
Background

Much of state government's business is conducted using computers which work with and store private or disclosure restricted information.

The Montana Constitution affirms Montana citizens' right of privacy and the state's duty to protect this privacy. Implementing this right through statute and policy, the state is required to protect individual privacy and the privacy of the information contained within the computer systems by restricting information disclosure.

Government information managers have recognized the risk of information disclosure and require all information be removed before a state agency disposes of computers. The resulting state computer disposal policy requires, "All agency data must be removed from the computer in such a manner that it cannot be recovered" when the disposal computer leaves an agency.

Audit Objective

To test the effectiveness of the computer disposal policy, we acquired computer hard drives from computers no longer used for state business, and determined whether all data and software were removed in accordance with state policy.

Scope and Methodology

There were 51 state agencies disposing in excess of 2,300 computers during calendar year 2004. We acquired 18 computer hard drives from these computers, originating from eight different state agencies. We examined each hard drive for recoverable information. If no information was present, we concluded the agency had met state policy and properly removed information. If any information was recovered, we concluded the agency had not met state policy requirements.

- ▶ We were able to recover information on 12 of the 18 hard drives we acquired.
- ▶ Eight of the 18 hard drives held information restricted from public disclosure by Montana's constitution, legal statutes, administrative rules or Federal requirements.

Summarization

Removing all information from computers no longer needed for state business is an effective method enabling the state to meet its information privacy responsibilities. The following report includes one recommendation to address the state's lack of a single clear policy instructing departments on information removal, and the communication of responsibility for data removal.