Records and Information Management:
Meeting the Challenge

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I'm being sued. There was an accident on a construction site, and it has nothing to do with me. Now some lawyer is demanding all my files. What is this "discovery" they are talking about?

or

What is records and information management? Does my firm have to do this? My attorney says, yes. Won't this thing somehow just take care of itself?

If you have found yourself in either of these situations, you are not alone. In the first instance, the ton of bricks has just landed, and that firm is in for an expensive, and possibly traumatic, journey. In the second, someone is at least thinking that something might be done to manage the flow of information, though the tendency is to put it off to another day. There is so much to accomplish-interesting and demanding project work and proposals to get out the door-and just maybe someone else in the firm will take on the task. Most designers enjoy doing what they do best, and they resist intrusions not related to design. There are better things to do than keep records for attorneys.

But, listen to one up-and-coming principal whose firm grew from 40 to 80 people these past five years, just as the economic downturn was hitting so many others. In addressing an audience of peers on how he managed information in his firm, he said: "If you don't take the time to pay attention to these business issues, you are not going to *be* in business. " With quality design as his mission, records management was one of the means to accomplishing that goal.

As much as anything else, professional practice in the 1990's is about the collection, control, and use of massive amounts of information. With a records and information management program in place, you can reduce the risk of design and construction-for your client's benefit, as well as your own-and you can improve the quality of your work. There are so very many details to be dealt with during the course of a project, and on each one may ride the success of the project or the safety of a building or a site. When you know where the relevant records are, who has them, how, they are arranged, how long they will be kept and why, you have a grasp of the project that is essential to its progress and to the quality of the end result.

This issue of *Practice Notes* urges the strengthening of records management practices. It discusses the reasons for having a sound records and information management program, outlines the essential principles of a good effort, and describes ways successful firms have gotten started.

But, first, a word about keeping records for lawyers.

WHOSE PRIORITIES ARE BEING SERVED?

Ask any attorney. The idea of going into court with a client who has only hazy recollections of events long past can be a nightmare. From your attorney's point of view, you could make far worse use of your time

than to spend it documenting your each and every action in meticulous detail and sending those documents into a record keeping system that would dazzle the advanced systems analysts at Microsoft. Your attorney knows only too well that if your records have to be called into service in the defense of a claim, they can make the critical difference between a catastrophe and a favorable outcome.

From your point of view, the idea of approaching your work with the thought foremost in mind that you might someday be sued is self-defeating, at best. Fortunately, there are far better reasons to make careful record keeping and records management a routine practice in your professional life. The real value of the records you create and the records management program you have in place lies in the role they play in helping you manage your firm, strengthen project and business communications, enhance the coordination of the work, and project the professionalism with which you go about doing what you do best. It is a happy coincidence that realizing this value requires recording and controlling the same elements of information your attorney would like to see neatly on file.

OVERCOMING INERTIA

Let's go back to the beginning. *"Does my firm have to do this?"* Yes, it does. A records and information management program is essential to sound business practice. Your firm needs to know what records are being generated, what needs to be kept, where, by whom, and for how long. It need not be an overly complicated system (although there are a lot of those, set up by some very well meaning people). In professional practice, it is particularly important that the system be clear and simple, so that it does not interfere with the creative, absorbing, and demanding work of the office.

Designers tend to be positive and focused people. They like to contemplate how they can do a good job on the present project and even a better job on the next. They do not like to think about the unthinkable, about what could go wrong. There is a small corner of the information management profession called "disaster recovery. " Whenever it is mentioned, it is received as if it were an unpleasant noise. We do not want to think about things that could go bump in the night. If we view records and information management as planning for disaster recovery, we do not want to think about that, either. So let's think about records management as a key to successful practice.

A records management program is meant to make the work of the office flow more smoothly, increase communication among staff, and encourage productivity. People can actually find things-no more wasted time roaming the office looking here and about for the reflected ceiling plan for project Y. Peter Drucker *(Harvard Business Review,* September-October 1992) points out that knowledge workers in today's office want to be treated properly and have their time used wisely. Let the benefits of the records management program be the main focus. Even though you do *have* to have a program, access and information retrieval are why you really *want* to have a program.

