

Personal Record Keeping – Pile or File?

Author: Lynda Leigh

After a major renovation, I was busy setting up my new own home office, trying to sort, cull and file and I started to wonder if records managers were like all other “tradies” as diligent at home as we are at work. The standard cliché states that mechanics drive crappy cars, plumbers have blocked sinks, GPs always have sick kids and electricians have faulty wiring.

I wonder if the every-day person realised they were actually record keeping when they enjoyed scrapbooking; when they compiled the family history; volunteered for the school’s Parent’s and Citizens Association (the P&C), Scout Leaders or belonged to Rotary or Lions; when they collect recipes or craft from magazines; had a home library of book or CD/LP collection; or even created a ‘memory box’ of ‘stuff’ that they can’t bear to throw away...

I seem to be immersed in record keeping – I do it all day at work and then at home I manage my own household bill paying, shopping and menu planning tasks. And just for fun, I was the Secretary for the body corporate executive committee, I’ve been the volunteered Archivist for the local Primary school and on numerous school boards, P&Cs. But I confess, I guess I’m as bad as anyone else when it is time to complete my tax return – I must sort through the piles seeking information rather than the files.

When my Mum in law passed away in 2002 and my Dad in-law didn’t want *anyone* to help him ‘clean up’ her belongings or with running *his* house, however something was amiss when my (then) husband received a panicky phone call from his widowed Dad asking “if you were your mother, where would you keep my birth certificate?” Dad needed it for his passport application for his impending UK trip. Incredibly my (then) husband did know where to find the certificate “in the top cabinet of the buffet in the lounge room”.

Dad died a year after taking that trip - I then unfortunately discovered the extreme importance of records. Suddenly I needed his personal address/phone book to inform friends and family of his death and his funeral arrangements. I needed his parents’ names and their dates of birth as well as all their children’s names and ages (ie, Dad’s siblings), both alive and dead to complete the form require for his death certificate.

Soon afterwards I gained another task - I became the unofficial ‘administrator’ for my late parent’s in law estate. Once I had birth and death certificates of both in hand I could deal with the official paperwork of closing bank accounts, cancellations of health insurance policies, drivers licence etc for both of them. Straight forward and necessary.

Sorting through their personal paperwork was a different experience.

Whilst Dad paid the bills, I found bills, receipts shoved in various drawers, in the house, in the garage and the glove box of his car. He never banked cheques made out to him either. It was a nightmare made worst by the fact that Mum kept ALL her records. I discovered that Mum and Dad rented the family house from the ACT Government in 1970 for \$10.73 per week; I found the receipt for the purchase for Bobby, their now long dead cockatoo; I even found the fabric protection guarantee of Mum's hot pink lounge suite bought in the mid-80s. Mind you, we sold it for \$200 as it was in such good nick and didn't need the guarantee!

Then husband's older brother realised that Dad removed the manufacture's compliance plate from his Ford GT sedan to thwart thieves. He had no idea where the plate was and his beloved GT was almost worthless without it. Not only does the plate list the manufacturing date and the model number, it also lists the VIN and chassis numbers need for vehicle registration too. Yes, I found the plate to his relief.

But where was the approval for the home extension Mum and Dad completed years ago? We needed it for the 'Certificate of Occupancy' to sell their house. The only plan found was for the bathroom and it was on shiny fax paper and that was faded and unreadable. ACT Planning and Land Authority had an incomplete set of plans for the extension and discovered that the only application lodged and finalised was for the fire place!

I found bank books and statements of forgotten accounts – same with shares. All had current value. A life insurance policy paper trail led me from company to company, decade after decade. The paper trail stopped in 2002 and I rang the company involved and the policy was still current – unfortunately it was on the lives of my brothers-in-laws not their parents.

To be fair, I've made some mistakes too with my personal records. Did you notice the fine print on your Medicare receipts? It states not to store the receipt with plastic as fading will occur. How about those 'magnetic' sticky photo albums popular in the 70s have faded – even destroyed – the photos they held? Sadly, my photos are in boxes, in no particular order and the photo album I started for my son when he was born contains exactly six photos and he's now 17 years old!

Maybe if I got paid for recording keeping at home, I would be much more efficient?