"If it isn't in writing, it didn't happen." It's an old saying that everyone in your organization – private-sector or public – should be aware of. More important, everyone should know how to put the concept – documentation – into practice. Does that mean writing careful notes about any information conveyed orally? No. It means a lot more than that and, given documentation's importance, you need to know what "a lot more" entails.

Before we get into the nuts and bolts, let's answer "Why?" Typically, the only time you open a project file after close-out is when a problem arises. That problem often takes the form of a claim and, in most instances, the claim is made two or more years after you've completed services on a project, when the people involved have forgotten most of the details.

More frequently than you might imagine, a note of some sort kept in a file is enough to save the day, by confirming a vague memory and thereby eliciting a jubilant, "See, I did do it!" Unfortunately, such a note can in some cases have the exact opposite effect, by putting into the hands of opposition counsel something they can blow out of proportion, to induce a hefty settlement.

One of the most significant elements of ASFE's Fundamentals of Professional Practice (FOPP) program is the research assignment enrollees must complete during their six months of remote instruction. Documentation is one of the research topics they can select. The assignment requires them to evaluate their organization's documentation program and recommend improvements. Improvements are *always* needed, because – despite their importance– documentation programs seldom are subject to the oversight they merit.

One of the basic elements of a good program is written guidance that tells people what to commit to writing. Obviously, not everything needs to be written: "Mr. Smith called and inquired if we were 'working hard or hardly working.'" Smith's pleasantry is not important, but it may be important to know that he called and, assuming it is, when he called, why he called, whom he called for, and so on. In fact, applying the questions who, when, where, what, how, and why helps people ask the right questions. But they need to know whether to record the information or not. Developing a list of typical kinds of information that needs documenting – e.g., change orders – will be helpful. It would also be helpful for people to know when they should send a brief memo to others involved in the conversation, to help ensure "you said it right and I heard it right." This can easily be done via e-mail: "Hi, Bill. I append a note to file about your call at 1415 today. I want to make sure I heard you correctly before we proceed." By taking that approach, you reduce the risk of misunderstanding and demonstrate your professional approach.

Should those taking notes apply a certain format? That's up to the organization, of course, but usually the answer is "Yes," if only because doing so permits the organization to more easily develop and conduct workshops, seminars, or other education/training media, and to evaluate employees' subsequent performance.

So now, let's assume that people know what and how to document. Do they know who else should see the documentation before they put it into a file? And do they know which file it should go to? Into a project file? In that case, every piece of documentation probably should have a file number on it (something to be considered with respect to format).

The next step of the process relates to documentation and file review. During the course of the project, or possibly at close-out, people who know what they are doing need to review the file. Is everything in it that should be? If not, it's likely that any number of other pieces of documentation are missing, and some rapid fact-finding probably is in order. If so, then the file probably contains more than is necessary, making it appropriate to discard what's not needed or wanted. Those assigned this important file-review task need the ability to discriminate, of course, because keeping too much can be just as bad as keeping too little. The ability to discriminate is gained only through instruction and supervised experience. Guidelines are essential, too, especially as they relate to how long various types of documentation should be kept. In some firms, project files are reviewed five years after close-out, then five years after that, with more material being discarded each time. Each firm should develop its own guidelines, of course, preferably with the advice of an attorney who understands risk management, as well as any applicable laws or regulations.

So there you have it: a great program, but only on paper. Which is why the FOPP assignment requires participants to examine five closed project files to assess the degree to which their organization's documentation policies are being followed. Typically, some project managers do a good job and some do not. As a result, the FOPP participants frequently recommend that the organization develop a method to ensure that every new hire receives the proper instruction, and that the program is subject to effective monitoring. "Effective" in this case means monitoring that is performed on a regular basis, with written reports being forwarded to appropriate personnel; people who understand that "little things" can be extremely important, and that, as documentation itself, if it isn't in writing, it didn't happen.