Records management is essential to project management. It starts before the project does, and it includes proposal development and related research. It is not something that happens after the project is over and you have gone on to the next. It does not somehow take care of itself. Wait until the end of the project or after, and records management becomes an overhead function (that's bad). Build it into the project and it becomes billable (and that's good). It also gets done (that's good, too).

And, what about the records created by the accounting function? Or human resources? Or marketing? Managing this information is simply a requirement of being in business. So, let's manage it from the start

and not have to worry about it later. The unwelcome alternative is that you may well have to worry, *really worry,* about it later.

WHAT GOOD WILL COME OF IT?

Workers in an office appreciate being able to find documents, and there is security in having the support of a good program. But, what about the principals? The benefits to the firm are far reaching and substantial. They are worth exploring in some detail.

Legal Protection

It may not be the best motivation for sound record keeping, but the legal protection it affords is an important benefit. Government projects, in particular, may include detailed (often arbitrary) record keeping obligations, and various federal, state, and local agencies promulgate rules, regulations, orders, advisory opinions, and administrative decisions that govern record keeping and retention. In addition, most states have statutes of limitation or repose, which may affect decisions you make about how long you keep your project files. You will need to know what obtains in your state (or the state in which your project is located).

Your attorney can he a useful resource here. There are also materials close at hand. Consult "Statutes of Repose for the Design Professions, " Special Supplement No. 1, 1992, to *Guidelines for Professional Practice,* Volume XX, No. 3, 1990, published by Victor O. Schinnerer & Co., Chevy Chase, Maryland. Additional resources are listed in Appendix 1.

If you are embroiled in litigation and cannot find the necessary documents, you could be in trouble. You may not even know if they exist. Sloppy record keeping reflects badly on professional competence. It is not so much that the information in the document is vital, but that failure to keep your records appropriately implies to judges, juries, and all concerned that you do not take your work or your profession seriously.

Even if you have not violated a specific law governing a retention requirement, lost or mismanaged records can hurt you in court. In "Carlucci et al. v. Piper Aircraft Corporation " *(Federal Rules Decisions* 472, West Publishing Co., 1984), plaintiffs brought suit claiming that design defects resulted in a crash killing three men in 1976. Piper could not supply certain subpoenaed documents, and it turned out that, in the past, Piper employees had been instructed to select and destroy documents that might be harmful to Piper in *possible* lawsuits. This was a costly decision. A default judgment was entered against Piper in the amount of 10 million. Having such misguided procedures in place preempted consideration of the merits of the design defects allegation. The issue was not even addressed in the resolution of the case. It was lost the day supervisors told staff to purge the files of potentially harmful documents.

If any legal action is foreseeable, the relevant records must be kept. In "Lewy v. Remington Arms Co., Inc., " 1988 (836 *Federal Reporter,* 2nd 1104), an appeals court held that a three year policy governing retention of complaints was insufficient because litigation concerning those records as more than a remote possibility.

One only has to look as far as the national news these days to see that the removal of files from Vincent Foster's office in the White House and the destruction of boxes of records at the Rose law firm in Arkansas have implications unrelated to the merits of the case. There is also some confusion about exactly what was shredded. Don't they *know*? Where is the retention schedule (or the policy and practice statement regarding preservation or destruction)? Where is the list of what was in each box? And, who signed off on the destruction?

You may be thinking by now that perhaps it would be best not to have policies or procedures at all. Just tell everyone to do their own thing. Wrong. If you do that, as a noted construction lawyer has pointed out, you have a *de facto* policy already: "It's called CHAOS. " Judges do not like that at all. Nor will your staff, who will not be able to find what they need to do their work.

Being able to call up records promptly can often forestall legal action. "What did you say about that change order? I have a memo from Joseph Construction dated 10/10/93, and our records verify that the contents of the disk were sent to the site on 9/9/93. "If the other party is only working from memory and has lost the memo in question, you are in a good position.

