

In an interconnected world – why do we think in functions?

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I work in the university sector at a great, sprawling institution, with its own quirks, needs, concerns and issues. With occasionally minor reference to the rest of the world, it keeps on going, outwardly little different now from the way it was 20 years ago when I was a student here too.

In that 20 years, however, there has been so much change that it's really only the surface that seems similar. Underneath, courses, systems, staff (although fewer than you would think) and the place that this university occupies in the world have all changed. And yet, when it comes to advising staff about the best way to manage the records that they create, I can't offer them anything other than the same solution my predecessor 20 years ago would have offered them – a Retention and Disposal Authority (RDA) with classes that do not, quite meet their needs.

Part of this is systemic – there are well-known challenges in working with sector RDAs that have a 10-year lifecycle – but part of it is the lack of awareness and responsibility that such an RDA can provide to the complexity that is information – and records – in this new world. What do you do when your information is in systems, each field with a different retention, but where the system is a fragile concoction of linked tables and fields and dependencies that may well be strung together with proprietary secrets? When there is no way that it would survive the butchery that would be needed for real disposal – but when there are other concerns – privacy, access, storage – that would protest at the over-retention of data?

It's ironic, then – or possibly just saddening – that over 20 years ago Bearman was arguing the same issues that we are now reconsidering in this paper. At that time, his *Archival Methods* questioned exactly the problems that are facing my institution today – what do we do with this explosion of material? What do we do with the 'retain everything' mentality that's either an unconsidered by-product or a preferred outcome of a systems-focused world? How do we deal with systems that have no ongoing business use after five years, but are holding permanent records that need permanent retention and therefore potentially demand the permanent maintenance of aging software, systems, hardware and corporate knowledge?

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I remember that one of the in-jokes about classification when I was studying was ‘everything is miscellaneous’. In the systems that we use in my institution, it’s almost as though everything is also miscellaneous. In our interconnected reality, we don’t have a system for HR, and a system for finance and a system for research – we have one system that not only covers all of them but, naturally, feeds data from one function to the other. How can we apply functional appraisal to this kind of system?

Bearman states:

One of the major challenges facing archivists in the next decade will be to control the information in office automation systems so as to properly dispose of transient information and identify records for archival retention. Previous studies have shown that the only viable framework for making appraisal decisions on electronic records is the thorough documentation of systems functions; this same information is no less essential to assure meaningful access to the records that are retained.¹

With this in mind then, as we already use jurisdiction-wide RDAs to appraise common record functions (Financial Management, Personnel Management and Property Management for example, to give their Victorian titles in PROS07/01 *General Retention and Disposal Authority for Common Administrative Records*²), should we have systems from vendors that actually have intrinsic retention that supports consistency across all agencies? We have functionality for the application of appraisal in electronic document and records management systems, but should we be looking for our other cross-functional core systems to carry the same capability? To have standardised retention periods as a key configurable element at the point of implementation? And, more importantly – if we do now aim for built-in retention, does the essentially narrow breadth of our globalised system choices actually now demand the globalisation of our appraisal decisions?

To support this idyll of records-centric perfection, central to getting support from system creators and vendors would be to have the role of appraisal more widely known and appreciated. While not a glamorous concept, there is a key understanding of what appraisal is in the wider community. If you explain that you work on what things are, and how that affects how long they are kept, people understand the value of that. If this is more widely known, we may, possibly, be able to convince even the most systems-orientated technologists that there are reasons for making systems that are able to support retention and disposal activities. With the inclusion of an analysis of cost (less in the electronic world, but still significant), then there is, possibly, also a hard-nosed financial incentive to develop the technologies that will assist with the effective management of cross-functional systems – and for vendors to find the differential that will ensure that their system is made an industry standard.

There are, however, two parts to this – if we are looking to persuade vendors to create systems that are able to appraise and dispose of records, the archival profession must also support this brave new world and undertake the challenge of crossing our boundaries to develop cross-jurisdictional RDAs. For large national agencies such as universities, water authorities and health agencies, it is difficult to conceive that the key reasons for determining appraisal decisions – outside jurisdictional legal requirements – can be essentially different. A qualification from one university should, and is, generally recognised internationally. The management of water catchments, and the environmental factors that support determination of the appraisal of those records, should, logically, be the same irrespective of manufactured jurisdictional borders – and recording the birth of

a child or the life of an individual needs to be consistent regardless of an arbitrary geographical location. Therefore, before we persuade vendors to alter their patterns of working, we need to consider whether we are, perhaps, sufficiently flexible to change our own.

Bearman, and the Recordkeeping Roundtable discussion about our desperate need to reform appraisal, therefore, challenge us to do far more than just identify and change the world in which we work – they require us to fundamentally change our archival understanding and identity. Perhaps that is the change that will mean that, when my successor reads Bearman in 20 years' time, (s)he can see, following his call to arms, the radical reform to our key concepts and intrinsic societal change that we, as a profession, have generated to this challenge.

Endnotes

1. David Bearman, *Archival Methods – Archives and Museum Informatics Technical Report #9*, Archives and Museum Informatics, Pittsburgh, 1989, available at <http://www.archimuse.com/publishing/archival_methods/#ixzz2vA8oifsf>, accessed 27 February 2014.
2. Public Record Office Victoria PROS07/01, 'General Retention and Disposal Authority for Records of Common Administrative Functions', available at <<http://prov.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/PROS07-01CommonAdminVar2-WebVersion20130628.pdf>>, accessed 27 February 2014.