

State of Michigan
Records Management Services
Metadata Retention Guidance

General Schedule #8--Metadata states, "Metadata is broadly defined as 'data about data.' There are many types of metadata, some of which are created manually, and some of which are created automatically by computer systems. Metadata is not a record in and of itself; it is a component of a record. Metadata does not need to be retained after it is created, and may be destroyed at any time after creation."

General schedules apply to multiple agencies and only establish minimum retention periods for retaining records. However, it is acceptable for agencies to retain records longer than the minimum timeframe established in the general schedule, as needed. General Schedule 8 provides state agencies with the authority to dispose of metadata, but it does not require agencies to do so. State agencies should establish a normal routine for disposing of records in accordance with the provisions of approved Retention and Disposal Schedules.

Not all metadata possesses the same value; some of it is necessary, most is not. For the purposes of this document, four categories of metadata are defined: substantive, system-based, structural, and embedded.

- **Substantive** metadata is application-based and may contain modifications, edits, comments, etc., that are not reflected in the final publication version of a document. For example "track changes" information in Microsoft Word.
- **System-based** metadata includes information automatically captured by the computer system, such as author, date and time of creation, modification dates, access dates, etc. Some computer systems generate audit trails of user activity.
- **Structural** metadata includes information necessary for the proper operation of the file such as formats, compression, syntax rules, size, type of file, etc.
- **Embedded** metadata consists of characters and content that is directly inputted, but not necessarily visible on output, such as spreadsheet formulas, hyperlinks, properties, or index fields.

Some computer systems will overwrite metadata over time, such as the last accessed date field. Some metadata can be lost when an electronic record is converted to a new format (such as a migration from one format or software program to another, or when printing to paper). Metadata may be essential to support the ongoing functionality of an electronic record, such as formulas or index fields. Metadata may also be needed to document the authenticity of the electronic record, such as audit trails. Individual

agencies will determine for each record series that they create when the metadata is no longer necessary.

Records Management Services recommends that state agencies retain and organize their records according to the business process they support, not the technology that was used to create them. Employees should only need to look one place to find the document or information they need. Therefore, if the bulk of the records for a business process are maintained in paper files, the corresponding electronic records should be printed and filed in those paper filing systems. If the bulk of the records for a business process are maintained electronically, then the e-mail, word processed documents, spreadsheets, digital images, etc. should all be kept together in that central electronic file. The disposal of non-essential metadata should not prevent state employees from following these best practices for recordkeeping.

Note: If a state agency is notified that some of its records will be relevant to litigation, audit or investigation, it must immediately cease the destruction of those records (even if destruction is authorized by an approved Retention and Disposal Schedule) until that activity has ended. Once notification is received, the records must be retained in their native format so no metadata is disposed of. If relevant records exist in electronic formats, the agency should notify information technology staff. Failure to cease the destruction of relevant records could result in penalties from state and federal courts.

If you have questions or need additional assistance, please contact Records Management Services at 517-335-9132 or visit our website, <http://www.michigan.gov/recordsmanagement/>.