Project Communications

A good record keeping system begins with the disciplined recording of vital information. Memories can be faulty. On balance, we retain only a portion of what we see and hear-even less if the message is somehow painful or outside the range of our experience. We remember those things we can identify with, those that reinforce our values, and those that cast us in a positive light. We tend to block or distort the unpleasant, the uninteresting, the unknown. We tend, in other words, to develop memories of convenience.

Given this, it is easy to see how an owner's expectations can soar beyond reason, in spite of the fact that earlier limitations (imposed by that self-same owner) virtually preclude the possibility of those expectations ever being met. This danger exists at every point at which issues involving time, cost, or quality are raised.

The same holds true with the contractor on the job, if for slightly different reasons. Any decision that could have an adverse impact on the contractor's profit may well be misinterpreted, either in intent or as respects the actions to be taken.

So it can easily happen. In walking away from an important project meeting confident you have a decision firmly in hand, you may, in reality, be taking the first, tentative steps toward irreconcilable conflict. You can go a long way toward avoiding this outcome if you make it a regular practice to document the progress of your work-the interviews, telephone calls, meetings, detailed investigations and evaluations-as well as your understanding of important decisions and how they came about. It will also help if you can locate that document quickly when it is needed most.

Effective documentation and record keeping affords considerable leverage, for you serve four objectives at once:

1. The writing, itself, tends to force a critical re-examination of your thinking and a valuable restructuring of your efforts to convey your conclusions to others involved;

2. Your written message reinforces the points you have made and provides an opportunity for feedback in the event that what appeared to be a common understanding, in fact, was not;
3. You have a means readily available by which to communicate decisions to all who need the information to meet their responsibilities to the project; and
4. You will have a resource that can be called upon later, should it prove important to refresh fading memories as to what actually happened.

All things considered, principals and staff alike can easily agree that this is not a bad return on a relatively modest investment. If the product of the same effort also turns out to be useful in the defense of an otherwise unavoidable claim (and some can be unavoidable), so much the better.

Ownership

Who owns your records? The question of copyright has been covered in another issue of *Practice Notes,* "The Architectural Works Copyright Protection Act of 1990," Vol. 5, No. 2 (November 1992). It is good that the law expanded the protections for design, but there are other issues, besides copyright, related to ownership.

There are misconceptions about what constitutes a record. Many think, for example, that information in electronic form is some how not a record. The fact is, computer records are as much information as any piece of paper, and it is up to the firm to make certain that those who will use the firm's work understand this. *Practice Notes,* Vol. 7, No. 1 (January 1994), "CADD Risk Management, " has good advice on this point. The person at the construction site may change what is on the disk, not really focusing on the fact that alterations are being made to work that you own. At the site, that same person would mark up a print, understanding perfectly well that the work is yours. Similarly, because they focus on paper files, some individuals have not included material submittals or environmental samples in their thinking about a records program.

Another factor in contemporary practice is the changing notion of the young professional and the attitude of management toward the development of that person. In the older atelier model of a firm, the young came in to sit at the feet of the great man. Now the recent graduate may join a firm to gain one kind of experience, go to another soon after, and each time gather up files, drawings, disks, or whatever as life progresses. This is not to say that one may not maintain copies of some work for an individual portfolio, but the firm does need a policy and an understanding with staff about who owns what. Likewise for the individual who stays with a firm for years and uses its resources to develop a moonlighting practice!

It may happen that a letter arrives from an attorney requesting "discovery " of materials for a certain project or time frame. Many think they are doing well to produce one set of central files and drawings. This may not be sufficient. The discovery demand usually includes originals and duplicates and all forms of documentation (presentation boards, shop drawings, disks, etc.) from everyone. As thc owner of these records, it is the firm's responsibility to know where duplicates are. The Pinto litigation, which resulted in an adverse judgment against Ford Motor Company, hinged on a record that a staff member took home.

