

From reactive to proactive appraisal

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The records continuum made waves in Britain in the early-2000s and was variously hailed as a long-needed theoretical framework for electronic information management or rejected as an abstract model that has little relevance for recordkeeping processes. What made the model so appealing to some was its move away from a linear view of recordkeeping processes to a multi-dimensional way of seeing and perceiving recordkeeping responsibilities.¹ Archivists and records managers, now no longer seen as at opposite ends of the professional scale, were asked to exert their influence at creation stage to ensure the right records were created and to help develop coherent recordkeeping systems. A proactive approach to the creation, management and, not least, the appraisal of records was stipulated, so that records were fit to not only serve business needs but also wider societal interests in permanence.² Proactive appraisal at creation stage is essential to ensure the continued accessibility, authenticity and integrity of digital material. Practically, that meant that recordkeeping professionals should concentrate on embedding recordkeeping concerns into ICT systems used in modern organisations. The reality is that most of us are still sorting through the paper legacy mountain trying to reactively apply appraisal criteria that would satisfy primarily the organisation's compliance framework and risk appetite and, often only as an afterthought, wider societal expectations. It seems that even though the continuum provided many answers to emerging professional issues, it has never really gained much traction in UK recordkeeping practices and appraisal is mostly still a reactive assessment of semi- or non-current records, often even still in paper format.

The primarily risk-based approach to retention scheduling and reactive appraisal practice runs counter to the UK government's move, as outlined in the 'Government ICT Strategy', to a 'modern, knowledge-based service delivery underpinned by effective information architecture and open standards [that] will support government to build more transparent, trusted and efficient information exchange processes.'³ Open and transparent information exchange has led to a commendable focus on information

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management in the public sector but also introduced functional retention scheduling, standardisation and formalisation of organisational processes which lead to a 'sanitised' record of what an organisation does.⁴ Ministers have quickly learnt to conduct business 'off the record'.⁵ Similarly, staff files no longer contain interesting personal facts about prominent employees but a plethora of standard forms and templates. In most public sector organisations, a risk-based retention schedule now widely determines what information reaches the stages of being appraised for permanent preservation in an archive.⁶

How do wider societal interests fit into such a process-driven approach to managing information? The UK government recently published 'Information Principles for the Public Sector', billed as 'timeless truths to which all public sector organisations can subscribe' and which recommends that information as a valued asset is managed, protected and exploited throughout its lifecycle.⁷ The focus of the principles is on the re-use and exploitation of information not only by public sector organisations but also by the wider public. Making raw data or unstructured information available to the public will not achieve the envisaged exploitation of information assets or the proliferation of knowledge unless it is provided to the public with sufficient context and after careful appraisal has been applied. Interestingly, the implementation recommendations do not suggest involving the public in the selection and appraisal process of the information that is being shared (or not shared, more importantly). It is not a revolutionary view to state that public sector information belongs to the public and that it should have some involvement in its selection and appraisal. Public organisations can make the appraisal process more open and transparent. As Cox put it, 'Archivists should make available draft appraisal reports and seek public input into these decisions ... to enhance society's knowledge of the archival mission.'⁸

In addition, appraisal and, to an extent, access decisions should be considered by public sector organisations as soon as information is created and/or received.⁹ Considerations as to whether particular types of information will potentially be published for public consumption should extend to decisions about the format in which information is created and published and how context (through metadata) is provided and maintained. It is true that most information is created to support an organisation's conduct of business but it should be part of an open and transparent public sector organisation's processes to consider how that information can be published, shared and re-used right from the start. Rather than waiting for information to reach the end of a lifecycle that no longer exists in the digital environment, a continuum view of how to manage information in different contexts of simultaneous use is needed. Proactive appraisal is essential also in the sense that recordkeeping professionals should not get mired in what can be perceived as an endless backlog of 'legacy' files to be appraised. Rather, they should take time and apply expertise to improve the status quo and, looking forward, should actively develop appraisal criteria for current information to avoid re-creating the appraisal backlog for future generations. Records continuum thinking calls for a more active profession that puts information management concerns on the corporate agenda and ensures information management processes are embedded in day-to-day work in organisations. In the digital environment, ensuring valuable, authentic and trustworthy information is created, used, stored, appraised and made accessible for not only internal use and re-use but also for the wider public affords the input of recordkeeping professionals at systems procurement and implementation stage. Appraisal of digital information is dependent on systems setup to support recordkeeping processes and systems built with information management processes in mind.¹⁰ Appraisal should be part of a

continuum of information management processes and not an afterthought in the lifecycle of digital information.

Endnotes

1. F Upward, 'The Records Continuum', in *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society*, S McKemmish et al. (eds), Centre for Information Studies, Wagga Wagga, NSW, 2006, p. 198; S McKemmish, 'Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: A Continuum of Responsibility', p. 10, available at <<http://www.sims.monash.edu.au/research/rcrg/publications/recordscontinuum/smckp2.html>>, accessed 5 January 2014.
2. F Upward and S McKemmish, 'Somewhere Beyond Custody', available at <<http://www.sims.monash.edu.au/research/rcrg/publications/somewher.html>>, accessed 18 February 2014.
3. Cabinet Office, 'Government ICT Strategy', 2011, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/85968/uk-government-government-ict-strategy_0.pdf>, accessed 18 February 2014.
4. For a similar view see M Cook, 'Appraisal and Access: We Should Expect Changes Driven by the Media and by Public Awareness', *Records Management Journal*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2010, pp. 72–7.
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7. Cabinet Office, 'Information Principles for the UK Public Sector', 2013, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/266284/Information_Principles_UK_Public_Sector_final.pdf>, accessed 18 February 2014.
8. RJ Cox, 'Appraisal and the Future of Archives in the Digital Era', in *The Future of Archives and Recordkeeping*, J Hill (ed.), Facet, London, 2011, p. 217.
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