Effective HR document and file management for supervisors

"Out with the old, in with the new!" chant managers intent on a serious spring cleaning. In their quest for a clean slate, they sometimes dispose of documents they shouldn't—documents they should be submitting to HR so they can be added to an employee's official personnel file, which may substantiate a need for family and medical leave, etc.

Here are pointers to help bosses decide which documents to retain and which to pitch. Note that this advice applies to both paper and electronic records.

To keep or not to keep

Generally speaking, managers are not responsible for maintaining personnel files, but most of the documents that go into personnel files originate with managers. They should check with HR before pitching any documents related to:

- Hiring, promotions, demotions and terminations

- Disciplinary matters: infractions and the resulting consequences

- Employee performance

- Work hours, leave requests

- Accommodation requests

- Selection for training opportunities

- Safety and health.

When it's unclear what to do with a document, Barbara Hemphill, consultant and best-selling author of the *Taming the Paper Tiger* book series, encourages asking:

- Does this require action?

- Can I identify a specific use?

- Is it difficult to obtain again?

- Is it recent enough to be useful?

- Are there legal implications?

If the answer to each question is "no," ask: What's the worst that could happen if I tossed this? If you can live with your answer, toss or recycle it. Otherwise, retain it.

Managing desk files

Desk files are personal files that managers keep on their employees. While they aren't official personnel files, they contain information that will eventually make it into those files.

Examples of desk files: performance-related notes they want to include in a review, lists of dates when employees were absent or late for work, suggestions about training and development courses that might be appropriate, etc.

Desk files should be temporary. To ensure that they are, train supervisors to follow these three steps:

- Date them to make sure the information is added to official documents in a timely manner.

- Incorporate them into formal performance reviews, formal disciplinary warnings, etc.

- Dispose of them after including the information in a formal document.

Note: Supervisors don't need to retain every email they have ever written or read. However, they should manage their e-files just as they do other files.