Risk Management/Quality

One principal said, "I see records management as a reflection of a firm's attention to project management. An accurate records system is a management tool. I can look at project records and see very quickly where the project is, check dates for schematics and design development, and check the sign-off set of documents and the marked up set, as well. " (AIA *Memo* April 1990, p. 5-6). This firm's program was tailored to performance and to quality. During a period of growth, tools were needed to help ensure that design and production were of the highest caliber. It is important to manage information to your advantage.

There is a big difference between managing information and just saving everything. If everything is saved, the firm will drown in its own production. This is not the late nineteenth century when 10 drawings were enough for a four-story building. Today, depending on the firm and the nature of the project, there could he 100 final drawings, 6 boxes of files, computer tapes and disks, 12 presentation boards (etc.) for that size structure. One, unbuilt, large project recently generated thousands of drawings before it was canceled. No one says this job is easy!

Guidelines on what to keep and what to discard can be developed with relative ease. Then, there is some rationale to what is saved. The reward is the marriage of good design with effective management, and there is less risk. Opening a tube of drawings need not he an experience full of surprises.

Flexibility can he built into a records and information management program. A thoughtful information management effort is one very effective tool in running an office. Henry Mintzberg *(Harvard Business Review,* January-February 1994) discusses the process of creativity or innovation and how leaders have to have a combination of ideas to synthesize. He warns of the perils of formalization, which is relevant as we go on to the next section. In an attempt to control the present, one must not lose a vision of the future.

Information Retrieval

What is important here is that finding the information you need can help during discovery or during the early stages of a potential dispute. Retrieval can be rapid. This impresses everyone. And...you should be able to *rely* on the retrieval system. There should be a comfort level here, unless you like to live "on the edge " (and some do).

Client Service

Principals, indeed all in a firm, are aware of the client who calls asking for information. While it is not a legal requirement that you produce the documents your client needs quickly, it will certainly help if you can.

Then, too, your firm and your records may well be needed for future additions or expansion, and some clients lacking an in-house capability for document control may look to you for assistance in meeting future maintenance requirements. In either event, your interests in future work might be well served by a willingness to bear the burden of creating and maintaining essential project records for extended periods of time.

Sound Business Practice

In addition to offering legal protection, a records management program can save money. Reducing the cost and the risk of litigation is one thing, but it is good also to look at how much space the information in your firm takes up and how much time is spent looking for lost information. Then, weigh this against the cost of effective information management.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Let's hope you have already thought this through, that you have not had a bad experience in litigation. You are concerned, and you want to strengthen the information management program in your firm. What are the keys to success? Here are some you might want to consider:

Management Commitment

The support of the leaders of the firm is crucial. There is still a top-down structure in most firms, so those at the head must be interested and involved in either a substantive or a monarchical way (willing to finance some of the trappings that have come to signify commitment). But, there is a flatter management style in many firms; the knowledge worker is sophisticated and wants to be involved. Your information is an asset, and everyone can participate in developing the program and understanding it. More filing is being done at workstations now and with individual managers. Centralization is not in a designated space, but in a computer database.

Effective Programming

Survey the sources of information in the firm-all of them. Look at what is actually happening, not what staff say they are doing. Ask staff members how long they think a particular category of information needs to be kept for reference. Do they use it? How often is it on computer, in hard copy (usually photo, paper, or mylar), or both? Who is on the distribution list? Where is the original? Is there anything considered a "record copy "? What databases already exist? Has anyone attempted a filing system?

Let's hope things have not been complicated too much with obtuse numbering schemes. The natural language used within the firm is far better. There are only so many ways to file: by chronology (or time), alphabetically, by category (or type). Things should be "user friendly" in the best sense of that term. The team elected to run the survey will set the tone.

Clear Documentation

Take the time to develop clear policies and understandable procedures. What are you keeping, for how long? What are the legal requirements? Attorneys say they are trained to know about the law, but how often they wish their own literature dealt more with the records that become significant during the practice of law.

It is up to the librarian or someone else in the firm to survey the literature on retention requirements related to your particular type of practice. You will want to review the results with your attorney and your accountant. The retention schedule need be no more than a list (see Appendix II). Start with project

information first. You will find that most decisions are up to the firm. The toughest are those that deal with creative work or material kept for reference. Everyone knows to keep contracts, record drawings, and approval or sign-off sets.

