

## > Locating Records – A Guide for DEET Employees

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### About this Guide

The following is a guide for employees within the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) who are required to search for records in response to applications for access to information, made under the provisions of the *Information Act*. Search methods will vary according to the type of information that an applicant has requested and the way records are stored and managed in a particular work unit. Please note this is a guide only. Ultimately responsibility rests with individual work units to ensure all information relating to a particular application is found.

### Searching

Searching for information relating to an application can be a challenging and time consuming exercise. The task is certainly assisted by having a good records management system in place, and ensuring that it is diligently adhered to. However, even with the best system, the job of locating information often has to be approached with some investigative flair.

#### Where do I start?

Upon receipt of a search request from the Information Officer, examine the applicant's request. Check for any date ranges or key words, such as the name of a project, a third party or officer within the Department. It may also be useful to consider the following information in relation to the applicant's request:

- The procedures normally adopted in responding to an incident of the type in which the applicant is interested or the usual practices and procedures followed for projects like the one the applicant is interested in;
- The types of records normally received or created in relation to such projects or incidents;
- Staff members who might hold relevant information, or know where relevant information is held;
- Whether there are any electronic databases apart from the mandated records management systems, on which relevant information may be held.

This information will be useful when planning which areas of the work unit will be searched and will assist in deciding, and building on, search criteria. Searches should aim to locate any information held by the work unit that is relevant to the application and should extend to all registered files as well as any –

- E-mails
- Other computer records, such as documents kept on the business drive (O: Drive)
- Handwritten notes and Post It notes
- Hard copy or electronic diaries
- Draft documents
- Working files or folders
- Loose papers that may be relevant
- Database entries

As part of conducting a search it may be necessary to ensure relevant officers within the work unit search through their work area and also complete a *Search Declaration*. Never underestimate the potential for loose papers to be left on desks or in safes, drawers and briefcases, or for people to forget to print out e-mails and file notes.

Any information relevant to the applicant's request should be forwarded to the Information Officer, even if an officer states that they were made for his or her own personal reference. Issues about whether records are 'government information', whether they fall within the scope of the application, and whether some or all of the information is exempt from disclosure, will be decided once **all** the relevant information has been located and assessed.





## Electronic searches

Most areas have at least one electronic records management system that enables searching by key word, for example TRIM and SAMS<sup>1</sup>. Searches should be conducted on each database where the presence of relevant information is considered possible. Searches should be conducted under a number of individual key words or phrases (and combinations if reasonably possible). Don't forget to consider unique stand-alone databases, maintained and operated by individual work units, for example: Microsoft Access databases or mailing lists.

**Example:** Searches might be conducted for applications for access to personal under -

- The name of the applicant
- The address of the applicant
- The names of any nominated third parties
- The name of any nominated officers in combination with a date range

**The same approach could be used for applications for access to government information.**

Searches might be conducted under –

- The name of the project or projects involved with the information the applicant has requested
- Key words and/or dates provided in the applicant's request

**Note:** It is preferable not to confine initial searches too narrowly. For example, a person may recall that an incident took place on 5 July 1999 when it, in fact, occurred on 3 July. Adopting a reasonable date range for a search will show that every effort is being made to locate the information. Similarly, if searches are available that allow near matches or phonetic matches, they may assist in locating relevant documents.

## Interpreting an application

Applications are made by members of the public who are not necessarily familiar with the type of information held by government or the way that government describes the information it holds. Applications should not be interpreted in an overly critical or legalistic manner. If there is doubt about the information the applicant is requesting, contact the Information Officer who may be able to provide more information.

## What about e-mails?

Emails that contain information that documents business decisions or transactions should be printed and filed on the appropriate registered file. Once an email has been filed it can be deleted from your inbox. Your email account is not an authorised recordkeeping system and storing business emails in your inbox is not appropriate records management. If e-mails are not printed and filed search and retrieval capacity is hindered and a true reflection of the information held by the Department is not accessible and could incur penalties.

If emails have not be printed and filed it will be necessary for relevant officers to search their email accounts. Any emails relevant to the applicant's request will need to be provided to the Information Officer.

## What about loose papers and diary notes?

Loose papers and diary notes of individual officers will need to be provided to the Information Officer if they are relevant to the applicant's request. Even if loose papers and diary entries are working notes, or for personal reference only, they are still subject to the provisions of the *Information Act*<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> TRIM is the acronym for the Tower Records and Information Management recordkeeping system.

SAMS is the acronym for the School Administration Management System.

<sup>2</sup> See *Information Act* Section 4 definition of a "record" and Section 5(7)(b) definition of a "public sector organisation".





## What about duplicates?

Unless the Information Officer has indicated otherwise, where duplicate copies of information have been found they should be provided in response to a search request. Where a particular document has been copied and additional notes added (for example: handwritten notes) that document is no longer a duplicate, it is a unique record.

## What if I can't find anything?

If, after all possible areas have been searched, no information relevant to the applicant's request has been located, the *Summary of Search Results* and *Search Declaration* should still be completed.

Details of where and why searches were conducted should be completed, and possible reasons why no information was found should be provided. Where possible, officers conducting searches should indicate other areas of the organisation (or in some cases, other areas of the NT Government) that may hold relevant information. In some cases it may be necessary to provide the names of officers (including those who work in other areas or who are no longer employed by the Department) who may recall the records or types of records that may have been created in relation to the information the applicant is requesting. If necessary the Information Officer will contact these individuals.

