Business Records Retention Guide

How Long Should You Keep Business Documents?

1 Tax Records

Document Type	Retention Period	Notes
Tax Returns (Federal, State, Local)	Permanent	Keep copies forever for historical purposes.
Supporting Documents for Tax Returns	7 years	IRS typically audits within 3 years; 6 years if underreporting >25%.
1099s, W-2s, 940s, 941s, state payroll tax returns	7 years	Same as supporting documents.
Payroll Records	7 years	Includes timesheets, tax deposits, earnings records.

2 Business Formation & Corporate Records

Document Type	Retention Period	Notes
Articles of Incorporation/Organization	Permanent	Foundational legal document.
Operating Agreements, Bylaws, Partnership Agreements	Permanent	Foundational governance.
Meeting Minutes	Permanent	For corporate governance & legal protection.
Business Licenses & Permits	Permanent or as long as active	Renew as required, keep expired copies for at least 7 years.

3 Financial Records

Document Type	Retention Period	Notes
General Ledgers	Permanent	Core financial record of the business.
Financial Statements (Annual)	Permanent	Useful for business history and legal purposes.
Bank Statements	7 years	Electronic or paper copies.
Cancelled Checks (business-related)	7 years	Proof of payments.
Credit Card Statements	7 years	Particularly those used for tax deductions.
Accounts Payable/Receivable Ledgers	7 years	Useful for collections and audit trail.

4️⃣ Contracts & Legal Documents

Document Type	Retention Period	Notes
Contracts, Leases, Agreements	7 years after expiration	For legal protection and reference.
Intellectual Property Records	Permanent	Protects valuable assets.
Legal Correspondence	Permanent or 7 years after resolution	Depending on subject matter.

5️⃣ Employee & HR Records

Document Type	Retention Period	Notes
Employee Personnel Files	7 years after termination	In case of legal claims.
Form I-9	3 years after hire or 1 year after termination	Whichever is later.
Retirement & Pension Records	Permanent	Important for employee benefits.
Health & Safety Records (OSHA)	5 years	Varies by industry & type of record.

6️⃣ Property & Equipment Records

Document Type	Retention Period	Notes
Fixed Asset Purchases	7 years after disposal	For depreciation and tax purposes.
Vehicle Titles & Records	As long as owned + 7 years after sale	Proof of ownership and sale.
Equipment Warranties & Service Contracts	As long as active + 7 years	For warranty claims and repairs.

7️⃣ Digital Records / Emails

Document Type	Retention Period	Notes
Business-critical emails	Same as paper equivalent (typically 7 years)	Backup and archive carefully.
Routine operational emails	1–2 years	Unless required for legal or business purposes.

⚠️ Special Notes:

If litigation is pending or reasonably anticipated, suspend routine destruction of records that could be relevant.

In heavily regulated industries (banking, healthcare, nonprofits), check for sector-specific requirements—some documents must be retained longer.