But, every staff member must understand the concept of the "normal course of business. " In other words, don't let things pile up and then have a crash program to clean up the mess. Plan to sort files on a regular basis at distinct phases of the project. Make sure the task is not given only to the temporary or student. Better still, manage projects and work as you go along. Coordinate the organization of the CADD system with the rest of the office. Material can be lost in a CADD system very easily; watching a young designer spend hours looking for drawings in a system makes one think that the technology of the flat file drawer may have its place. One firm thought it would be clever to have a Halloween party to toss out the accumulations of years of non-management! This is irresponsible, as well as dangerous. Your intent must be to have a well managed program as part of normal business.

Some records are kept only temporarily, others until the end of the project, some for a designated number of years. Perhaps one category is kept until invoices are paid. Incorporation papers and other documents vital to the continued functioning of the firm are designated and given special attention, often an off-site or more secure location. How long do you retain these? Some are designated "permanent, " others 10, 5, 3, 2 years, some as long as "reference " warrants. Project files have unique risk management implications which require special consideration. More on this later.

Some types of material, such as images, whether computer, slide, or photo, need a different level of attention to their preservation. Since one cannot see computer information in the same way hard copy is recognizable, the procedures and customs accompanying electronic records need to be documented more thoroughly. How frequently the back ups are done is one such requirement.

There used to be preference in the court for the "original" (usually paper) copy. Now the Best Evidence Rule, (part of Rule 901(b)(9) of the Uniform Rules of Evidence) makes the use of a properly authenticated record in a newer technology acceptable; professional associations are drafting guidelines for the use and acceptance of different technologies in court.

Careful Maintenance

But, don't stop there! Now that much has been accomplished, you cannot rest easy. Someone must see that the program is continued. Again, the support of the principals is vital. Once a year do an "audit, " or review the program. Be ready to be flexible. Do not let anything become entrenched in "bureaucracy. " Make sure all in the firm understand what is going on, and write down (and retain) what you do. There is a certain irony in keeping records of the records program, but they demonstrate effort and compliance.

GETTING STARTED

How do you set in motion an effort to strengthen your record keeping practices? Here are some ideas on how to get started and how to show support and involvement:

- Choose an individual to initiate the program who is well liked and respected within the firm. He or she needs to be a good listener.

- That individual should excel at what the firm values most. If it is design, he or she should be a good designer.
- Rotate leadership occasionally. Two years is enough. Then, someone else can learn about it.
- Have a fit with the culture of the firm. If the firm has committees, or task forces, or whatever, use that mechanism.
- It helps to have more than one person involved from different levels within in the firm.
- Try to create widespread understanding and acceptance of the goals. For example, lunch discussion groups; each employee must attend. Then, everyone will know what is going on.
- Fund the program. Provide lunches. Support a membership in professional associations, such as ARMA, and attendance at chapter meetings. Provide time within the project budget for information administration.
- Seek professional help, if you need it. A skilled consultant can save a great deal of otherwise wasted time and energy when used effectively.

HOW LONG SHOULD I KEEP MY PROJECT FILES?

This question is raised time and again. There is no unqualified answer. Architects and engineers often disagree; no real accord exists among attorneys. Yet, somewhere between, "Get rid of your records as soon as you possibly can!" and "Save them until the end of time!" there must be some reasonable set of assumptions on which you can base your own decisions about how long project records ought to be kept in your firm.

Finding an appropriate answer is complicated by uncertainties in the legal environment. Special statutes of limitation or repose in your state may or may not hold up under future judicial review. As a result, you could find yourself forced to mount a defense in an action brought long after the inception of what may once have seemed to be perfectly valid protections under the law. The problem can be further complicated by services you might provide to clients in other states.

Between One Extreme…

Among a few architects and engineers, there is a dangerous misconception about the retention of records. It is based on the belief that their contents can only cause future harm. A timely, periodic purging of the files, so this line of reasoning goes, can eliminate the possibility that some underemployed attorney out there, years hence, may find an obscure document with which to pursue an otherwise untenable allegation of liability.

