

RECORDS DISPOSAL IN THE MODERN ENVIRONMENT

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Why do Records Disposal Schedules seem to be failing as a tool for effective records and archival management? The history of records disposal in Australia since the Second World War documents various attempts by archivists and records managers to deal with this problem and clearly illuminates why the various proposed solutions have failed. Are there any other approaches that may be more likely to succeed?

Introduction

A records disposal schedule, to be referred to here as a disposal schedule, is “a document governing, on a continuing basis, the retention and disposition of the recurring records series of an organization or agency.”¹ Other synonymous terms used since the Second World War include disposition schedule, records schedule, records control schedule, (records) retention schedule, and records management schedule. Disposition refers to the “final action that puts into effect the results of an appraisal decision for a series of records. Transfer to an archival institution, transfer to a records centre, and destruction are among possible dispositions.”² It should be noted that in Australia the terms “disposal” and “disposition” have come to have identical meanings to archivists while in the USA, particularly in the context of U.S. government records, “disposal” means destruction. In Australia, the wider community of records creators, both in government agencies and business, also tend to equate disposal with destruction. This misunderstanding is symptomatic of the communication problem that archivists and records managers have with their clients.

Disposal is inextricably linked with “appraisal” which is defined simply as “the process of identifying whether documentary materials have sufficient value to warrant acquisition by an archival institution.”³ The problems of appraisal are therefore the problems of disposal and the appraisal of records in the post World War II environment has been at

the heart of many of the problems facing the contemporary archivists and records managers.

Appraisal has taken on new urgency. Why? More people, more records, more media, more duplication, high costs, growing space requirements, less money, unfamiliar and unstable media, vague or nonexistent documentation trails, few researchers willing to tackle overwhelming masses of records, information systems that emphasize access and speed over preservation of a useful body of information for hypothetical future users . . .⁴

The disposal schedule was developed by the archivists as a tool by which they could influence events at a distance. In a sense the schedule was to represent the archivist at the records "coal-face", to act as an agent for the archivist to ensure that records appraised as being of archival value were not either deliberately or inadvertently thrown out by their creators or minders. The records manager was seen as the means by which the disposal schedule could be implemented and it was deemed that they include the efficient and responsible disposal of records as part of their regular activities. Unfortunately this idealized scenario has been seldom realized in fact. In the past forty years archivists have developed sophisticated procedures for the development of disposal schedules⁵ and student archivists are trained in the details of their construction. The most recent publications from the Australian Archives (their brochures on records appraisal and disposal and the General Disposal Schedules⁶) and the Public Record Office of Victoria⁷ show the high degree of refinement these documents have reached in the hands of skilled archivists. The question remains, however, as to why disposal schedules are not incorporated into the regular records management practices of government agencies? Is it a failure of the archivists? of the management of the agencies? of the record managers? Or is it a structural problem with the disposal schedules themselves?

Some early attempts to implement records disposal schedules

From the outset disposal schedules, whether compiled by the archives institution or the agency, were expected to be implemented by the agency independently of the archives. The role of the archives was to accept records whose disposition was for permanent retention. However, this quickly proved to be unworkable and attempts were made to intervene at the agency level to facilitate records movement and control.

During the first half of 1957 the Commonwealth Public Service Board launched a scheme for the appointment and training of specialist records managers, to be known as Departmental Registrars, in Commonwealth Departments. The decision to do so resulted from the growing awareness on the part of the Board, the Commonwealth Archives Committee and the National Library that the provision of efficient and economical record keeping services to meet modern departmental needs on the one hand and the installation of continuing disposal programmes to reduce accommodation

costs and to channel the permanently valuable core of records onto archival custody on the other were two inter-related aspects of the over-all records management problem.⁸

This ambitious project set about training 19 recruits between March and July 1958 in a ten-part course that included the disposal of records, theory of classification, access and reference services, and training of registry staff. The registrars were to have wide powers over all the records in their department and were expected to advise upper-level management "on all aspects of the organization and use of records in the department".⁹ On the surface this approach appears to be a reasonable way to proceed, and indeed 17 years later, a similar project was proposed in South Australia. The 1975 Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Public Service of South Australia suggested the appointment of "information managers to key positions within departments with direct access to permanent heads; their responsibilities to include (a) records management (b) resource centres and (c) publication and other internal and external information activity".¹⁰

Peter Crush in his comments on this proposal, while essentially agreeing with the concept, noted that the Registrars Scheme had not been a success and that this proposal was likely to fail for similar reasons.

