



Israel

Preservation of Electronic Records

This article was adapted from Annual Report of the State Comptroller of Israel #54B, published in May 2004.

Management of electronic records

The management and preservation of, and access to, electronic records produced by the Israeli government authorities is a difficult challenge that requires appropriate preparation and organisation. Rapid changes in software, hardware, and storage systems for electronic information increase the difficulties. In addition the increasing quantity of important information, and the immense number of records maintained and managed by computer, increases the urgency of the need to deal with the challenge of electronic records management.

Insufficient attention to its effects could lead to a future situation in which access to an enormous quantity of important government records could be denied.

The Annual Report of the State Comptroller of Israel #54B, published in May 2004, warned that the absence of adequate electronic records management could:

- Effectively deny access to an enormous quantity of important government records and much state information could be lost forever
- Damage fulfilment of the goals of such laws as the Archives Law and the Freedom of Information Law, 5758–1998, and historical research of the people and the state.

The Report recommended inter-ministerial collaboration for the creation of the necessary infrastructure for the preservation of electronic records.

Electronic records are different in nature from printed records. Because electronic records have particular characteristics (box overleaf), special guidelines are required for their preservation. Dynamic technological changes and the growing extent of the creation of electronic records in state institutions require periodic examination of the guidelines and their adjustment to the changes that have occurred.

This is a picture of a very interesting building. It has to do with preservation but not of paper or digital records but of a very special "document" written about two thousand years ago. The building is called The Shrine of the Book situated in The Israel Museum, Jerusalem and it is the home of the exceptional archaeological finds: the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Government offices at Kiryat Ben Gurion are in the background

Characteristics of electronic records:

- Electronic records can only be read with a computer. Due to the rapid changes in technology, archived material preserved on the magnetic media of the last generation cannot be retrieved without being updated to the current technology.
- Meta-data, the information about data, is an essential tool for the preservation and retrieval of electronic records. Meta data must include: operating instructions for the software; internal codes; the location of files and libraries; the creation of links between documents. When software for retrieval and appropriate hardware are lacking, electronic records cannot be accessed and retrieved, even if the medium on which they are recorded is preserved (i.e. hard discs, CDs and floppy discs).
- It is extremely difficult to monitor the completeness and reliability of computerised information, since at every stage of work the information can be modified without leaving a trace. A record can be destroyed when it is no longer needed for current work purposes, in a manner that cannot be monitored; preservation of the final document alone can make it impossible to trace its evolution.
- The separation of material between that which must be stored and that which may be disposed of, is more complex with electronic records than with printed records. Distinguishing material in electronic records requires expertise.
- The preservation of magnetic media is likely to require special environmental conditions in order to prevent damage and for the preservation of characters and symbols. For example, careful maintenance of appropriate heat and humidity, protection from dust and magnetic fields, and transfer from CDs, floppy disks, and film whose lifespan is limited.
- Electronic mail (e-mail), adds to the problem of preserving computerised information. Documents are transferred from one computer to another via e-mail, including documents that include decisions, instructions and considerations, and are therefore eligible to be considered as archival material.
- The administrators of records in government ministries must be knowledgeable in electronic records management and information technology, in addition to their professional training.

Summary of Comptroller's Report

The Israel State Archives is the national archive for the State of Israel, and is a department within the Prime Minister's Office. The deposit of archival material in the State Archives is for perpetuity (subject to limitations that the State Archivist is authorised to stipulate in the regulations). Electronic records are archival material for all intents and purposes, and their care and disposal must accord with the Archives Law, 1955, and the regulations issued under its power.

Although in the 1990s there was a technological revolution in information sciences, and most documents are now created and managed in computerised systems, the State Archives has not published guidelines regarding the preservation of electronic records, as necessitated by their special characteristics. The State Comptroller's Office revealed that since 1992, when the State Archivist stipulated in the Archive's Manual for the Disposal of Archival Material that disposal of electronic records must be carried out in accordance with the law and regulations, he has not set the necessary detailed guidelines.

Given the lack of guidelines, most government ministries have not transferred to the Archives any computerised archival material (records, documents and databases created and administered in computerised systems, such as the Population Registry and the Companies Registry), but have kept them in their own possession. The storing of this material in the ministries cannot be considered preservation for the future, since many do not have the capability of locating and retrieving a document after a certain period of time. Also in ministries in which records are kept on magnetic media, it will not be possible to view them if the hardware and the software enabling access are not maintained. In practice, many ministries destroy material when it is no longer necessary for their current needs.

During the past decade the State Archives, government ministries, and the Civil Service Commission, have established committees to deal with various aspects of the management of electronic records and procedures for their preservation. In practice, nothing has been done regarding the matter, and no solutions have been provided for the problems raised by the committees.

The preservation of audio-visual materials raises a similar problem, in that all filmed material should be converted to digital media and upgraded regularly, in order to ensure proper preservation. Due to budgetary limitations, the State Archivist has not undertaken such actions, and has not even prepared a computerised catalogue of all the audio-visual material in his possession.

In November 2002, a commercial company offered to preserve all the audio-visual material in the Archives and in public archives, at its expense, with no direct outlay from public funds. In exchange for this service, the company requested the production and broadcasting rights of documentary films that would be produced based on the material. To the end of the audit period in August 2003, a contractual agreement had not yet been approved.

In 2001-2002, the government decided on the implementation of national projects in the area of information technology. Among other things, the government decided to assign the Chief Scientist in the Ministry of Science to prepare a detailed proposal for establishing a national [computerised] network for purposes of research, education and culture: to implement "Project TAMAR", designed to enable citizens and civil servants to file forms using electronic signature; to implement "Project MERKAVA," a government-wide computerised system for the efficient management of state assets and resources. The audit found that the State Archivist was not included in the process of defining priorities towards the carrying out of these projects.