Purging the files with this purpose in mind is akin to throwing the baby out with the bath water. While it may alleviate the fear that somewhere in the archives there lurks a "smoking gun, " it can also eliminate any possibility of mounting an adequate defense against an unwarranted claim.

The corollary assumption, that the absence of records can somehow be used to one's advantage in the event of litigation, is equally ill-founded. As we have already seen, a self-inflicted inability to produce evidence on one's own behalf is unlikely to be viewed by the court with favorable consideration.

Perhaps more importantly, those who find themselves inclined to believe their records can only get them into trouble are probably directing their attention to the wrong problem. What shows up in those records

is a reflection of management practices and professional attitudes that extend throughout the firm. It has nothing to do with how long the records are kept.

...and the Other

Many attorneys advise that the only way to keep some types of records long enough is to keep them forever. This precaution may seem excessive, but it points to a real problem: There is little comfort to be gained from the special statutes of limitation or repose.

It is not that the intent of the legislation is unclear. The purpose of the statutes is to strike a balance-between the right of injured persons to seek redress from those who caused them harm, on the one hand, and your right to be free of the threat of litigation within some reasonable period of time, on the other. What is far from clear is just where that balance will eventually be struck.

In many states, the statutes have not been tested in the appellate courts. Where they have been, some have proven vulnerable to challenge. It has been argued that the limitation period should be allowed to begin to run only at that point at which the plaintiff knew or should have known of damages arising out of the alleged negligence. In some cases, this argument has prevailed. In others, it has been rejected, only to be resurrected on constitutional grounds.

The result has been the striking down of the statutes in a number of states. The fact that state legislators may well retaliate (as some have) by reaffirming their intent and reinstating them is likely to be of little consequence to the unfortunate firm which finds itself the object of all this judicial and legislative attention. Nor, is it likely to be helpful in the interim to those defendants who have already discarded important documents.

So it may be best to err on the side of keeping. But, remember that the more you keep, the more attention you must pay to care, organization, and administration. Records kept in an incoherent mass (or mess!) will not do you or anyone else much good.

Charting a Manageable Course

The inherent legal uncertainties suggest a cautious approach to the record keeping problem. Notwithstanding the need for caution, however, it would be unreasonable to ignore the fact that most professional liability claims are filed within five years of substantial completion of the work. Thus, keeping all of your documents forever is probably an unnecessary, if not an impossible task.

What you might do is view any applicable statute of limitations as a minimum requirement. Then, you can selectively identify aspects of projects which, in your judgment, necessitate the retention of records for considerably longer periods-the use of new building products or systems, extraordinary design challenges, work performed for particularly difficult or unsophisticated clients, work for repeat clients who may need additional services, such as facilities management, or work involving important interactions with others.

If the sheer volume of paper becomes a burden, you may want to build a review procedure into your records management system (after 10 years, for example and provide for changes in what you retain. The

important thing is to keep your records for each project in the same manner. You need a baseline representation that applies across the board-even to structures that may no longer exist.

Whatever you decide to be appropriate under the unique circumstances you face in your firm, it would be well to keep this in mind: At some unknown point in the future, after key people can no longer be located, your project records may be the only resource available to you to protect the financial stability of your firm and to safeguard the professional reputation you have worked so hard to achieve.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Once upon a time in Anglo-Saxon, then Norman, England, all discourse was oral. One had to present one's case in person in the event of a dispute. Then came the Domesday Book of 1086, which set down things in writing-appropriately enough, a record of a survey of English lands ordered b- William the Conqueror. This was something new. Records could be used as evidence. Over the years, their value has increased, dramatically in recent years. When organized effectively and used well, they can be one of the most important practice management assets you have.

APPENDIX I

RESOURCES YOU CAN USE

Two professional associations can be of great help. Both offer assistance in the form of resource centers, journals, newsletters, seminars, conferences, and networking with colleagues:

- ARMA (Association of Records Managers and Administrators) - (800) 422-2762

An educational organization with a network of local chapters, a quarterly journal, other publications and conferences.