The suggested high level of status and considerable knowledge of the occupant of this position would also make him/her good management material and the turnover of staff in the position could be fairly rapid which could be detrimental to the effectiveness of the position.¹¹

Apart from the difficulties of finding suitably qualified people for the positions and the tendency for appointees "to become introverted, to become inflexible and bound by departmental traditions"¹², it was forecast that the major difficulty with the information managers, as with the registrars, would be the continuity of programmes, for example implementation of disposal schedules, through changing personnel. Crush saw the solution to this problem in the placement of the Records Management Service with the Government Archives whereby a consistent, qualified and experienced advisory service could be supplied to information managers.

The development of records management techniques in government agencies and the need to control the enormous increase in the quantity of records being produced through effective records disposal is reflected in the late 1970s in the establishment by the Commonwealth Public Service Board, in 1975, of a special Disposal and Appraisal Unit located in the Australian Archives central office¹³, and the setting up of the Records Management Office of New South Wales in 1976 and the Report of the Task Force on Records Management for the Public Service of Victoria in 1979. Despite the professionalism of both the archivists and the records managers as seen in these developments the position in the agencies had changed little from the 1950s.

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 was very rarely acted upon and implemented.¹⁴

Records management was based, during this period as it still is now, on "the 'birth-to-death' concept"¹⁵ or the life-cycle concept of records generation. The disposal of the record marked the major rite of passage of the record to either the archives or to destruction. While it is debatable whether this analogy provides the correct basis for the development of records management practice, it has provided the theoretical foundation for the production of disposal schedules and it, perhaps may provide one of the clues as to the lack of acceptance that disposal schedules have found in government agencies.

The 1980s have seen significant modifications in the attitude and practices of the major government archives as regards disposal scheduling. This can be seen in the recent publications from the Australian Archives and the Public Record Office of Victoria referred to earlier but was foreshadowed in the experiences of the Records Management Office of New South Wales.

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*.

... 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.¹⁶

It was also noted that the Office was at times perceived as an outside consultant imposed upon departments. This led to the departments adopting adversary positions which were counter-productive and not conducive to change.

There is a tacit assumption that, during this period of general economic prosperity (1960s-early 1970s), government agencies were not experiencing any great difficulties with their records and certainly the major archival institutions were doing little disposal work.¹⁷ If agencies were having difficulties with the bulk of their records it was more often than not solved by a once-off indiscriminate purge of the older files. The Australian Archives spent much of this period developing the series concept of archival administration in an attempt to cope with the style of

government administration that evolved since WWII and was reflected in the frequent restructuring of the ministries. It was not until the early 1980s, when the legal position of government archives was more clearly established and the powers of the archival institutions embodied in acts of parliament, and perhaps also under the influence of computerization, that agencies started to take their records responsibilities more seriously.

The policy of the archival institutions relating to disposal that has stayed with us during the 1980s, in a period of diminishing resources, is focused on the provision of general disposal schedules covering commonly occurring classes of records such as finance, administration, personnel and works. Agencies are left with the responsibility of implementing the schedules and developing programs to deal with their functional records but with the added legislative pressure that not to do so may be breaking the law.

Inevitably, this means that while some agencies may institute disposal schedules or programs, most will not respond until they reach a crisis point and are faced with a mountain of paper and storage problem. But the key question that has been with us since the 1940s is how are the agencies going to implement the disposal schedules or develop their own? Some agencies have viewed the problem as being beyond their staff and have engaged archival or records management consultants to institute schedules or develop disposal programs. This is often done in conjunction with a move in the agency to greater computerization of records and information control.

Solutions

The archival community is likely to give increasing prominence to its role in helping society to identify and select records of long-range value to its governments, private institutions, and the public. This is the role that can be presented most impressively to the public and it is the one that is the unique province of archivists as compared to other information professionals. Selection is also the function that will require increasing cooperation and communication with records creators (who are most often the key resource allocators); such contact is needed both to obtain resources and to directly influence the treatment of archival records while they are still active.¹⁸

The USA over the last thirty years has provided a number of examples of innovative archival practice but of interest here is the development of discipline-based archive and history centres. The American Institute of Physics Center for History of Physics is one of the oldest of these and has been a leader in assisting government archives come to terms with the disposal of records from a number of their agencies dealing directly in physics research, for example sections of the Department of Energy.¹⁹ The essence of the success of their work in developing

documentation strategies for the relevant research institutes is that they narrowed their field of interest so that the quantity of information involved could be responsibly managed and they developed skills in dealing with the content of the records. It was only through direct contact with the records and the record generators and using their general knowledge of the field that they were able to sensibly appraise the materials and recommend appropriate disposal programmes. Not only did they produce disposal guidelines for the institutes but they published handbooks for secretaries on file maintenance and records disposition.

