

Eight Essential Elements of Municipal Records Management



Records management is a function of all municipal governments, regardless of its size. Developing a records and information program for a municipality is a big task: the workload is significant, challenges are abundant and there is little time to create a strategic road map for your program. Every Ontario municipality implements and manages its own program, but share several common challenges, including:

- The pressure of keeping up with ever-changing regulations, such as Bill 8, that impact record keeping and the audits associated with these regulations such as finance, transportation, environment and FOIPP
- The increasing volume of records to manage in 'hybrid' digital and paper environments

- Limited resources with competing and fluctuating priorities
- Effective communication with records owners and guiding and supporting them as changes are introduced

Providing reliable and credible service to voters and municipal citizens while ensuring security, accessibility and accountability for record keeping.

Based on TAB's work with hundreds of Canadian municipalities, we suggest eight essential elements that will form a blueprint for municipal RIM programs.



1. Program Documentation and Delegation of Responsibilities

As with any successful municipal program, you need endorsement and authority to act. The program documentation provides that endorsement, but also acts to communicate expectations and responsibilities to employees. The documentation must be clear, concise and supported by senior management. A records management policy with formally designated roles and responsibilities for record keeping, or a records management bylaw with a records classification and retention schedule and outline of records management services available, are examples of program documentation.



2. Records Classification and Retention Schedule

A schedule is a foundational RIM program element. It provides a logical and consistent structure for identifying and describing groups of records, and clear and up-to-date direction for how long to keep records. Your schedule also identifies department-level responsibilities for file collections and may also indicate the existence of personal information, vital records and security levels. The schedule must be formally approved through a bylaw and be kept up to date. There are three different styles of classification schedules and you can decide which style works best for your municipality:

- **Functional** - records are grouped by business functions
- **Subject** - describes what the record is or the content of the files
- **Block Numeric** - organizational based



3. Records / Document Database Management

It is very difficult to effectively manage records without some type of database to track and control records holdings. Alternative measures such as spreadsheets or file lists tend to be labor intensive to maintain and lack security, control and flexibility for searching and reporting. A basic records management database is relatively inexpensive in relation to other business applications, and most are scalable and offer additional modules for future expansion to more robust electronic document management system configurations, such as our RIM software, TAB FusionRMS.



4. File Collection Management and Planning

Municipalities deal with large volumes of information and you must be able to break your information into manageable chunks. To start, apply the file collection management and planning practice to each department and file collection throughout your municipality.

For example, begin with Department "A" and identify its critical records collections. For each records collection, identify the different media types – such as paper files, electronic files on a shared network drive, emails, business application databases, websites, etc. – that make up the content for the collection.

Categorize all sources (and often duplication) of information for the collection and then determine how the collection must be identified for end users retrieval, interfaces for other applications, security purposes and ownership. Understanding the life cycle of the records collection in detail will allow you to manage the content appropriately and ensure that permanent collections are protected and accessible over time.

This diagram captures how the approach can work for a Land or Property File collection.



5. Inactive Records Control

Many municipalities struggle to find adequate space to store inactive records. When space is found, access, security and environmental controls to protect records from dust, heat, humidity or flooding must be considered. Lack of proper storage space makes it even more important to ensure records are destroyed on time and that processes for transfer, storage and retrieval are ingrained in the day-to-day business operations. Faced with lack of adequate space, an increasing number of municipalities are finding it more beneficial and cost effective to store their records at a nearby commercial records storage facility.

Land Files

Paper Files



Classification
File Name, #,
Description, Data
entry



File Conversion

Shared Drive Docs



Folder Hierarchies
Doc naming
standards File Name,
#



Imaging

Email



Naming standards
Email best practices
File Name, #



Shared Drive Structure

Application Database
i.e. CityView



Property data
File name, #,
Links to docs



Data Conversion



IT Interfaces



This image of the 2013 floods in the Greater Toronto Area, remind us that disaster recovery is a reality all municipalities must prepare for.

Photo credit: thestar.com.



6. Technology Integration

Rampant duplication and overlap between files, network shared drives, applications and databases are not uncommon in municipalities. For example, two or more departments use and store duplicate records. Records management may hold portions of the collection and business software applications can quickly and easily recreate entirely new sets of data for the same collection. When planning and implementing new systems, business applications and document management technologies, you must consider interfaces to compliment and strengthen your records collections. This type of collaboration avoids redundancies, reduces costs and improves accuracy of information collections.



7. Vital Records Protection and Disaster Recovery Program

In the event of a disaster or mishap, there must be guidance for recovery and restoration of mission critical documents and an understanding of what records are considered vital, critical or important. Vital records are the records necessary immediately following a disaster such as an employee contact list or current payroll system. Other records may be categorized as “critical” such as accounts receivable, tax rolls, etc., or “important,” such as contracts and agreements. These last two categories of records will be needed sometime after the disaster to establish rights, ownership and monies owed. Your municipality should have its own disaster recovery program to ensure it is able to continue to serve the community and protect its records.



8. Training, Education and Support

Outlining the roles and responsibilities for users, managers, supervisors, senior managers is essential within the context of records and information management. A brief orientation can be provided to ALL new employees, followed by a more in-depth ‘fit for purpose’ training for executives and senior management, managers and supervisors, and records contacts and coordinators. Desk side support is most effective as it is specific to your records and operating environment. If appropriate, you can involve others in the department during these sessions.

How to Implement the Eight Essential Elements

The best way to implement and incorporate the eight essential elements for a successful RIM program is to develop one-, three- and five-year plans, and to support the one-year plan with a detailed action plan. Most importantly, involve IT and the business units in the RIM planning process and consensus building. Setting priorities will help you keep the implementation manageable. Your priorities will depend on several factors including:

- Identification and agreement on critical business issues
- Support and endorsement by senior management
- Technology and resources available
- The maturity level of your existing RIM program

At TAB, we are proud of our track record of successful client relationships, resulting in over 1,000,000,000 client records managed through FusionRMS.

We look forward to working with you!

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