

NCOA^{Link®} -- Frequently asked Questions (FAQs)

NCOA^{Link®} is a popular method of meeting the Move Update requirement. In the simplest terms, this is a process that compares the customer's data to the National Change of Address database in order to identify individuals or companies who may have moved in order to update their file. Here are some of the most frequently asked questions about this process.

Q: What is the National Change of Address database?

A: When individuals, families or companies move, they typically file a Change of Address with the USPS so their mail can be forwarded to them at their new address. This information is compiled into a database that is maintained by the USPS.

Q: How does this information get distributed to companies who do the processing? If I filed a Change of Address form myself, is my information protected?

A: Privacy is a major concern to both consumers who file a Change of Address and to the USPS. NCOA processing is performed exclusively by licensees. In order to become licensed to perform this processing, a vendor must meet multiple criteria including security criteria and must go through a licensing process to ensure that they will handle the data in accordance with USPS requirements. Additionally, the actual database that is distributed is encrypted such that the individual licensees are unable to directly access the information. The vendors must use software to perform the process and the software performs the lookups. Licensees are required to secure both the product and the server that does the processing.

Q: Why are there 18-month and 48-month databases? Which one meets the Move Update standard?

A: Licensees who perform NCOA processing for others can be licensed as either a Limited Service Provider (LSP) or a Full Service Provider (FSP). Most licensees are LSP's which is a significantly less expensive license and the associated processing fees typically are less for the mailers who send their files to them. LSP's use an 18-month database for NCOA processing which means the Change of Address data they are using goes back 18 months. The 18-month database meets the Move Update standard. If a database has not been updated for a while, it may be beneficial to use the 48-month database which goes back 4 years. This process is performed by FSP licensees. Typically, it will be a little more expensive to process your data using this file. Most LSP licensees will act as brokers on your behalf if you prefer to have your file processed using the 48-month database. Once you've performed this update, you may wish to maintain it more frequently using the 18-month database.

Q: Why does my lettershop keep asking me to sign a Processing Acknowledgement Form (PAF)?

A: The USPS requires licensees to have a signed copy of the PAF for anything that they process using the NCOA database. That PAF has to be signed by the list owner – the lettershop is not allowed to sign as the list owner. PAF forms are valid for one year from the date the list owner signed the form. That means if you signed a form on 09/30/2008 it will be valid through 09/29/2009. Keep in mind that you will also have to sign a separate PAF form for 18-month processing and 48-month processing. If your lettershop outsources NCOA processing to more than one licensee, you may also be asked to sign a new PAF for each licensee that they use.

Q: I'm preparing a mailing and I asked my printer to rent a list for me, print my mail and prepare the mailing. I don't own the list. So why do I need to sign the PAF form?

A: There are actually two issues here. First, when renting mailing lists it's always a good idea to only rent lists from vendors who are move updating those lists themselves. Otherwise, how can you be sure that the list is high quality and that you won't have a lot of undeliverable returns as a result of using that list? The other issue, though, is if you do need to NCOA a rented list who technically "owns" the list in this scenario. The answer lies in identifying who ultimately is benefiting the most from the use of that list. Presumably it's the owner of the mail – which would be you, the customer. If someone responds to that mailing, you will benefit. Not the lettershop. Therefore, in this scenario, you would still need to sign the PAF form as the list owner.

Q: I recently did a mailing where my vendor did the NCOA processing and I still got mail returned to me. Doesn't NCOA take care of that? Why am I still getting returns?

A: There is no form of Move Update that will completely eliminate your return mail. No matter what you do, you may always get some returns. NCOA will substantially reduce your return mail if you are using the new addresses, though. There are a number of reasons why you will still see some returns. Here are some of those reasons:

- NCOA^{Link®} requires an exact matching process. This is actually for the consumer's protection of privacy. If a customer file doesn't have the same original name and address as it appears in the USPS database, then the USPS will not provide the new address information. That being said, there is some flexibility to allow for nicknames and similar sounding but not spelled exactly the same matches. The record may be flagged as a possible move but a new address can't be provided if a match can't be confirmed. So, it's possible that the record in your database may have been a non-exact match in this scenario but could not be move updated. You can ask your vendor to let you know about these records after they perform NCOA processing so you can make the final decision as to whether or not to mail these.
- Not everyone files a Change of Address. In fact, estimates have ranged from 15% to 20% of the population moves without filing a Change of Address with the Post Office. That means an NCOA process will not catch those moves – they will probably get returned to you identified as having moved without leaving a forwarding address.
- Did you instruct your vendor not to mail to the new address but to still mail to the old address? Depending on the class of mail, how long ago the person moved and any ancillary endorsement you may have used, it's possible the mail would not be forwarded to your customer but would be returned to you instead.
- It's possible that the person may have moved but the new address they provided was not a good address or that they moved again after your file was processed. These instances are infrequent but they do occur.
- If you don't update your database regularly – or haven't for a few years – it's possible the individual moved more than 4 years ago which means their move falls outside of the NCOA process.
- It's possible that they didn't move at all. Maybe this was a LACS update (Locatable Address Conversion System) where a rural address got converted to an urban-style address. Those updates only stay in the system for 18 months. After that, the old address becomes a DPV failure and it's likely undeliverable and will get returned to you. You'll need to investigate alternatives such as Address Element Correction or another type of address updating to try to find that customer. Or, you may need to pull it from your file.