The development of agency-based disposal programs or plans in Australia is clearly the most positive step that has been made to date as it begins to incorporate the life, development, expansion, contraction and restructuring of the agency into the life-cycle of the records. With few exceptions, modern government agencies are dynamic institutions, responding to ever-changing political, fiscal and physical environments. The records of the agencies are going to reflect these changes and thus are unlikely to remain stable enough to fit into elaborately developed disposal classes of an earlier period. Such changes may occur over as little time as two or three years or, as in the case of computerization, the environment may change virtually overnight. Clearly there is little point in developing schedules for records that are going to have such a short administrative life. So how are we going to deal with records disposal?

It seems that archivists are required at the "coal-face" to make the records appraisal and disposal decisions in the agencies. This point is made clearly in *Keeping Archives* in the section dealing with disposal schedules where the role of the archivist in all stages of the process is emphasized, but it is not fully supported by recent work at the Australian Archives.²⁰ Some of the larger Commonwealth agencies, for example Foreign Affairs, CSIRO and the Army have appointed archivists, and some have established archives sections. However, as shown earlier, a "registrars scheme" is not the answer. Most agencies do not require a full-time archivist and perhaps some could not even justify a full-time records manager, but all agencies need the development and maintenance of an archival records profile which will allow them to assess their documentation needs and requirements. The responsibility for these profiles needs to be borne by the archival institutions, and archivists within these should be allocated portfolios of agencies as their particular concern. In this way the overwhelming problems of contemporary archives on a national or state level can be broken down into manageable chunks that can be dealt with on an individual basis by "agency archivists" [my term]. This is not to suggest that responsible archivists do all the appraisal and disposal work in the agencies. Their job would essentially be to act as consultants to the agencies, to interpret the legal archival requirements,

to assist in the development of disposal plans, to assist in making disposal decisions, to liaise with outside consultants who may be brought in to perform specific functions, and to maintain finding-aids and other documentation associated with the already preserved archives of the agency.

The bureaucratic and legal frameworks of the archival institutions would need to be flexible enough to provide sufficient room for innovative and imaginative solutions to be found to individual agencies' problems. Likewise the agencies would need to be able to incorporate this new function into their Corporate Services or Information Management sections and allow it to form a close association with their Registry where one exists. These "agency archivists" would need to develop the trust and cooperation of the agency and it would often be beneficial if agencies appointed "archives and history" committees to monitor the archival and records position. Perhaps the use of task forces working with the "agency archivist" to sort out a particular agency's backlog might be effective in some situations. There are probably many other ways too, in which a system could be implemented.

It is within this framework that General Disposal Schedules will come to have the most utility. At present, the Australian Archives General Disposal Schedules are comprehensive reference texts outlining the sentences on various classes of records within certain administrative functions. They tell the agency, but in particular the middle manager who received the GDS in the mail, very little about how this document relates to the agency. It is only with a fair amount of study that such a document could be understood and translated into a useful tool for the agency. The "agency archivists" would be able to adapt and interpret these tools for the particular agency's needs. The central archives would be able to use information from the "agency archivists" further to develop the current GDSs and develop new ones.

As regards disposal schedules, the appendices, which are reworkings of the Australian Archives General Disposal Schedule No. 11 for Staff and Establishment Records, provide examples of how this information can be interpreted in such a way as to make its message clear to the agency officers concerned. Appendix 1 is a simple summary of the disposal classes which makes it possible to see at glance the coverage of the schedule. Appendix 2 is the aggregation of those records marked for permanent retention and is perhaps the most important subset of information to be gleaned from the GDS. It gives the middle manager, who has responsibility for the records of the agency, a picture of the records that have to be saved and will highlight immediately any current records practices that are not in accord with the GDS. I would suggest that it is these types of documents that should be supplied to the agencies, in conjunction with the full schedule.

Conclusion

The solution offered here addresses a number of the issues facing archivists working in both government and non-government archives. It is premised on the archivist having skills in information management, especially through the use of computerized word processing and database management. More particularly, it attempts to define a position for the "archivist" within the larger archives administration bureaucracy and to clarify the relationship between the archives and the agency. The "agency archivists" would need to have had work experience across many archival functions, as it is their archival skills rather than merely information management skills that are required. They would need to be paid at the same rate as middle managers, to help stem their otherwise almost inevitable migration into the information management profession. Also archival organizations will have to accept some degree of decentralization, which may mean devolving some authority to the periphery while maintaining a strong central policy direction.

