

Electronic Records Management: How Long Do Database Records Need to be Kept?

Purpose: Provide guidance to state agencies and local government entities on the retention of records contained within databases and information systems.

Is there one retention period for database records?

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

How long database records need to be kept depends of the agency's business, legal and accountability needs to retain the evidence of the transaction that is documented in the database record. 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 will be "Archival" and kept forever.

The questions to ask to determine the function/content of database records are:

1. What is the database record about? (content)
2. Why was it created and for what purpose? (function)

Having just one blanket retention period for database records is akin to having a single retention period for all letter-sized paper – the format does not determine the retention.

Is simply keeping the database records forever the answer?

NO – Keeping every database record is not the same as managing public records contained within databases and information systems. Such a strategy is unlikely to be sustainable in the long run, will make it harder to locate the public records that need to be retained, may impact the performance of the database/system and may not be the most efficient use of agency resources.

What if the database/system can't delete/export records?

Some databases/information systems have not been designed to allow records to be destroyed/transferred in accordance with approved records retention schedules. In such cases, the agency may need to wait until the data needs to be migrated before those records that have met their retention are able to be destroyed/transferred.

Where can I find out what the retention is, based on the records' 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 are available from Washington State Archives' website at:

State Agencies:

<http://www.sos.wa.gov/archives/RecordsManagement/RecordsRetentionSchedulesforStateGovernmentAgencies.aspx>

Local Government Entities:

<https://www.sos.wa.gov/archives/RecordsManagement/Local-Government-Records-Retention-Schedules---Alphabetical-List.aspx>

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

**www.sos.wa.gov/archives
recordsmanagement@sos.wa.gov**