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## Using Records Retention Schedules: Strategies for Applying Retention to Subject Files

**Purpose:** Provide guidance to state and local government agencies on options for applying function-based records retention requirements to broad subject-based files.

### Why Isn't There a "Subject Files" Record Series Any More?

- Many people tend to organize their thoughts and records around **subjects/topics**, rather than by the various business activities that may be involved.
- However, records retention requirements for public records depend on the **nature of the business functions represented** and the **legal, fiscal, business, and historical needs** associated with those activities
- For this reason, records retention schedules are organized by business functions/purposes rather than by broad-based subjects.
- For example, if Washington State Archives were to create a subject file on the topic of "Bring Your Own Device (BYOD)" for all of the records relating to BYOD, it might contain records tracking a key legal case, drafts and final versions of internal policies and procedures, and advice and training developed for and provided to agencies. While all of these records relate to BYOD, they have different retention requirements based on their business function/purpose (e.g., legal research, policy/procedure development, curriculum development, training event records, etc.).

### Options for Applying Retention to Subject Files

- If your agency has pre-existing subject-based files, there are basically two ways to apply retention to those records:
  1. **Separate** – Sort the files/folders according to the different business functions/purposes represented in the records. This will not only make it much easier to apply retention, but will also bring together the evidence of particular business processes.
  2. **Keep for the Longest Applicable Retention** – If separation is not feasible, review the file/folder to determine the various retention periods that apply to the records, and then keep the entire file/folder for the longest identified retention period. If the file/folder contains both "Archival" and "Non-Archival" records series, please contact Washington State Archives to arrange for appraisal and further advice.

**Additional advice regarding the management of public records is available from  
Washington State Archives:**