

Management of Back-up Tapes

This Public Records Brief advises public authorities of the risks associated with relying on back-up tapes as evidence of business activity.

What are back-up tapes?

A back-up tape (or its related system) is a hardware device that is designed to maintain copies of files or databases so that these will be preserved in case of equipment failure or other disaster. Backing up electronic information onto tapes is part of the routine operation of government.

What should back-up tapes be used for?

Back-up tapes should be used for business continuity purposes. Information that is stored on back-up tapes and systems act as a reserve copy of the original, to be accessed if anything happens to the original data. In the event of data loss, the back-up tape can be accessed by authorised officers to restore the lost information.

Back-up tapes are not, and should not be used as, a recordkeeping system.

Risks of retaining back-up tapes

Back-up tapes are a useful tool for public authorities in terms of business continuity, but they should not be used for purposes other than what they were designed. In particular, back-ups should not be used as a substitute for records management systems and strategies.

Some agencies may assume that keeping records on back-up tapes meets their responsibility to maintain electronic records over time. However, records on back-up tapes may be missing the metadata required to preserve their context and make them useable.

Back-up tapes also save records and data as a single mass of information, making searching and retrieval time-consuming and difficult. In addition, a single tape could contain a wide variety of records and data, all with different retention periods.

In addition, prolonged retention of back-up tapes may pose additional risks.

Back-up tapes are discoverable in the event of litigation or for Right to Information enquiries. If back-up tapes are kept for a long period, records previously destroyed in accordance with an authorised Retention and Disposal Schedule may still be discoverable.

Public authorities should be aware that under the new provisions of *the Right to Information Act 2009*, documents that are maintained on back-up tapes and systems could be discoverable under certain circumstances. These include:

- If documents have not been registered to the agency's authorised recordkeeping system, and there is a reasonable expectation that the documents would be exist on back-up tapes/systems.
- If documents have been registered to the recordkeeping system, yet have been not disposed of under a Retention and Disposal Schedule approved by the State Archivist.

In order to fulfil the requirements under *Information Standard 40 – Recordkeeping*, public authorities need to implement and maintain a recordkeeping system that has the functionality to create, maintain and preserve the record and its overall context. Public authorities need to capture as records all information that record business decisions and provide evidence of business activity. Refer to the Public Records Brief 03/05 [Identifying a Public Record in the Electronic Environment](#) for further information.



Management of back-up tapes

The appropriate management of back-up processes, including the tapes used, is usually the responsibility of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) staff within an agency.

Records managers should liaise with ICT staff to ensure that back-up tapes are kept only for the appropriate period specified by the agency. The *General Retention and Disposal Schedule for Administrative Records* states that tapes are only required to be retained for as long as required for administrative purposes. In most situations, this may mean keeping the most recent back-up, and the previous one.

In discussing management of back-up tapes, it is important that back-ups are not confused with data archiving.

What is data archiving?

Back-up tapes, and back-up systems, are often confused with 'data archiving'. While the same physical media (tape) is used, the two processes are different.

Unlike backing up a system or network, which involves copying an entire system in case of system failure, data archiving involves moving selected, usually inactive, data to a tape so it can be removed from the online system. This is equivalent to moving inactive physical records to secondary storage and can form part of an appropriate management strategy for records of business systems.

In this case, it is necessary to determine the retention periods of the records or data and ensure the tape is kept for the authorised periods. For example, financial data may be moved offline two years after the end of the financial year to which it relates. As many financial records are required to be retained for five years after the end of the financial year to which it relates, the tapes would need to be retained for a further three years.

Conclusion

Queensland State Archives recommends that Records Management and ICT staff jointly review the management of back-up tapes to ensure that they are not being used as substitutes for appropriate recordkeeping processes, and are retained for the period required for business continuity purposes.

Contact your agency's Records/Information Manager for further information and advice on public records within your agency.

For more detailed guidance on the management of public records, visit the Queensland State Archives' website at <http://www.archives.qld.gov.au>, or contact us on:

Telephone: (07) 3131 7777

Email: info@archives.qld.gov.au.