- It's also possible something else is wrong with the address itself that makes it undeliverable. Maybe the street or the house/building number doesn't exist or maybe it's missing a directional. Again, you may need to investigate alternatives such as Address Element Correction or another type of address updating to try to find that customer. Or, you may need to pull it from your file.

Q: Will NCOA processing update my business contact information?

A: No. Here's how business matching works: If an entire business moves, then that business files a Change of Address. When NCOA processing is performed on your file and a business is found, only the business name and address is matched to the Change of Address record. The contact name of an individual is not included in that match. Therefore, if John Jones moves from ABC Company to XYZ Company and you are mailing to his old employer (ABC Company) no match would be identified and you'd still end up mailing to him at ABC Company. The only way to get John Jones' new business address in this example would be to get it from him directly. An individual is not permitted to file a Change of Address if they change employers. However, if ABC Company filed the Change of Address and you are mailing to John Jones at ABC Company, then your file would be updated if it matched the Change of Address record.

Q: Will NCOA^{Link®} update any of my DPV failures?

A: No. The NCOA process performed by your vendor will include CASS/DPV processing. This step occurs before the list is processed by NCOA^{Link®}. Any records that are in your file that are unable to be ZIP+4 encoded or are identified as a DPV failure will not be processed by NCOA^{Link®}. That's because the encryption technology that NCOA^{Link®} relies upon requires a ZIP+4 to "unlock" the encrypted record in the NCOA database. If the ZIP+4 isn't present then it's impossible to update the address.

Q: Do I have to use the new address provided by NCOA^{Link®}?

A: No. You can mail to any address you choose. However, your choice may require you to pay more postage. The USPS plans to step up their enforcement efforts and has many tools in place to assess whether or not you are updating your file. If the USPS determines that you have submitted a mailing at discounted rates but are not move updating your file, they may come back to you and require you to pay additional postage for your entire mailing. As an option, you could choose to mail to the existing addresses you have but submit only those records that NCOA processing did not identify as having moved at discounted rates since those would have gone through an NCOA process and would be within compliance. Addresses identified as having moved that you choose to still mail at the old address should be mailed at single-piece rates to remain in compliance.

Q: Is there anything I can do to improve my file processing with NCOA^{Link®}?

A: Yes, there is. NCOA^{Link®} requires that your data be clearly separated into a primary address line, a secondary address line, a city/state/ZIP+4 line, a company name (if applicable) and an individual name field. If your data is formatted in a label format (or "line data") rather than discrete-fielded data it is much harder to map your data for the NCOA process. See the next page for examples of what we mean.

Here's the first example:

Line1:	Edward Example
Line2:	ABC Company
Line3:	Suite 123
Line4:	900 Main Street
Line5:	Hometown, US 12345-6789

Line1:	Carol Consumer
Line2:	456 Pleasant Lane
Line3:	Hometown, US 12345-1234
Line4:	
Line5:	

In the example the first record looks fine. However, in the second record, there is not a company name in Line2. If Line2 were identified as "Company Name" for NCOA, then the software would not see the address and this record would not get processed correctly by NCOA.

Here's a better way to identify your fields:

Name:	Edward Example
Company:	ABC Company
Street1:	Suite 123
Street2:	900 Main Street
C/S/Z:	Hometown, US 12345-6789

Name:	Carol Consumer
Company:	
Street1:	456 Pleasant Lane
Street2:	
C/S/Z:	Hometown, US 12345-1234

In this example, the name is always in the same field in your data. If a company name is present, that information is always in the same field. Addresses are always in the same field, etc. Data formatted like this has a much better success rate in NCOA processing.

Q: Will NCOA^{Link®} process my foreign records?

A: No. In fact, foreign records must not be submitted for NCOA processing. This brings up another great point, though. If you have foreign data it's important that you have a "country" field and then you put the country name in that field. That allows the foreign data to be identified and pulled out prior to NCOA processing. Without that country field there's a high likelihood that the software will not recognize that the address is foreign and will identify it as a DPV failure.