ACT Government Records Digitisation Guidelines

Key points
- Digitising hard copy records can have many advantages, including cost savings and improved access to important information.
- Digitisation projects are rarely as simple as people imagine. They require proper planning.
- Talk to the Territory Records Office before embarking on new digitisation arrangements.

Benefits of digitising ACT Government records

Digitisation involves the conversion of a physical or analogue record to a digital representation. Digitisation is one means of converting an original or source record and is usually carried out through scanning or photographing the source record, in the case of paper or microform. For audio-visual material, it involves converting content into digital code that can be read by computers.

There can be a number of drivers behind a decision to digitise hard copy records. They often encompass improving access to information, preserving at-risk records, achieving savings in storage and handling costs, or some combination of these.

The benefits of records digitisation can include:
- improved productivity and service delivery, as records can be accessed immediately, used by multiple people and become part of monitored workflow processes
- greater sharing of information and re-use of previous work
- better decision-making as the full set of contextual and background information can be accessed
- savings on storage, management and access costs
- preservation of historical information and fragile records.

Records may be digitised with a number of audiences in mind:
- officers within the agency, so that information can be used in current business processes
- clients and stakeholders, so that they can more easily access information about themselves or the business activities that affect them, through freedom of information or other processes
- the community more broadly, who may wish to access archival records for historical or other research.

Complexity of records digitisation

Digitisation of hard copy records is often seen as a simple solution to accessibility and storage problems. It is, however, rarely as simple or as cost-effective as many believe. Scanning of archival records is not a case of dropping a set of papers into an office scanner and storing the resulting copy on a hard drive. There can be many factors, which are often overlooked, that may make digitisation processes more complex and expensive than anticipated. For example:

- Inconsistent or fragile physical formats make records unsuitable for mechanised scanning, and require much more human handling. Almost all hard copy files will require manual work to remove file pins, staples, paperclips and the like before they can be scanned.
- The physical structure of hard copy files conveys information that can be lost in a scanned copy and which may need to be manually entered into management systems. This can include information on file covers, or even in separate documents such as file indexes.
- Digitisation of analogue audio and video can be very resource intensive, depending on the quantities and formats involved, the equipment and software required and the quality of the original analogue source.
- Poorly described and understood records throw up unexpected problems, and require greater analysis to capture the required metadata. Inadequate metadata capture will mean that digital copies cannot be easily found and understood.
- Digital copies need to be stored in systems that are able to properly manage them and the data about them, and which can allow the records to be searched for and used in the future. Unstructured storage systems such as hard drives do not allow sufficient protection of records and the information about them, and rarely provide adequate search facilities. Purpose-built archives, records or business process management software will usually be required to store the digital copies.
- The long-term accessibility of digital content must be monitored. Format and media obsolescence and migration to new platforms should be considered in your planning and risk management.
- Not all physical records can be destroyed after they have been copied. This may limit the return on investment for a digitisation project.

Even with good planning, factors such as the fragility of the records, the quality of available metadata, and long-term accessibility requirements will usually account for the bulk of the costs of digitisation work.

Factors to consider before digitising records

With these benefits and barriers in mind, there are some key factors that should be considered and understood before commencing work on digitisation of records:

- What is the outcome being sought? Different approaches may be needed depending on whether your goal is to save storage costs, protect fragile records from excess handling, or make the information in records more accessible to staff or the public.

- How much is known about the records, their condition, context, and use? These elements will have a large impact on how long it will take to scan or convert the records, what approach to take, and how much it will cost.
- Is there structured metadata already available for the records? If the metadata that describes the records, their titles, the dates they were created, their business purpose, etc, is already well managed in a business system or an electronic document and records management system (EDRMS) it may be possible to export this to a new management system. If not, metadata requirements will need to be identified, and the metadata created manually.
- Who should do the work? Do you have the right equipment to scan or convert records to the right quality or file format? Do staff have the right training, and enough time, to do the work properly? Leaving digitisation tasks to line areas is rarely a good idea, and can lead to lost or inaccessible records, poor quality copies and damaged originals.
- Who else might be interested in these records? The needs of other users of the records, such as other business areas or members of the public, may influence your decisions about where digital copies should be stored, what output format they should be created in, what metadata needs to be captured, and how the digital copies should be managed.
- What systems are available to manage the digital copies? The capabilities of the system that will store the digital copies need to match the needs of current and future users, and be sufficient to collect and manage contextual information about the records so that they can be identified, used and understood in the future.
- Will the work provide value for money? Saving money is not the only reason for digitising records. However, the cost and complexity of the proposed work needs to be balanced against the benefits it will provide.

