THE NATIONAL RECORDS RETURN

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Business and management texts for decades have exhorted readers to "know your market, its size, location, composition, how it is changing . . ." and for archives and records organisations, the process of gaining this knowledge traditionally involves conducting records surveys. One of very few full records censuses to be conducted in recent times, at least in the government sphere, was the National Records Return (NRR) organised by the Australian Archives during the mid to late 1980s. In view of the paucity of published accounts of such large surveys,[1] the following presentation aims, first, to cover in general terms the origin, objectives, methodology, uses, management and findings of the NRR and, second, to discuss as a substitute for a comprehensive analysis of the findings, some aspects of two of its basic conclusions.

The Australian Archives has undertaken records surveys since the early 1950s and from the very earliest work preparing its legislation, the survey function was intended to be an essential feature of the Bill. When passed as the Archives Act in 1983, it included survey among the Archives' functions, i.e. "to ascertain the material that constitutes the archival resources of the Commonwealth" and specifically provided the power "to undertake the survey of Commonwealth records". The first regulation issued following the Act's proclamation in 1984 included the requirement for Commonwealth institutions to provide on request, for appraisal reasons, descriptive details about the records in their custody. It is clear, even without a precise understanding of terms such as "archival resources", that survey was intended to be a key means in achieving Archives' now legislatively based objectives. Accordingly, in 1984 a survey program was established and Central Office staff appointed. An early aim was to begin planning a national survey of records in agency custody.

The intent of the NRR, from the beginning, was to produce through a systematic survey of all records in agencies (including those overseas), a database of statistical information capable of analysis and

interpretation for planning purposes. Given this ambitious nationwide scope, considerable preparation and planning was involved. For example, alternative methodologies had to be studied, the information requirements of all Archives' management and functional areas obtained and assessed, questionnaire booklets and other paperwork designed and printed, pilot surveys undertaken, and finally, that crucial requirement of any full census survey, a comprehensive list of the target agencies compiled. A complete census was decided on mainly so that information about each individual agency would be available. At the same time, this avoided the difficulties of accurately sampling and also made the Archives' role and services known to every known agency creating Commonwealth records.

The NRR survey was conducted over 18 months during 1985-87 in three six-monthly stages, the 2550 agencies involved being spread as uniformly as possible across the three stages. Answers to five questions were sought through the issuing of questionnaire booklets and measurement guides to key agency coordinators who previously had been trained by Archives survey staff. Because each question had several parts, over 300 facts about each agency were collected. The net result was a massive management information resource comprising 780,300 data items covering such matters as physical record formats, quantity, growth rates, disposal coverage, and physical condition of records, as well as the characteristics of ADP equipment and records storage facilities agencies used. The Archives' Systems Management Section, and outside contractors, provided assistance in processing and analysing the data, as well as with producing multiple copies of printed reports for departmental agency and Archives use. At various stages during the NRR, the data was stored on NEC PCs and the organisation's Prime 9955 mini computer before a final decision to transfer it to Macintoshes using 4th Dimension software.

Inevitably with large statistical projects involving data on which management decisions concerning facilities and services will be based, one looks for some reassurance that the figures are correct. Archives' confidence primarily was based on the methodology employed, although instinctively one also asked on the first appearance of the results, "do they look right?" Comparison of the NRR results with earlier Australian Archives surveys and the published findings of surveys conducted overseas was immediately ruled out, as neither kind was assessed to be directly equivalent. Nevertheless, staff did note the results of two earlier Archives surveys (a 1978 survey of all Departments and some related agencies and authorities and a 1984 NRR pilot survey in Tasmania) as well as surveys of records in government agencies in Victoria in 1987 and in New Zealand in 1986.[2] The comparisons suggested nothing was awry.

As for the more directly relevant indicators, several aspects of the

NRR methodology prompted confidence. First, it was virtually a *total* population census of record creating agencies, the only omissions — for resource and other reasons — being eight one-person overseas posts and 16 agencies already covered in one of the pilot surveys. At the agency level, again the survey was practically a full census, the only sampling undertaken being for half a dozen agencies such as some of the larger Government Business Enterprises which had numerous sub-offices and branches throughout Australia. By itself, a full census approach does not guarantee accuracy, but because selecting a representative sample from which to generalise was unnecessary, sampling error at least is avoided. Second, through the provision of training for agency staff and the production of a measurement guide for calculating the quantity figure, consistency of approach was fostered. Third, care was taken using internal consistency checks and experienced regionally based Archives staff to pin-point mistakes in individual agencies' returns which required checking.

From the moment the NRR was completed, its data was out of date, partly because it was conducted over three six-monthly stages and because of the inexorable rates of record creation. Some details quickly dated, particularly those regarding intentions such as ADP equipment purchases planned for the following two to five years and the quantity of records agencies planned to transfer in the 12 months following the NRR. However, the information which made up the aggregate results (e.g. total holdings, growth rates, breakdowns by State and format, etc.) will change relatively slowly and is likely to remain usable for some time. Knowing the growth rate for quantity (in both aggregate and broken down by State, format, portfolio, etc.) of course meant that the "big picture" totals could be projected to cover 5-10 post NRR years.

The aggregate data collected through the NRR has been used in two main ways, in addition to the gaining of a basic appreciation of the size of the task in managing the Commonwealth's records. The information has assisted the overall planning of services and facilities and the allocation of broad priorities, and has been drawn on to target agencies most in need of Archives services. At the micro level too, it has been most useful. From the NRR database some regions prepared lists of agencies matched against quantity held of inactive records or of records over twenty-five years old so that they could focus transfer and disposal programs. The data has provided an understanding of a particular agency prior to discussion of the agency's problems. The idea of a national Agency Profile Database using NRR and other data was investigated but proved not to be cost effective. There remains some regional interest in the "agency profile" concept.

