer than one announcing the company Christmas party. There is no single retention for emails; they should be treated as any other type of corporate document – the same rules apply.

The most common mistakes made in establishing a Records Management program are:

1. Not having senior management support for the implementation of the program;
2. Not getting input and buy-in from all users; and
3. Not being consistent in applying the program principles to all corporate records, regardless of their storage medium.

There are many more program components that need to be considered such as policies and procedures, the use of technology, identifying and protecting vital and archival records, training, supervision, accountability and the use of the proper storage media. You can learn more about classification and retention and the other program essentials by subscribing to one or more of the set of five, one-hour webinars on Records Management at www.professionalorganizers.com

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