Such a solution is clearly based on a "pro-active" role for archival institutions and archivists. The possibilities inherent in such a scheme are demonstrated by the activities in the USA which developed in response to the "keep our fingers crossed" attitude typical of archival institutions for generations. The increasing use of computers for data management, word processing and production control will place many of the older records at risk so action needs to be taken now. The older records will provide the key to understanding the new machine-readable records which, themselves, will provide a new set of disposal challenges. The "agency archivist" will be required to see that the transition is smooth and that the system operators incorporate the appropriate archival programs into their software. However, records disposal in the current environment will continue to be perilous and many important archival records will be lost unless archivists and archival institutions can be brought into closer contact with records generators.

APPENDIX 1

General Disposal Schedule No. 11
for Staff and Establishment Records

Class 1 Compensation

- 1.1 Policy
- 1.2 Case files (death)
- 1.3 Case files (other than death)
- 1.4 Returns
- 1.5 Delegations

Class 2 Establishments

- 2.1 Planning and review
- 2.2 Staffing—Central and Regional Offices
- 2.3 Establishments action at Regional and Central Office level

- Class 3 Personnel**
- 3.1 Policy
 - 3.2 Personal history
 - 3.3 Leave
 - 3.4 Grievances
 - 3.5 Department of Finance Salaries ADP System input
 - 3.6 Department of Finance Salaries ADP System reports
 - 3.7 Salaries—Manual Systems
 - 3.8 Overpayments
 - 3.9 Attendance
 - 3.10 Overtime
 - 3.11 Periodic returns (such as forms PSB 39 and 40)
- Class 4 Recruitment**
- 4.1 Policy
 - 4.2 Vacancies
 - 4.3 Transfer/promotion
 - 4.4 Occupancy
 - 4.5 Advertising
- Class 5 Staff Appraisal**
- 5.1 Design of systems
 - 5.2 Implementation
 - 5.3 Reports (excluding probationer reports—see 3.2)
 - 5.4 Statistics
- Class 6 Staff Counselling**
- 6.1 Work performance counselling (See also entry 7.2)
 - 6.2 Personal problem counselling
- Class 7 Staff Discipline**
(See also 3.2)
- 7.1 Preliminary interview
 - 7.2 Counselling (See also 6.1)
 - 7.3 Disciplinary action files
- Class 8 Staff Industrial Matters**
- 8.1 Policy
 - 8.2 Claims (excluding claims which develop into disputes)
 - 8.3 Disputes
 - 8.4 Liaison with staff associations
 - 8.5 Copies of awards, determinations and other reference material
 - 8.6 Monitoring of staff associations.

APPENDIX 2

General Disposal Schedule No. 11
for Staff and Establishment Records

PERMANENT RECORDS

- Class 1 Compensation**
- 1.1.1 Policy
Documentation relating to the development of policy and procedures, including precedent material, associated with claims under the Compensation (Commonwealth Government Employees) Act, 1971.
 - 1.5.1 Delegations
Delegations to agency officers under the Compensation (Commonwealth Government Employees) Act, 1971.

Class 2 Establishment

- 2.2.1 Staffing—Central Office
Preparation of Forward Staff Estimates, management of staff ceilings and average staffing ceilings (prior to 1 March 1984)
- 2.3 Establishments actions at Regional and Central Office
- 2.3.1 Consideration of proposals from line/action areas to review or vary staffing structures.
- 2.3.2 Provision of bids to the Public Service Board (prior to 1 July 1984) for Bulk Establishment Control Reserve Pool positions or other establishment variations and subsequent action to seek formal creation of positions
Includes:
 - Duty Statement (PSB 16B)
 - Executive Council submission papers
 - Organization Chart (PSB 16C)
 - Supporting documentation
- 2.3.3 Applications to the Secretary of Department/delegate (from 1 July 1984), for creation of positions
Includes:
 - Formal report proposing creation of positions.
 - Duty Statement (PSB 16B)
 - Organization Chart (PSB 16C)
 - Departmental instruments
 - Supporting documentation
- 2.3.4 Allocations/withdrawal of positions from Bulk Establishment Control Reserve Pool
Includes:
 - Establishment Variation/Allocation Authority
 - Duty Statement (PSB 16B)
 - Organization Chart (PSB 16C)
- 2.3.5 Proposals to reclassify positions
Includes:
 - Organization Proposal Report (PSB 16A) (prior to 1 July 1984) and equivalent departmental documentation from 1 July 1984)
 - Duty Statement (PSB 16B)
 - Organization chart (PSB 16C)
 - Departmental instruments (from 1 July 1984)
- 2.3.6 Complete chronological sets of establishment action documentation
For example; sets of:
 - Organization Proposal reports (PSB 16A) (prior to 1 July 1984) and equivalent departmental documentation (from 1 July 1984)
 - Duty Statements (PSB 16B)
 - Organization Charts (PSB 16C)
 - Establishment summaries
 - Authorities to vary establishments
 - Executive Council submission papers (prior to 1 July 1984) and Departmental instruments (from 1 July 1984)
- 2.3.8 Position cards
- 2.3.9 Bulk Establishment Pool control documentation including control ledgers and establishment summaries
- 2.3.10 Position number register

