

Project Records Retention

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SUMMARY

Maintaining project records can be a hassle unless your firm has instituted a record retention schedule. This Best Practice identifies the important decisions a firm should make regarding retention guidelines.

AN EFFECTIVE RETENTION SCHEDULE

Proper management of project records does not mean to save everything. An effective record retention schedule should be efficient and clearly state necessary procedures so the retention process does not interfere with administrative functions.

An effective record retention policy should be in writing and should

- Identify records by category
- Describe the length of time for retention
- Designate the method of storage and destruction
- Establish a protocol to determine whether documents not easily categorized are to be retained or destroyed

DETERMINE PERMANENT DOCUMENTS

Project records can be divided in two main categories: permanent and temporary. Determine how your firm will distinguish the two categories. Every project has temporary documents—those used to develop final instruments of service. These may include report drafts, handwritten logs and diaries, rough calculations, and draft sketches. Often a firm will determine whether it is best to discard temporary documents when a superseding document is created or when the project is closed.

Permanent documents include interim documents that are provided as milestone submittals or contract

deliverables. This category includes all final documents, project correspondence, meeting memoranda and minutes, internal memoranda, logs, journals, and calendars. Handwritten telephone memoranda or site-visit notes are considered final if not superseded by typed versions.

Maintain service agreements, contract drafts, and any subsequent modifications as well. In many instances, final contract terms can be clarified by looking at what each party proposed, what objections were recorded, and what compromises were reached.

Also develop a timetable for when to destroy specific types of documents. To increase the effectiveness of your plan, the destruction system should be logical and your firm should keep to the schedule.

PRESERVE SPECIAL PROJECT RECORDS

Save files for those projects in which new building products, systems, or methods were used. Also retain files for any project that suffered an unusual number of design, construction, personality, or financial problems. It is important to save documents indicating that architectural services, recommendations, and judgments were in accordance with the applicable standard of care.

DETERMINE THE RETENTION PERIOD

The establishment of a record disposal date is ultimately a business decision. One factor to consider is the length of the statute of repose mandated by the state governing the project. It is prudent to keep project records for at least one year past the longest applicable statute of repose.

Certain projects may have specific retention guidelines noted in the contract. Government projects may include detailed record-keeping obligations as well; various federal, state, and local agencies may have their own record-keeping guidelines. Your client may also set retention guidelines in your contract.

MAINTAIN THE FIRM'S PROCEDURES

Develop procedures based on your firm's specific needs and abilities to enforce those procedures over time. A sound records management and retention policy adds to your firm's credibility if questions arise about a possible lack of documentation on a given project. Such a policy can reduce exposure or lead to an early dispute resolution.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 10.01.04 Quality Control: A Project Record Retention Checklist
- 10.03.01 Managing Challenges of Electronic Documents
- 10.01.03 Project File Organization
- 10.01.05 Document Disposal: When and How to Throw It Out

For More Information on This Topic

See also "Information Management," by Elena Marcheso Moreno in *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 13, page 380.



See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



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