

# Identifying a Public Record in the Electronic Environment

## What is a public record?

A public record is any form of information, either received or created by a public authority, which provides evidence of the decisions and actions of a public authority while undertaking its business activities.

This definition does not specify the format of a record – it can be paper, electronic, microfilm or any other format. The *Public Records Act 2002* covers all public records irrespective of the technology or medium used to generate, capture, manage, preserve and access those records.

## What are the characteristics of a public record in an electronic environment?

A key characteristic of any record, regardless of format, is that it documents a business transaction. The 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 electronic environment, emails, spreadsheets, word processed documents, presentation slides, websites or information in business systems may all be records. [What is a Public Record?](#) contains some examples of what is and is not a public record.

## Identifying a public record in the electronic environment

The following five questions provide a quick and simple checklist to identify whether something is a public record:

- Was it made, sent or received in the course of business?
- Does it document a decision taken?
- Does it document advice given?
- Does it document the process of arriving at a decision?
- Is it required to be kept by legislation?

If the answer is yes to any of these questions, it is a record and should be captured and managed in accordance with the requirements of the *Public Records Act 2002* and associated standards. However, the answer to these questions can be difficult to determine for some electronic records, particularly in business systems and websites.

Retention and disposal requirements apply to all records regardless of format, including records in business systems and websites.

### *Business Systems*

Business systems, such as human resources, client management or licensing systems, contain information in structured fields within databases that may be frequently updated. The business processes underpinning the IT system must be examined closely to determine what, if any, business transactions the business system is documenting.

The specific content or data that makes up the evidence of the business transaction must then be identified. This will require analysis of the data structures and data and class models.

A distinguishing feature of records is that the content must exist in a fixed form, that is, be a fixed representation of the business transaction. Strategies must be developed to maintain records of the business transactions in a fixed and unalterable form for the required retention period. For example, this may be achieved through:

- System controls, such as setting the object as 'read only'
- Designing controls that prevent the overwriting or deletion of the specific data in the system that has been identified as forming part of the record, and
- Bringing together the selected data elements (which may be from within the same table or selected data from rows in different tables within the database) and creating a distinct digital object, for example, a report.

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 agency dealings with the people listed in the database, it would be a record. Databases also often form an official register of information that is required to be maintained in accordance with legislation.

For more detailed information on recordkeeping in business systems, see the [Guidelines and Functional Requirements for Records in Business Systems](#).

#### **Are emails public records?**

A record is not dependant on the format. Like other records, an email is a record if it documents a business transaction: for example, 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, refer to the [Managing Emails that are Public Records Policy & Guideline](#).

#### *Websites*

Agency 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 electronic service delivery, for example, renewing a car registration online. Creating and keeping records of such online transactions is essential.

Like business systems, the rapid rate of change on many websites makes it difficult to capture and manage the record in a fixed and unalterable form over time. Because of this, it is essential to identify recordkeeping requirements and develop strategies to meet them when a new website is being designed or changed, or when planning a new online service. Strategies for capturing records may include:

- Maintaining an online archive
- Using object-driven approaches, such as snapshots and change logs, and
- Using event-driven approaches, such as activity logs.

For more detailed information on recordkeeping of websites, see the *Managing Records of Online Resources and Services Policy* at <http://www.archives.qld.gov.au/downloads/Policies/OnlineResourcesPolicy.pdf> and *Managing Records of Online Resources and Services Guideline* at <http://www.archives.qld.gov.au/downloads/Policies/OnlineResourcesGuideline.pdf>.

#### **For more information**

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](mailto:info@archives.qld.gov.au)