Introduction

The following document is the final report of the "Retention Compendium Project" for the United Nations Archives and Records Management Section. The project work commenced on May 1, 1995 and ended June 30, 1995 with this final report.

The goal of the project was to develop a Retention Compendium reflecting the range of retention periods for simialr type records. The compendium would provide a history on past retention decisions. The objective was to use the compenduium as a tool for developing future records retention schedules for United Nations departments.

This report describes the current records retention environment, provides a project description, discusses the findings, and offers recommendations.

"Records", for the purpose of this discussion, are all documentary materials made or received regardless of physical type (books, paper, photographs, maps, electronic data, audiovisual, microforms, etc.) documenting decisions and transactions made in connection with official UN business. Library and museum materials made or acquired and preserved solely for reference or exhibition purposes, extra copies of documents, such as printed "official records", preserved only for convenience of reference, and stocks of publications are not included within the definition of "records".

In the definition of records cited above, the phrase "regardless of physical type" means that records are not comprised only of paper materials. Attention must be given to electronic records including magnetic tapes and disks, etc.

Current Records Retention Environment

The United Nations Archives and Records Management Section (ARMS) has the prime responsibility for providing efficient and cost effective records management services to the UN Secretariat departments, and to collect, preserve and make available for research historical records generated by the United Nations.

United Nations ARMS support departments by developing uniform standards, procedures and techniques for handling information. Records retention and disposition schedules are developed under ARMS supervision, and serve as the basis for retaining, disposing, and transferring records to storage; they also act

as a mechanism for identifying and transferring to Archives records with permanent historical value.

Presently, there are several records retention schedules in existence for United Nations records including the Finance Manual and older schedules that were developed for various departments throughout the United Nations in the 1970's and 80's. Other sources of retention period information include file classification plans, records appraisals documented in the Records Retention Table and Accessions-Disposal Table of the United Nations Archives Data Base System, records accessions files, archives finding aids, and from interviews with UN Archives staff.

Project Description

The first step in the project was to become familiar with the structure and basic operational procedures of the United Nations ARMS. Information was gathered on the organizational structure of the United Nations and ARMS from organization charts, descriptions of departments, annual reports, and through interviews with staff.

Next, an overall review took place of records retention schedules in existence, directives, official or informal retention decisions, studies and reports, file plans, archives finding aids, and retention decisions reflected in the Archives Data Base System.

During the review, a list of records series titles and/or descriptions with similar type functions were compiled including the following:

      1.   Official Status Files
      2.   Intern
      3.   Applications
      4.   Correspondence - Chronological, Reading, and Letter Files
      5.   Cases - Project, Country, and Study Files
      6.   Petitions
      7.   Reports
      8.   Survey Records
      9.   Meeting Files - Committees, Boards, Panels, Agendas, and Minutes
    10.   Audivisual Records
    11.   Ledgers, Registers, and Logs
    12.   Rules, Regulations, Policy and Procedures Files
    13.   Communications Files - Cables

14. Attendance, Leave, and Time Records
15. Maps, Plans and Architectural Drawings
16. Contract and Agreement Files
17. Budget Records
18. Purchasing and Accounting Records

Each record title was researched for retention periods using the older retention schedules, Finance Manual, file plans, finding aids, and the "records description" fields of the Archives Data Bases previously mentioned for retention information. Archives staff were also a good source of information.

Occasionally, it was difficult to determine retention periods assigned to records accessions documented in the Accession-Disposal Table of the Archives Data Base System because different methods of recording retention period information are used. In some cases the retention periods for records series is the difference between the latest date in the "inclusive date" field and the "review for disposition" date field.

In other cases, the records are scheduled from the date of accession regardless of inclusive dates of the record. Sometimes inclusive date information is missing. Also, there are multi-year record accessions for a given record series that are sometimes recommended for immediate disposal, and accessions sometimes consist of several different record series.

All series used in the project from the Accession-Disposal Table were cross checked against the hard copy Accession File. Sometimes additional information on retentions could be found in the Accession Control Sheet and the Request for Transfer of Inactive Records which are document components of the Accession File.

Project Findings

The output from the project shows that many different retention periods have been assigned to records types with similar functions. Some searches generated vast amounts of information, such as "case files". Others, such as "studies", and "maps, plans, and architectural drawings" did not produce much output. There are also many variations for a given record series title.

The Compendium does reflect past retention decisions. However, these retention have not been assigned consistently

and many of the record series do not have the benefit of a records retention schedule. Some retentions are based on users needs and recommendations made at the time the records were accessioned to Archives' storage or on their limited value or use. The retentions listed in the Compendium are too varied to serve as a useful tool for creating future retention schedules.

The project also reveals that the "Finance Manual", a general schedule for financial records, is being implemented both by ARMS and United Nations Secretariat departments in a consistent fashion. This is a positive signal. It could mean that users are recognizing the Manual as an authority on the retention of financial records, or, users find it easy to use and a fast way to get rid of unwanted records cluttering the office. Whatever the reason, it indicates that users are aware of a records management program and know how to use it.

Recommendation

The recommendation resulting from this project is to develop a General Records Retention Schedule for administrative records of the UN. The Schedule would include an updated and enhanced version of the records listed in the Financial Manual.

The General Records Retention Schedule (General Schedule) would cover administrative records common to most or all departments. They provide departments with readymade schedules for the disposition of their records. These records are created mainly in administrative functions, and they usually constitute about one-third of all department records.

The General Schedule indicates the minimum length of time that records must be retained before they may be legally disposed of. The schedule will not include all records of a department; it can be supplemented at a later time by schedules for unique programme records. The General Schedule operates independently of the organizational structure and does not have to be revised when the organization is restructured.

The purposes of the Schedules are:

* To ensure that records are retained as long as needed for their administrative, legal, and fiscal uses.

* To provide that records of enduring value are retained permanently for historical and research purposes.

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*   To encourage and facilitate the systematic disposal of those records no longer needed for the conduct of UN business.

Once the schedule has been adopted, records with minimal value may be disposed of continually as they meet their stated minimal retention periods. The advantages of a program for systematic disposal are:

*   To destroy records that are no longer useful for the conduct of UN business.

*   To guide in the management and disposition of electronic records.

*   To minimize requirements for filing equipment and space and free storage space for new records as they are created. By storing semi-active and inactive files in the UN's low cost off-site records storage facility, as well as destroying obsolete records in a timely manner, departments avoid labor costs as well as costs incurred by the inefficient storage of office records.

*   To facilitate the identification and preservation of archival records.