



Adopting Electronic Records

Considerations for Government Officials

Summary: Records created by public officials benefit the public in two ways: They increase efficiency and protect legal rights. Various factors determine whether electronic records can be used to meet one or both of these responsibilities. In certain cases, other record formats are needed to meet these obligations.

Governments are increasingly adopting electronic records in their daily business. Reformatting hard copy (paper) records is often an effective method of reducing space requirements, improving access, and protecting originals. Electronic records offer many advantages over paper and microfilm: rapid and easy access, almost limitless duplication, and instant distribution over networks.

Governments have embraced electronic records largely because these advantages help public officials provide more efficient service to their constituents, but records created by public officials must also protect the legal rights of citizens. Electronic records are not always the most cost-effective and reliable method of retaining information for long periods of time.

How can a public official determine whether a record should be kept in electronic form, on paper, or as microfilm? One way is to think of the record as though it were two records: one record for *access* (for efficient service) and one record for *retention* (for protection of legal rights). In fact, to achieve these two goals a government may need to produce two copies of the record, one for access and one for retention. The chart below and the FAQ that follow will help public officials evaluate record formats.

<u>When these conditions apply...</u>	<u>Consider these formats....</u>		
Access copy considerations	Paper	Microfilm	Electronic
Users need rapid access to information.	Good	Poor	Excellent
Many people need access at the same time.	Poor	Good	Excellent
The information must be secure from alteration or theft.	Poor*	Excellent*	Poor*
Record storage is limited.	Poor	Excellent	Excellent
Retention copy considerations	Paper	Microfilm	Electronic
The information must be retained for 15 years or less.	Excellent	Good	Good
The information must be retained for 16 years or more.	Excellent	Excellent	Poor
The information is vital to agency operations and must be easily duplicated for disaster recovery.	Poor	Excellent*	Excellent*

**Agency policies and procedures will have an important influence on this as well.*



THE GEORGIA ARCHIVES

Frequently Asked Questions

If I make separate copies of my records for access and retention, won't that double my work? Current technology allows microfilm to be produced directly from digital images. With proper workflow planning, scanned records can be transferred to microfilm without refilming.

Is it possible to keep the electronic records forever and not produce paper or microfilm? Retaining an electronic record for long periods of time presents many challenges. The hardware changes frequently (less than 25 years ago the Commodore computer was popular), storage media are developed and discarded rapidly (only 25 years ago 5¼-inch floppy disks were state of the art), and software changes quickly (WordStar and VisiCalc were widely used 20 years ago). Each time a government creates an electronic record, it is committing itself to 'migrating' that record each time technological changes make it necessary. Imagine the number of changes that would have been necessary if the data or information had been stored using Dictaphone dictabelts since 1947 (when they were first introduced), or 8-track tapes (since 1965), or 8-inch floppy disks (1971), Windows 1.0 (1985), or Netscape Navigator 1.0 (1994). The State Archives might be better equipped to deal with complex long-term preservation issues.

Why is microfilm always suggested as the way to keep records for a long time? Other than stable quality paper, microfilm is the only medium that has been *proven* to last for extremely long periods of time. Independent laboratories have conducted many tests which demonstrate that microfilm will last for hundreds of years when produced properly and stored under controlled environmental conditions. Although microfilm does not provide *access* as readily as electronic formats, it is an excellent medium for *retention*.

If I produce microfilm of my records, they'll last forever, right? Microfilm that lasts for extremely long periods of time must be produced to archival standards and stored properly. Basically this means that a specific type of film is used, the filming is done to specifications, the chemicals used to process the film are regulated properly, and the film is stored in an environmentally-controlled storage area. These standards are not as difficult to meet as they may appear; but if they are not met, the film will degrade within a relatively short time.

If I decide to create electronic records, is there anything I can do to ensure success? No digital imaging process should be contemplated without a sustainable, ongoing records management program in place. Such a program would include approved retention schedules for all records; a designated records management officer; written policies and procedures about how records will be stored and disposed of; and ongoing, dedicated funding to ensure the continuation of the program.

Where can I get more information or help? The Georgia Archives is ready to provide assistance to state and local governments that have questions about records—paper, microfilm, or electronic. Please contact us:

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