What is a public record in the digital environment?

A recordkeeping update for Queensland public authorities – Reissued October 2013

As Queensland Government increasingly administers and transacts business through electronic means, the essential sources of evidence that help ensure sound decision-making and accountability are in digital form. These digital records also document and protect the rights and entitlements of the Queensland community. It is therefore essential for a public authority to know what digital public records the organisation owns.

This Public Records Brief provides advice for public authorities on understanding what a public record is in the digital environment. It also offers specific advice identifying public records in business systems.

Public records come in all formats

A public record is any form of information, either received or created by a public authority, which provides evidence of the business or affairs of the public authority, irrespective of format.

The definition of a public record as set out in the Public Records Act 2002 applies irrespective of the technology or medium used to generate, capture, manage, preserve and access those records.

Characteristics of a public record in the digital environment

A key characteristic of any record, regardless of format, is that it documents a business transaction. A record may be routinely created as a by-product of the business transaction, such as a receipt automatically generated by an online transaction, or deliberately created, such as a note of a phone call.

In the digital environment, emails, spreadsheets, word processed documents, presentation slides, websites or information in business systems may all be records. Queensland State Archives’ advice, What is a Public Record?¹, contains some examples of what is and is not a public record.

Digital public records may be born-digital, or digitised versions or surrogates of physical records.

Information value is not an identifying characteristic of a public record

Just as public records can take digital and hardcopy forms, they also vary in intrinsic value. It is important to understand that the frequency with which digital records are accessed and the perceived value of the records are not factors in determining whether or not they are deemed to be public records.

The length of time a public record is legally required to be kept before it may be disposed of, is a separate issue and there are many factors which determine its value.

Digital records closely associated with key and/or high risk activities are more likely to attract longer retention periods under a Retention and Disposal Schedule, approved by the State Archivist. Others will only need to be retained for short periods of time.

**Identifying digital public records**

The following five questions provide a quick and simple checklist for determining whether a digital information asset is deemed to be a public record:

1. Was it made, sent or received for, or to support, a business purpose?
2. Is it evidence of a decision taken?
3. Does it document advice given?
4. Does it document the process of arriving at a decision, or represent the basis/facts upon which a decision was made?
5. Is it required to be created or kept by legislation?

If the answer is yes to any of these questions, it is a public record and should be captured and managed in accordance with the requirements of the *Public Records Act 2002* and associated standards (*Information Standard 40: Recordkeeping* and *Information Standard 31: Retention and Disposal of Public Records*).

**Business Systems**

Business systems, such as human resources, client management or licensing systems, contain structured information that may be frequently updated. Understanding the business processes underpinning the system will help you to determine what the record is in a business system and at what points in the business process a record needs to be captured/fixed to support future business activity, decision making, reviews or stakeholder queries.

It is also important to note that the content or data that makes up the evidence of business may not just be stored within the system. It may also be stored in other systems, documentation about the system, procedures, logs, inputs and reports generated by the system. Particularly in highly integrated environments, parts of the required evidence may be held across multiple systems and some systems or components may be shared with other organisations. The specific data and metadata that makes up the evidence of the business transaction must then be identified. This will require analysis of the data structures and models.

While some business systems may seem to be an information source rather than a record of business transactions, closer examination may reveal that they are actually a record. For example, a database of contact details may appear on face value to simply be a source of information, but if the database also contained information on public authority dealings with the people listed in the database, it would be a record. Databases often form a register of information that is required to be maintained in accordance with legislation.

For examples of systems which will contain or generate public records, see Table 1 below:

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<tr>
<th>Business system types</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Licence and permit application processing and registration systems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Funding, grants and subsidy application processing systems</td>
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<td>Property management systems</td>
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Business system types

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incident or disaster response systems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Call centre enquiries and customer relationship systems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project management systems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research data and analysis systems</td>
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<td>Planning and mapping systems</td>
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Queensland public authorities are encouraged to use ISO 16175-3:2010 *Guidelines and functional requirements for records in business systems* which provides further information about how to identify records in business systems and can be used as a checklist to assess the recordkeeping functionality of existing systems. For more information see Queensland State Archives' *Managing records in digital environments using ISO 16175*.

**Email**

Like other records, an email is a record if it documents a business transaction: for example, authorising a course of action or responding to a complaint from a client. An email is not a public record if it does not document a business transaction: for example, an email to staff inviting them to morning tea to farewell a colleague. For more information, see Queensland State Archives' *Managing emails that are public records policy and guideline*.

**Websites**

Public authority websites, and the information on their websites, are public records and should be captured and kept as such. This is because the act of publishing a website is a business transaction and it provides advice and information to clients, and therefore forms part of many transactions.

Websites may also provide a gateway for digital service delivery, for example renewing a car registration online. Creating and keeping records of such online transactions is essential. For more information, see Queensland State Archives' *Managing records of online resources and services policy and guideline*.

**Social media**

Social media is increasingly being used by Queensland public authorities to inform and interact with the public and for internal collaboration. This includes blogs, wikis, third party social media sites and media sharing. Social media content is a public record if it documents a business transaction (for example responding to a

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2 This was developed by Queensland State Archives in partnership with National Archives of Australia as part of an International Council of Archives project, with the support of the Australasian Digital Recordkeeping Initiative.


complaint) or documents a decision. The same records management principles apply to social media content as to other public records created by the public authority. Public authorities using social media tools for official purposes need to consider how the records are captured. For more detailed information on the recordkeeping considerations associated with social media, refer to Queensland State Archives' Social media and public records.⁶

**Shared drives**

Shared drives are sometimes used to store business information in public authorities which have no eDRMS or other appropriate digital recordkeeping capability. Typically, this information will comprise a mixture of public records and ephemeral documents and will have minimal formal controls in place around their creation, use or deletion. Public records maintained in this environment are at risk of being inaccessible, corrupted, or unlawfully disposed of. For more information on the effective management of public records in shared drives, refer to Queensland State Archives' Managing shared drives.⁷

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**For more information**

For more detailed guidance on the management of public records visit the Queensland State Archives’ website at [www.archives.qld.gov.au](http://www.archives.qld.gov.au), or contact us on:

Telephone: (07) 3131 7777  
Email: [info@archives.qld.gov.au](mailto:info@archives.qld.gov.au)

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