

Records Management 9-1-1

by Melanie O’Kane

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There’s more to managing and safeguarding important, confidential information than simply creating folders and stuffing them until they rip and beg for mercy. Sloppy, overstuffed files are better than no files, I suppose. But they probably contain way too many paper calories than what’s needed to sustain a healthy archive.

All kidding aside, this is serious business.

The Gramm-Leach-Bliley Financial Modernization Act of 1999 (among others) holds financial institutions as well as business owners responsible for the practicality and safety of their records management processes. According to the US Federal Trade Commission, “Understanding how personal information moves into, through and out of your business and who has – or could have – access to it is essential to assessing security vulnerabilities. You can determine the best ways to secure the information only after you’ve traced how it flows.”

You see, records management is more than living by the old adage, “A place for everything – everything in its place.” It’s about maintaining a good balance of accessibility and security. Therefore, a business – your business – must not only consider the safety and security of its own proprietary information, but that of its clients, vendors, subcontractors, and employees, too!

Whether data are stored in hardcopy or digital form, any file that contains information like Social Security and Employer Identification Numbers, credit card information, and other non-public, personally-identifying information must be handled within strict guidelines that are now written into law. From this point forward, I’ll refer to this kind of information as “records”.

So how do you avoid a records management emergency?

Step 1: Start by taking a thorough inventory of all hardcopy and digital records. Make sure you note any data on computer/laptop hard drives, removable drives, floppy discs, CDs/DVDs, Blackberries, PDAs, cellular phones – any device used to process your business’ records.

NOTE: After you get the complete picture of where these records are, ask yourself, “Who needs to have access to these data in order to reasonably accomplish their assigned work duties?” Obviously, if you are a sole-proprietor, this may be a moot point. But if you have a family or other people living with you, these people need to know what they can and cannot have access to within your business space.

Step 2: Pull out any unnecessary information from your hardcopy and digital files and destroy it (e.g., security-cut shredder, incineration).

Step 3: The information left in your files should be relevant and necessary for reference and operations. Make sure these files are then placed in a safe, secure location – preferably one that is lockable and fire-/disaster-proof.

Step 4: Create policies for keeping your files in this newly refurbished condition and stick to them!

Step 5: Decide what you will do if an emergency strikes. How will you ensure the integrity of your records if your business encounters a burglary, fire, flood, tornado, or earthquake?

Destructive Tips and Tricks

Destroying digital files can be trickier than trashing hardcopy. I suggest a product called McAfee Security Center, which eats less memory than similar software, and includes a shredder for your recycle bin. Just because a file is emptied from your computer's recycle bin, doesn't mean it's completely gone.

McAfee's shredder takes trash in the recycle bin and, upon your command, will mince it into indiscernible bits of data that cannot easily be pieced back together for criminal intentions, etc. For more information about McAfee's Security Center, visit <http://tinyurl.com/35k5v5> .

When it comes to disposing of sensitive hardcopy material, nothing beats a security-cut shredder. Once shredded, you can do what I do and mix the clippings into the cat box litter.

If a would-be identity thief wants to piece together tiny bits of paper that have been (well) pooped and peed upon, more power to him/her.

Actually, ammonia in the cat's urine helps destroy and break down the ink on the paper.

You're probably chuckling. But this is just another way that I help prevent records management emergencies from happening to my business.

Sensible, effective records management doesn't have to be expensive and technical. It just needs to be smart!

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