

## Electronic Records Management: How Long Do Chat/Instant Messaging Records Need to Be Kept?

**Purpose:** Provide guidance to state agencies and local government entities on the retention of chat and instant messaging (IM) records, including those created through online meeting and collaboration platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, GoToMeeting, Webex, etc.

### Is there one retention period for chats and IMs?

**NO** – The retention period for public records depends on the *function* and *content* of the record, not its format or method of transmission.

How long chats and IMs need to be kept depends on the agency's business, legal, and accountability needs to retain the evidence of the transactions that are documented in these exchanges. Like public records in any format, some only need to be kept for a very short time, some need to be kept a little longer, and some may be "Archival" and kept forever.

To determine the function/content of chats and IMs, ask:

1. What is the conversation about? (content)
2. Why did it take place and for what purpose? (function)

Having just one blanket retention period for all chats and IMs would be like having a single retention period for all letter-sized paper – the format does not determine the retention.

### Aren't all chats and IMs transitory records?

**NO** – It is important to distinguish between public records created and/or received in a potentially transitory type of *format* (such as chat logs from an online meeting, which may not automatically be saved) from those public records which have only transitory *retention value* (based on their function/content).

### Is simply keeping all chats and IMs the answer?

**NO** – Storing every chat and IM is not the same as managing public records created and/or received through chats and IMs. Such a strategy is unlikely to be sustainable in the long run, will make it harder to locate the public records that do need to be retained, and may not be the most efficient use of agency resources.

### Where can I find out what the retention is based on the function and content?

**RECORDS RETENTION SCHEDULES** – These schedules set out the minimum required retention periods and grant permission to either destroy or transfer the records at the end of that period. The current approved records retention schedules for state and local government agencies are available from Washington State Archives' website.

**Additional advice regarding the management of public records is available from  
Washington State Archives:**

[www.sos.wa.gov/archives](http://www.sos.wa.gov/archives)  
[recordsmanagement@sos.wa.gov](mailto:recordsmanagement@sos.wa.gov)