

Records Management: Three Years' Experience at the Records Management Office of New South Wales

Dianne Patenall

Records Administration Officer
Records Management Office of N.S.W.

Author's note: This article follows very closely the address I gave to the Second Biennial Conference of the Australian Society of Archivists. Many of the points raised in it could, in themselves, be the subject of further articles and indeed I hope that they will generate further discussion and correspondence.

In my printed conference paper I covered in some detail the history of the Records Management Office of New South Wales and some of its activities during the three years since its commencement in March, 1976. Having just passed our third Birthday, I can, with the benefit of hindsight, reflect and comment upon the shift in emphasis, that has occurred during the three years, towards ensuring maximum departmental participation in Records Management Office programmes.

Olga White and Baiba Irving have written and presented to the Conference a paper on the "Appraisal and Disposal of New South Wales Public Records" which details this Office's recommended procedures in compiling records disposal schedules. However, the way in which our present approach has evolved is, I think, of interest.

A records disposal schedule is a most important tool for the Records Management Office, not only to achieve the efficient disposal of records but also to assist in record system reviews. The schedule identifies and gives a "birds-eye view" of the records created by a department and, in its implementation, eliminates from the record system the unwanted and uselessly created material, leaving only the required information in the system to be reviewed.

When the Records Management Office commenced undertaking record system reviews, records disposal schedules were largely unknown

in departments and it was essentially for our own purposes that, during a review, Records Management Officers also compiled a records disposal schedule. It was with some degree of idealism that we presented to the department a document which we felt was essential to it and which we knew had first class series identification and description. But what we were really leaving behind was an additional mass of paper which the department neither understood nor appreciated and which was very rarely acted upon and implemented.

Considering the time taken to compile records disposal schedules, a department's indifference to it was a poor return for the resources we had invested.

It is now this Office's policy that departmental officers themselves compile functional records disposal schedules. Our role is to provide training, presently being given through the Records Disposal Education Programme, to verify the structure of the schedule and its retention periods and to regularly update and issue the *General Records Disposal Schedule*.

Some archivists protest that the sanctity and purity of the series identification and description is at stake! On balance, I feel that the long term benefits to be gained from departments compiling and using their own schedules far outweigh occasional sins committed against the perfect series. A disposal schedule is primarily a departmental document to be used by departments and to be understood by them, and the combination of local terminology and formal description is producing schedules acceptable to both the department and the Archives Authority of N.S.W. during its appraisal process.

I firmly believe that the commitment of a department's resources to an activity will, more than any other factor, contribute to that activity's implementation and continuing success. The rationale of departmental participation in Records Management Office programmes extends to other areas such as the implementation of the Keyword Method of classification and record system reviews.

The problems of traditional methods of classification and the principles of the Keyword Method are documented in *Publications on Records Management*, Number 4: *Principles of Keyword Classification* and Number 5: *Manual of Keyword Classification* and I will not detail them here.

Initially, it was intended that, in addition to compiling the *Thesaurus of General Terms*, the Records Management Office would also be responsible for the compilation of functional thesauri covering, progressively, the records relating to the function of every New South Wales Government department. It was very tempting at the time to pronounce departmental officers incapable of thesaurus construction and remove from departments the responsibility for selecting the terminology which best reflects their functions. Happily, this was not pursued and departments are now responsible for the compilation of their functional thesauri.

Our role in the introduction of Keyword is training departmental officers in thesaurus construction, verifying the functional thesaurus, training record officers in classifying according to the thesaurus and maintaining and updating the *Thesaurus of General Terms*. Once a functional thesaurus has been compiled by a departmental officer, it needs to be endorsed as a departmental document, and to this end a departmental Thesaurus Review Committee is convened to ensure departmental representation and acceptance of the terminology contained in it.

In the activity of record system reviews, a very dramatic shift in emphasis has occurred. Our initial approach to review work was one which I call the "traditional organisation and methods" approach. This approach is reflected in the commonly accepted role of O. & M. units of the N.S.W. Public Service Board and departments. This is largely one of organisation and method officers, specialising in systems analysis, reviewing a particular activity, formulating recommendations, presenting the recommendations to management and then moving on to another review area, taking away with them much valuable information and commitment to the recommendations they formulated. During subsequent Steering Committee meetings held to discuss recommendations, departmental management and officers affected by those recommendations often take up positions as adversaries of the review team rather than being jointly committed to change. Since the Records Management Office had been established to advise Government departments on sound records management procedures, it was very easy for the Office to be perceived as an outside consultant and consequently to fall into the same adversary position with departments while endeavouring to effect change.

This traditional pattern is altering slowly throughout the New South Wales Public Service and since our experience has shown that departmental support of change and willingness to implement changed procedures is in direct proportion to its own contribution to the formulation of those changes, all record system reviews now ensure maximum departmental participation to achieve the most effective use of our own resources of time and staff, through implementation of our recommendations.

There are essentially two types of reviews undertaken. In a "survey", one officer from this Office is made available to work full-time with a departmental officer/s to progressively review, and report upon, the record system. The second type of review is an "advising" whereby a departmental officer/s undertakes the review in regular consultation with this Office. This type of review is done either at the preference of the department, or in response to an urgent request when full-time Records Management Office staff resources cannot be made available. In either case, the department is required to undertake preliminary tasks such as implementing the *General Records Disposal Schedule*, compiling a functional records disposal schedule, sending departmental officers to

appropriate training courses in records management, collecting record system data to facilitate the review and establishing a departmental steering committee to progressively review the findings of the review team.

During a record system review all aspects of the system are looked at, following the "birth — to — death" concept of records management. Records Management Officers presently undertaking review work either have formal training and/or experience in systems analysis and design, or have demonstrated a particular aptitude in it. In addition, all Records Management Officers are required to participate in extensive training courses with audiences ranging from junior records officers to departmental heads and, in less formal situations, a continuous public relations effort is required. All positions advertised in the Records Management Office require "understanding of and experience in systems analysis and design" and advertisements for departmental record managers call for "ability in systems design and implementation". Other requirements for both types of positions include "ability to liaise at all levels of Service personnel" and "experience in staff training".

These, and other records management activities, are very rarely considered by archivists and all too often records management is equated solely with records scheduling and the provision of semi-active record repository services. This very narrow definition leads to the assumption that archivists have all the prerequisite skills required of record managers. This view is especially taking hold within University archives.

Certainly, some archivists can make good records managers, there are areas of common interest, and records management and archival functions can be combined into one organisational structure with the identity of both still being preserved.

There has been much discussion during this conference on the relationship between records management and archival administration, yet little progress seems to have been made since the 1977 Canberra conference. In order to achieve some progress by 1981 it requires the archival profession to firstly understand what records management, in its broadest sense, encompasses.