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Crunch time: the revised ISO 15489 and the future of recordkeeping

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ABSTRACT

The revised International Standard ISO 15489:2016 Part 1: Principles and Concepts establishes a framework and a set of techniques with which today's recordkeeping professionals can implement appropriate and digital-ready strategies for recordkeeping. Moving away from conventions that remained tied to the paper world, the Standard establishes a set of principles to guide any approach, regardless of technologies and formats, and explains the fundamentally important work of appraisal. It also describes the essential elements of controls for records, to assist with access, retention and more. In this reflection, the author describes the genesis of the revised standard and argues that, unless recordkeeping professionals embrace the contingent and fluid nature of their work, and adhere to principles such as those described in the Standard, they will not produce solutions to accountability, access and memory challenges that meet the needs of the connected world.

In Berlin in May 2012, a new International Organization for Standardization (ISO) Working Group was convened and given the task of reviewing and revising the International Standard ISO 15489 on records management. It had been 12 years since the issue of the first edition. In that time, a few attempts to do this revision had been mounted, only to collapse, perhaps under the weight of expectations. Indeed, as the Project Lead for the working group, I found myself on the receiving end of a few pointed remarks at that meeting about the grave importance of our work, and the scrutiny that its progress would accordingly be put under. No doubt, the stakes were high. This was the central standard in a suite of products on recordkeeping that had grown up in its wake since the issue of ISO 15489-1:2001 and ISO 15489-2:2002. It had been formally adopted by over 50 nations and translated into 15 languages. In my own career, ISO 15489 and its Australian parent, AS 4390, had provided the foundation for almost everything I did as a recordkeeping adviser, trainer and policy-maker. The 'DIRKS' methodology, loved, loathed and wildly misunderstood, remained for me and many others a cornerstone of our practice.

Our Working Group's Convenor, Hans Hofman, and I, along with the other members of the Editorial Group,[1] also shared a sense that this review presented both a significant

opportunity for our profession, and something of a lifeline in the face of an uncertain future. Indeed in this journal in 2014, my Recordkeeping Roundtable colleagues and I made the case that our professional methods are not coping with the scale and complexity of contemporary recordkeeping challenges and that we are in danger of losing sight of what distinguishes our work from that of other kindred professionals.[2] We understood that our expertise is essential in a connected and information-abundant world, with appraisal and access at the heart of our contribution. However, this understanding and sense of urgency around the need for reform was not necessarily shared by all our colleagues in 2012, who argued for a 'low impact' revision that would not cause too many ripples in their jurisdictions – or in those jurisdictions that were only then seriously coming to grips with the principles encapsulated in ISO 15489:2011.

The Editorial Group was, in 2012, also cognisant of the need to develop something that would last. We thought that if the previous time lapse between editions was anything to go by, this new version could potentially remain in place up to the year 2030. This was a sobering thought, given the exponential rate of technological innovation that we are currently experiencing. In a 2015 report, the World Economic Forum described six 'mega trends' which have, since that time, only become more apparent in the day-to-day lives of people living in advanced economies.[3] People and things are connected to the Internet and to each other all the time. Ubiquitous computing power and nearly unlimited storage capacity are available to everyone. Machine learning and artificial intelligence are utilising massive volumes of data to train themselves to take over work and decision-making formerly executed by people and organisations. Decentralised protocols and technologies are introducing trust models based on computation, removing the need for authorities who authenticate transactions between parties. Complex tools and robots, once only available to high-tech industries and governments, are available to people in their homes.

Where does recordkeeping fit into this picture? What form will the recordkeeping professional of the future take? We attempted, in 2012, to commence our review by considering questions such as these. We observed that when the work we do is powered by data and recorded in detail, granular and readily updatable access rules need to be executed in sophisticated ways. We saw that information and records were no longer necessarily constrained by organisational, geographic or physical limits – that new models for business were extending responsibilities for records beyond traditional organisational and jurisdictional boundaries. There were increased expectations of transparency in decision-making from business and government by the general public, customers, users of services, records' subjects and others with an interest in how records are created, captured and managed. Expectations for information security and privacy were also becoming increasingly significant to stakeholders – both within and outside of organisational boundaries.

Bearing such observations in mind, we agreed that in developing the Standard, we needed to build a forward-looking document, being careful not to fall into the many traps of paper-based thinking. Reconfirming our understandings of records as enablers of business, not as 'things', was key at this point. Often throughout the development process, we stopped to remind ourselves to think of records as *data*, whether structured to non-structured, along with their contextualising *metadata*, which also serves as a management tool over time. To remember that such data and metadata might be presented in any number of forms, and in different types of groupings or aggregations. In this world, the analytical skills of understanding context and deciding how we want to create records in the first place, or how

we make decisions about their management at critical points such as systems migrations, are vital. Several of us in the Editorial Group also argued strongly for a records continuum-inspired standard, in which the keeping of records is a continuous activity for a variety of reasons and with a variety of users than should be considered outside of constraints of time, place and custody.

After a long and occasionally painful development process, by 2016, we had arrived at a revised version of the Standard which was endorsed by our colleagues and published by ISO. The Standard that was launched in Wellington, New Zealand in May of that year – ISO 15489:2016 *Records management – Concepts and principles* – moves away from the remaining conventions and practices that came with paper practicalities and offers a digital-ready set of principles underpinning recordkeeping, as well as descriptions of the key techniques, tools and processes for the creation, capture and management of records, in all forms. It describes the core work that supports the creation and management of records to meet compliance, business and societal requirements, and explains how to deal effectively and accountably with changes to these, over time. ISO 15489-1:2016 also defines the key records management control tools and processes that are needed, with an emphasis on flexible implementation options for diverse business environments. Metadata for records and its criticality is stressed, and approaches to its design and management in line with existing advice in ISO 23081 are embedded throughout the document,[4] in support of all aspects of making and managing records.