Class 3 Personnel

- 3.1.1 Policy
Documentation relating to the development of policy and procedure for the management of personnel matters, including the interpretation of relevant legislation
- 3.2.1 Personal history—Class A papers
- (a) For Department Heads (First division), Senior Executive (Second Division) and Statutory Position holders
 - (b) For those holding senior positions in key functional areas of agencies at Regional, State and Overseas Post levels
 - (c) For those who have achieved prominence in public life
- 3.2.7 Personal history—History Cards
i.e. PSB Forms 53, 53A, 53B and 54 or equivalent cards or sheets which document an employee's educational qualifications, salary, higher duties or superannuation history
- (a) For Department Heads (First Division), Senior Executive (Second Division) and Statutory Position holders
 - (b) For those holding senior positions in key functional areas of agencies at Regional, State and Overseas Post levels
 - (c) For those who have achieved prominence in public life.
- 3.3.1 Leave—Leave Cards
i.e. PSB Forms 55 or equivalent cards or sheets documenting an officer's/employee's leave history
- (a) For Department Heads (First Division), Senior Executive (Second Division) and Statutory Position holders
 - (b) For those holding senior positions in key functional areas of agencies at Regional, State and Overseas Post levels
 - (c) For those who have achieved prominence in public life.
- 3.4.1 Grievances
Files documenting cases of grievance under Public Service Regulations 33, 61U, 111 and 114
- (a) Policy and precedent cases and cases having unusual features

Class 4 Recruitment

- 4.1.1 Policy
Development, implementation and review of recruitment policy, including material having precedent value
- 4.2.1 Vacancies
Recruitment files containing applications (including PSB 100 for temporary employment), duty statements, schedules of applicants, interview reports, transfer to vacancy notifications, promotion confirmation notifications, appeals schedules and appeals statements
- (a) Department Head (First Division), Senior Executive (Second Division) and Statutory Office positions
 - (b) Central Office positions
 - (i) Senior (key) positions directly responsible for administering an agency's functional responsibilities, eg Branch Heads and equivalents
 - (ii) Overseas representation—Heads of Mission and delegates positions
 - (c) State, Regional Office positions
 - (i) Officers in Charge and deputies
- 4.2.2 Vacancies
Register of AGS numbers (block allocation)

- 4.4.1 Occupancy
Cards or staff list documenting the occupancy history of positions, including details of nominal and actual occupants and dates of effect
(a) Master

Class 5 Staff Appraisal

- 5.1.1 Design of Schemes
Design of staff appraisal and staff development schemes
- 5.2.1 Implementation
Implementation of schemes
(a) Development procedures
- 5.2.2 Implementation
Reviews of the purpose, design and operation of schemes
- 5.4.1 Statistics
(b) Information not consolidated elsewhere

Class 8 Staff Industrial Matters

- 8.1.1 Policy
Policy concerning staff industrial matters including handling of disputes, treatment of claims, liaison with staff associations, collection of statistics, etc.
- 8.2.1 Claims (excluding claims which develop into disputes)
Claims about pay and working conditions—cases (includes transcripts of proceedings of relevant Arbitral hearings)
(a) claims lodged under the Public Service Arbitration Act
(b) claims lodged under the Conciliation and Arbitration Act
(c) claims lodged on the agency (i.e. not formally lodged under the relevant legislation)
- 8.3.1 Disputes
Disputes involving agency staff or staff associations and agency management or the Commonwealth—cases (includes transcripts of proceedings of relevant arbitral hearings)
(a) disputes notified under the Public Service Arbitration Act
(b) disputes notified under the Conciliation and Arbitration Act
(c) disputes not formally notified under the relevant legislation
(d) potential disputes
- 8.3.2 Disputes
Statistical returns and reports on disputes
(a) internal returns and reports
• (i) copies held in Central Office
(b) returns and reports forwarded to PSB and ABS—copies retained by agency.

FOOTNOTES

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