## Can the applicant be asked to provide additional information to assist with the search?

Yes, the *Information Act* allows for the Department to request additional details from the applicant.<sup>3</sup> The Information Officer should be contacted if additional details are required to allow for a sufficient search to be conducted.

**Example:** An applicant has requested information relating to “any complaints” made against them.

Often records of complaints or grievances are titled by the name of the complainant or the aggrieved. It may not be possible to conduct a thorough search for the information the applicant has requested without additional information such as relevant names, dates, locations or references to particular matters.

## Responding to a search request

Once a complete search has been conducted of your work area it is important that the officer who undertook the search complete a *Summary of Search Results* and a *Search Declaration*. Both of these documents will accompany the request to conduct a search sent by the Information Officer. Before completing these documents, the officer who conducted the search must be absolutely sure that a thorough and proper search has been done and that all information stored and owned by the work unit, which is relevant to the request, has been found.

Make sure the information located is carefully examined before it is forwarded to the Information Officer. Often, examination of the records located will point to the existence of other documents or indicate other areas that should be searched.

**Example:** One letter may refer to a previous letter that has not been located. Or a memorandum may refer to a meeting that took place between two business units on a particular date. In that case it may be necessary to –

- Conduct further searches to find any records of the meeting with the business unit; and
- Contact the Information Officer and advise that the other business unit may have relevant records. The Information Officer can then ensure that a search request is sent to the relevant work area.

<sup>3</sup> See *Information Act* Section 19(6).





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## Signing the declaration

Before signing the *Search Declaration* the *Summary of Search Results* should be completed. The search declaration should not be signed unless the officer signing is absolutely sure that a comprehensive search has been conducted and that all relevant information has been found.

## Completing the *Summary of Search Results*

When completing the *Summary of Search Results* the officer conducting the search should provide details of all areas searched and, where applicable, how those areas were searched. The officer should also provide details of the results of each type of search and the time taken to conduct the search.

**Example:** The applicant, John Smith, has requested “all complaints” made against him by Jane Doe.

Areas Searched/Actions Taken	Results	Total Time Taken
TRIM Database: Key word search title and notes “John Smith”	1 file 6 documents	5 mins
Key word search title and notes “John Smith” and “Jane Doe”	Nil	1 min
Director’s Office: Desk Drawers	Nil	10 mins
Filing Cabinet	12 loose papers	15 mins
Diary	2 pages of notes	30 mins
Director’s Email and Lotus Notes Calendar: Key word search email subject/body “John Smith”	5 emails	2 mins
Key word search email subject/body “Jane Doe”	1 email and 2 meeting invitations	2 mins

**Note:** This is an example only and does not necessarily represent a complete search.

The *Summary of Search Results* should also indicate if relevant information was located, what information is being forwarded to the Information Officer and how. If no information is found, details of other areas that may hold information or reasons why the area does not hold relevant information should be provided.

### Example:

Relevant Information found? **Yes**

Details	Date	Method
1 TRIM File 2000/000111 (150 folios)	10/10/2001	Internal mail
12 Loose papers from the director’s office	10/10/2001	Internal mail
6 emails and 2 meeting invitations from director’s email account.	08/10/2001	Hand delivered to Information Officer
Please note that the memo referred to in folio 25 of file 2000/000111 was not found and may be located with the Ministerial Liaison Unit.		
Candy Cane was the officer who worked on this matter and may know of addition information that was kept. Candy now works with the Department of Health.		





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## Forwarding the information

Where possible original information should be forwarded to the Information Officer. If this is not possible the Information Officer should be contacted for advice. Information should be forwarded in a timely manner, in secure packaging and should be clearly addressed to the Information Officer. Information being forwarded from locations outside of Darwin may need to be sent via express post or overnight courier bag. Information should be clearly and appropriately labelled, for example 'Loose papers from the director's office.'

If you are unsure of the most appropriate way to forward the information, contact the Information Officer or the Records Management Unit for advice.

## What happens next?

Once the Information Officer receives all the relevant information held by the Department in relation to an application the information is assessed, with a view to disclosure, using the provisions of the *Information Act*, this may include consultation with third parties. Sometimes the Information Officer will contact relevant work areas to ask advice about the significance and sensitivity of particular pieces of information or to request additional search details.

Once the information has been assessed the Information Officer makes a recommendation regarding the disclosure of the information to the applicant. Decisions regarding access to information under the provisions of the *Information Act* are signed off by the General Manager, Business Planning and Information Division.

Once the request has been finalised all information is returned to the relevant work areas. Usually files will have a file note added that details which parts of the record were disclosed to the applicant.

## Further Information

For further information contact the Information Officer:

Freedom of Information and Privacy Unit  
Department of Employment, Education and Training  
14th Floor, Mitchell Centre  
55-59 Mitchell St  
Darwin

GPO Box 4821  
Darwin  
NT 0801

Phone: 8999 5796  
Fax: 8999 5788  
Email: [deetfoi.deet@nt.gov.au](mailto:deetfoi.deet@nt.gov.au)

## Acknowledgement

This guide is substantially based on the document, *Locating & Collating Records* published by the Office of the Information Commissioner of the Northern Territory and available from their website:

<http://www.infocomm.nt.gov.au/>