Before you begin

Before you commence any new work to digitise records, you should contact the Territory Records Office. TRO staff can advise you on issues that will be important to your decision-making, such as whether it will be possible to destroy originals after digitisation. The TRO may also be able to advise you of other digitisation work already underway, which may provide useful lessons, synergies or cost-savings for your own work.

You should also talk to other stakeholders about the proposed work. At a minimum, these will include:
- **Digital Records Support (DRS)** will need to be involved if you plan to store the digital copies in either of the ACT Government's whole of government EDRMS—TRIM/Content Manager or Objective. Digitised records can take up considerable data storage, and DRS will need to understand up front how much data you expect to load into the system and what impact your migration processes may have on other users and the system's performance. It will also be important to understand the metadata requirements for TRIM and Objective before you begin so that you can ensure this information is captured through your digitisation processes. The DRS system administrators will assist in the setup of your digital environment/workspace-

arranging correct access controls and system configuration in line with the approved RACI and configuration standards. Some required actions can only be managed by the DRS administrators..

- **Physical Records Support (PRS)** should also have an understanding of your plans, particularly if you expect to remove hard copy records from their storage facilities. While some ACT Government agencies have their own arrangements with commercial records storage providers, PRS manages the whole of government contract for these services, and you should discuss your plans with them to ensure they are consistent with existing contracts and obligations. Permanently removing records from commercial storage can incur large fees, and PRS will be able to help you to understand the costs involved.

Choosing a digitisation model

There are two potential models of digitisation available to ACTPS agencies–a program or 'digitise on retrieval' model, or a project model.

A project model for digitisation usually involves identifying a specific group of records to be copied at one time. Alternately, a digitise on retrieval or program model for digitisation involves copying records only when they have been requested for use by an ACT Government officer or a member of the public. Rather than receiving the hard copy record in response to their request, the user will instead receive a digital copy.

The different drivers and audiences for digitisation can influence a decision on the most appropriate model, as can other factors such as the location and condition of the records. Factors to consider when choosing a digitisation model are set out in the table below.

	Digitisation on Retrieval	Digitisation Project
Retention requirements	Digitise on retrieval can be useful for groups of records with varied retention requirements, as the key goal of increased accessibility is achieved regardless of the retention period of the records.	Project digitisation of long-term temporary records can provide storage savings if the original records can be destroyed. Records with unknown retention requirements should not be the subject of a digitisation project. This is usually wasteful as money will likely be spent on records that can be destroyed now or in the near future.

Format and condition of the records	Modern, uniform paper records are usually most suited to this option as they can be scanned readily. Audio-visual formats, fragile documents, and unusual or unevenly sized records can be risky and expensive to copy in an ad hoc way.	Generally suitable for records in any format.
Location of records	For records in secondary storage, your storage provider may provide such a service. For records in office storage, you may need to establish your own service. Think about purchase of appropriate equipment, training of staff, quality assurance processes, appropriate and secure storage locations and transport arrangements. Digitisation is usually better done centrally by trained records management staff, and self-service by office staff is not generally recommended.	For records in secondary storage, your storage provider may provide such a service. For records in office storage, you may need to consider establishing a workspace for the project, or consider outsourcing. Staff should receive appropriate training and be supervised by someone with records management expertise. The space, and any transport arrangements to move records into it, must have appropriate environmental and security controls.
Frequency and urgency of access	Digitisation on retrieval may slow the delivery of records to users, however, once digitised, access is much cheaper and faster	Digitisation projects can mean that records are unavailable or difficult to access while the project is in progress.
Audience and sensitivity issues	If the records contain sensitive information and the digital copies are intended for external access, decision-making about access exemptions can slow ad hoc processes down.	It may be possible to screen and exclude sensitive information from digitisation processes as part of project design.