The revised Standard places a strong emphasis on appraisal as the most important tool to achieve appropriate and effective recordkeeping. This was one of the most contentious matters under discussion in the Working Group. In the revised ISO 15489:2016, appraisal is used in the Australasian sense, taking on a wider scope than is familiar to some jurisdictions. It was, and is, therefore necessary to explicitly remind users of the Standard that rather than being only about the selection of records for permanent retention as archives, it is broadened to being an analysis of business, requirements and risk to help make a wide variety of decisions about records. As we know in Australia, done regularly, the data that this type of appraisal gathers is essential to a properly functioning program for making and managing records – in any environment. This kind of strategic, proactive approach is particularly valuable for prioritising work on the design of systems and services where there are recordkeeping needs, and to dealing with the volume and complexity of digital records. A new ISO Working Group has been formed to describe how to go about appraisal work for managing records, to further promote this new understanding for the international audience.

We intentionally avoided certain things in the revised Standard, in order to best achieve some of the goals we set for ourselves at the start. By explaining the role of appraisal as essential to recordkeeping decisions of all sorts, we effectively cover the early stages of the 'DIRKS' methodology, which was presented in the 1990s Australian Standard AS4390 (a precursor to ISO 15489:2001). We decided that, rather than additionally specifying a systems design and implementation methodology in the new version, we would leave this to local or industry preferences, and would look at opportunities for other products in the ISO suite of records products to offer extra advice.[5] The Standard does not specify an audience. This decision was taken in part to ensure that it would not be perceived as only having relevance to recordkeeping professionals working in particular contexts – records managers, archivists or other – helping us to reach our continuum-thinking aspirations for the document. The

Standard is not a compliance tool, and contains no auditable requirements. Rather, our preference was to develop a normative statement of what the work of keeping records *is*, and leave tests of quality or compliance to local or industry standards-setting bodies. This was, we felt, the most appropriate approach for work which we know is highly contingent, and also to ensure that opportunities for taking innovative approaches were not constrained.

Since its release in 2016, I have observed that reaction to the Standard has been an interesting mix of curiosity, positivity and, occasionally, confusion. In some countries, the transition to digital business is still in early stages, and in these cases, reassurance must be given that while the new Standard is digital in mindset, it is still entirely applicable in paper-based or hybrid environments. In other countries, our use of the term 'appraisal' requires additional explanation and selling of the benefits of the kind of work we describe. As I stress in presentations that I have delivered on the new Standard, the unfamiliarity of some of the ideas we present, and concerns about leaving behind some of our old methods, can be challenging. However, for recordkeepers as a profession, it is crunch time. Without embracing innovation and focusing on the special contributions that we make to accountable, efficient business, now and in the long term, we will simply slide into irrelevance. Recordkeeping professionals have a unique and incredibly valuable set of understandings, but our message has often become lost amidst overly prescriptive or unhelpful, checklist-obsessed attempts to present them. What we need is to make more open-minded approaches to the people we need to work with (technologists in particular) to build innovative solutions to recordkeeping problems, and to offer value to our employers and communities through our work of understanding changing recordkeeping needs. The revised International Standard ISO 15489:2016 *Information and documentation – Records management – Concepts and principles* has been developed to help us to do these things.

Endnotes

1. In ISO working structures, a Working Group and then smaller Editorial Group is created by a vote of the responsible Steering Committee (in our case, ISO/TC46/SC11 Archives/records management). In the case of SC11's Working Group 13, the Editorial Group consisted of members from Australia, the Netherlands, France, Sweden, United States, Canada and Estonia, and numbered between seven and nine members over its four-year lifespan.
2. Kate Cumming, Cassie Findlay, Anne Picot and Barbara Reed, 'Reinventing Archival Methods: Editorial', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2014. Also available as a preprint at <*https://rkroundtable.org/2014/08/01/introduction/*>, accessed 9 August 2017.
3. World Economic Forum, *Deep Shift: Technology Tipping Points and Societal Impact Survey Report*, September 2015. Available at <http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GAC15_Technological_Tipping_Points_report_2015.pdf>, accessed 9 August 2017.
4. See ISO 23081-1:2006 *Information and documentation – Records management processes – Metadata for records – Part 1: Principles.*
5. At the time of writing, the work in the ISO Committee TC46 SC11 on systems design and implementation is taking the form of a revision to the three ISO 16175 *Information and documentation – Principles and functional requirements for records in electronic office environments* Standards.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Cassie Findlay has worked as a government archivist, recordkeeping consultant and adjunct instructor. She is currently the corporate archivist for Gap, Incorporated, at their San Francisco headquarters. She has won a number of industry awards for her writing and for standards development, and has served in committees and leadership roles with the International Council on Archives and the Australian Society of Archivists. Cassie led the establishment of the digital archives program at State Archives and Records NSW, and was the Project Lead for the most recent review of the International Standard on Records Management, ISO 15489. She holds a Master of Information Management (Archives/Records) from the University of New South Wales and a Graduate Diploma in Management. Cassie is a co-founder of the recordkeeping and archives discussion group the Recordkeeping Roundtable.