- AIIM (Association for Information and Image Management) - (301) 587-8202

Concerned mostly with new technology and standards. Overlaps with ARMA on electronic records, imaging, optical disks, etc.

AIA Memo (April 1990), p. 5-6.

Davenport, Thomas H. et al., "Information Politics, " *Sloan Management Review* (Fall 1992). This article discusses the way information is used in organizations.

Office Access (The Understanding Business, San Francisco, 1992).

Recordkeeping Requirements by Donald Skupsky, 1986 (Information Requirements Clearinghouse, 3801 East Florida Ave., Suite 400, Denver, CO 80210 or (303) 691-3600) - is excellent, as are his other publications.

Records in Architectural Offices, 3rd ed. (MassCOPAR, 1992, P.O. Box 129, Cambridge, MA 02142 or (617) 496-1300) - includes sections on organization of office records, as well as preservation.

"Statutes of Repose for the Design Professions, " *Guidelines for Professional Practice,* Special Supplement No. 1, 1992, to Vol. XX, No. 3, 1990 (Victor 0. Schinnerer & Co., Two Wisconsin Circle, Chevy Chase, MD 20815 or (301) 961-9800.

APPENDIX II

SAMPLE RECORDS RETENTION SCHEDULE

(This schedule is intended to serve as an example only. It is not suitable for use without adaptation to state and local laws and regulations. Customize it to use the language of your firm, and define your own categories. Consult your attorney, your accountant, and internal policies and procedures before assigning your own retention periods. Those for computer records depend on office systems.)

Type of Document	Length of Time Kept
Business Organization	
Articles of Incorporation	P (Permanent)
Partnership Agreements	P
By-laws	P
Minutes of Organizational Meetings	P
Stock Certificates	P
Annual Financial Statements	P
Audit Reports	P
General Ledger	P
Principals' Notebooks	P (Archive)
Contracts	
Insurance	P
Professional	P

Owner/Prime Consultant Agreements	P
Prime Consultant/Subconsultant Agreements	P
Work Authorizations	P
Change Authorizations	P
Administrative	
Leases	P (or 6 years after expiration)
Mortgages	P
Administrative Consultants	6 years

Project Records
Drawings and Specifications

Sketch Books	P
Preliminary Designs and Sketches	Select for Archives
Feasibility, SD, DD Final Sets	10 years after completion
Competition	3 years (or Archive)
Permits or Approvals	P
Sign Off	P
Final Construction Set	P
Shop Drawings	P (or 10 years)
Record Drawings	P
Construction Contracts	P
Studies, Reports, Surveys	P

Correspondence related to categories in filing system, contract development, and project

organization	P
Correspondence related to legal action	P
Other Correspondence (use familiar categories)	P (or 10 years)
Meeting Notes	
	P
Slides, Photos Videos	
Construction related	
	P (after selection)
Promotion Related	
	As needed
Proposals	
	P
Accounting	
Income Tax Returns	P
Pension/Profit Sharing Plan Records	P
Interim Project Progress Reports	6 years
Final Project Progress Reports	P
Check Register	P
Invoices	
Vendor (Administrative)	3-6 years
Consultant (Administrative)	6 years
Project	P (or 10 years)
Canceled Checks	3-6 years
Bank Statements	3-6 years
Payroll	6 years
Time Sheets	3-6 years

Summaries of Time Sheets	P (or 10 years)
Employee Expense Reports	3-6 years
Accounts Receivable	6 (or 10 years)
Accounts Payable	
General Ledger	6 (or 10 years)

(This schedule is an example only. It is not suitable for use without adaptation.)

Mary Cooper writes from Cambridge, Massachusetts where she manages Cooper Information, an information services consulting firm to the design professions. She holds Masters Degrees in Information Science from Simmons College and in Education from Harvard University. She lectures regularly on information management for architects, engineers, and environmental scientists, as well as public and private institutions.