Quality of digitisation	For outsourced arrangements quality requirements can be specified in relevant contracts. For in-house arrangements it can be more difficult to ensure quality standards are met.	For outsourced arrangements quality requirements can be specified in relevant contracts. For in-house arrangements quality requirements should be determined in project planning and factored into training, equipment acquisition and quality control processes.

Selecting records for digitisation

There are several factors you should consider before choosing a group of records to digitise, or to determine whether the group of records you are considering is suitable for a digitisation project. These are summarised in the table below.

Factor	Considerations
Disposal status	- Records that are unsentenced cannot be destroyed after digitisation. - Records that are to be retained as territory archives may not be able to be destroyed after digitisation – you should consult with the TRO before commencing a digitisation project or process if your aim is to destroy original records and reduce storage costs. - Destruction of original records after digitisation is governed by the TRO's Records Disposal Schedule for Converted or Digitised Source Records.
Frequency of use	- High-use records are good candidates for digitisation as this can reduce the cost of repeated retrieval and reduce the risk of damaging fragile records. - Infrequently used records may be suitable for digitisation if they are of archival significance, as the process of making them available can increase their use while also protecting them from damage.
Quality of outputs	- The TRO has published technical specifications for digitising paper documents and images. - For audio-visual materials, contact the TRO for advice on technical specifications. - The quality required for digital copies generally increases with the length of time the records need to be kept.

Digital storage environment	You should not embark on any digitisation project if you do not have a suitable system for housing the digital copies. Storage in unstructured environments such as shared drives is insufficient, as they do not capture sufficient metadata to properly manage the copies, and do not adequately protect records from alteration or deletion. The most appropriate location of digitised copies of records is usually a purpose-designed records or archives system, such as Content Manager/TRIM or Objective.

Planning for digitisation

Digitisation of records should not be an ad hoc process. Whether a digitisation on retrieval or a project approach is required, it is important to be clear up front about a number of factors such as:

- what standard of image or file format is required?
- what equipment and training do you need?
- where will the digitised records be stored?
- what metadata needs to be captured, and who will do it?
- what quality assurance processes are needed?
- how do the original records need to be managed after digitisation?

Having a digitisation plan before you commence is always good practice. Your plan can guide decision-making when unexpected problems occur, can help to hold your contracted providers to account, and is an important factor in managing the quality of the digitisation work.

Having a digitisation plan is also mandatory if you will be seeking the TRO's authorisation to destroy records created between 1931 and 2000 that are of permanent value. Guidelines for planning digitisation projects, and for destroying original records after they have been digitised, are available from the TRO. The Public Record Office of Victoria has a useful template for documenting digitisation plans. Digitisation projects should be properly authorised within the agency, usually by the Senior Executive responsible for records management, or a more senior person.

You should also keep your digitisation plan up to date. For ongoing programs, review your plan regularly to ensure it is keeping pace with your business requirements, technical capabilities and storage arrangements. For digitisation projects, you may need a new plan for a new group of records to take account of different formats, the condition of the records, or different retention requirements. It is good practice to include your digitisation plan as part of the suite of documents making up your agency's Records Management Program.

Useful resources

Territory Records Office advice on digitation and disposal of source records:
https://www.territoryrecords.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/1690809/Retain-Digitisation-and-disposal-of-source-records.pdf

Territory Records Office Records Disposal Schedule for Converted or Digitised Source Records: https://www.legislation.act.gov.au/ni/2020-435/.

Territory Records Office technical specifications for digitisation: https://www.territoryrecords.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1315827/Retain-Digitisation-Technical-Specifications.pdf

Public Record Office Victoria Digitisation Plan Template: https://prov.vic.gov.au/recordkeeping-government/document-library/pro-58-digitisation-plan-template

State Archives & Records NSW advice on equipment for digitisation: https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/recordkeeping/equipment-digitisation

ACT Government Records and Information Management contacts: https://actgovernment.sharepoint.com/sites/Extranet-TRO/SitePages/Directorate-Records-and-Information-Managers-Contact-List.aspx

CONTACT US

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