Inevitably with such a large scale operation conducted for the first time, problems were encountered and valuable lessons were learnt. The timing of the survey, for example, was known to be crucial,

because any major machinery of government change would have created logistical and other complications, and rendered portfolio and department/authority statistical reports meaningless. In fact just as stage 3 of the NRR was completed, the Hawke government was re-elected (in May 1987). Administrative changes did follow and the data for report production had to be reorganised so that it could be related to current agencies. A further lesson learnt related to the fact that large surveys are very labour intensive. This reality daunted some in the bureaucracy, resulting in a focus on the effort of data collection rather than on the benefits which could subsequently result from using it. Ensuring the data was effectively used represented another challenge. Agencies received individually tailored analyses and a booklet giving advice about action which they might take to better manage their records, but with uneven result. Successful follow-up action usually occurred after speedy preparation of the analyses and contact made in person by the relevant Archives regional office soon after the survey was completed with the express intention of offering solutions to problems highlighted in the individual reports.

As noted above, the NRR was intended to provide Archives with broad level quantitative and qualitative data regarding the entire record holding of Commonwealth agencies. In summary, the "big picture" revealed that by 1985-87,

— the 2550 agencies held an enormous quantity of material, most of which was either files (42%) or "other paper records" such as printouts, forms and manuals (46%);

— the records are growing rapidly at a rate of over 10% p.a.; essentially, they are of recent origin, with the majority created during the five years prior to the survey and only a fraction over 25 years ago;

— physically, most records were in good or fair condition;

— of the ten record formats making up the total quantity in agencies, files were best covered by disposal authorities; and

— the use of ADP equipment was widespread, and agencies expected to increase this by 50% in the two to five years following the survey.

Such a summary hardly does justice to the myriad calculations and analyses prepared since 1987 for management and agency use. Rather than attempt to summarise them further, it may be simpler to take two of the basic conclusions of the NRR and discuss their meaning and some of the implications. The first, concerning the seemingly commonplace finding that the records agencies hold are essentially paper based, raises questions about the high concentration of non-file paper records and implications of the paperless office prediction. The second finding, that irrespective of format, agencies' holdings are

growing rapidly, presents a challenge in terms of explanation and records management.

First, then, the preponderance of paper. It is abundantly clear from the NRR that, essentially, Commonwealth records are paper records. Almost 90% of records in agencies in 1985-87 were paper based, i.e. either files or what the NRR surveyors termed "other paper records" (OPRs). By contrast, less than 3% of the records in agencies were ADP and computer generated records. (The 1984 NRR pilot survey revealed similar proportion — 91%, with 63% of agencies having only records in paper formats.)

Whether this NRR result confirms what many have thought to be the case, namely that government use of ADP equipment has not yet resulted in any strong trend towards a "paperless office", is an issue clouded by several problems of definition. If the original statement of the idea had actually meant "paper[records]less office", the NRR finding certainly may be compared favourably with the conclusion of several other studies, though one needs to ignore for the sake of comparison the fact that records and information are not the same thing. Thus an American survey undertaken by Coopers and Lybrand in 1987 for the Association for Information and Image Management reported that only 1% of the USA's "information" is stored on electronic and magnetic media; about 4% is stored as microform or optical media and the remaining 95% consists of such media as paper, cards and paper tape. The 1988 estimate of a local records management software company, on the other hand, is that 90% of the world's information is stored on paper though this was expected to fall by 5% in the five years following 1988.[3]

The paperless office notion undoubtedly overstated the speed with which the prediction might occur, as many commentators over the past decade have noted,[4] although it may yet prove to be correct. In the 1990s, no doubt proportionally more electronically generated and stored information (and possibly records) will be created, given the NRR figure noted above for intended installation of ADP equipment. The growing prevalence of EDI[5] and of electronic record keeping systems in Commonwealth bodies such as the Australian Securities Commission certainly represent a trend away from paper record formats. Whether there is an inverse relationship between electronic records and paper-based records is a separate issue for which solid evidence seems to be lacking. For some time yet, paper-based records, particularly files, will continue to be created as the staple record type in the Australian Public Service. Indeed, the Archives is actively if indirectly promoting this through its "NEED IT, PRINT IT, FILE IT" campaign, which urges a paper remedy for saving important information generated on word processors or sent via electronic mail systems. In addition, agencies with EDI and imaging systems which

convert inwards paper-based communications to electronic format are rightly reluctant to immediately discard the paper, a caution arising from legal and audit considerations. Thus, as Angelika Menne-Haritz stated in 1989, "we seem to be on the verge of a lengthy transitional period, in which letters must be stored on paper alongside texts constructed on word processors and electronically stored".[6] Certainly, for a long time to come, agencies' records and Archives' holdings will be primarily paper based. Archives will continue to require environmental controls and storage systems designed to accommodate them.

Looking closer at the breakdown of the 90% figure, one encounters several statistics which undoubtedly corroborate what many experienced in the ways of bureaucracy instinctively know, namely that extraneous or non-file papers seem just to go on accumulating.[7] As noted above, 46% of agencies' total holdings comprised OPRs. Such material included computer printout, volumes, folders, forms, card and other indexes, master sets of agency publications, and training and technical manuals, though the exact proportions were not obtained. But OPRs certainly included the type of material traditionally held on office shelves and in bookcases throughout the public service. The NRR revealed there is a great deal of OPRs held (the 1985-87 figure amounted to many hundreds of kilometres) and it was estimated to be growing at 15% p.a. Against this, the majority of such material would not warrant long-term retention and much of it may not need to be stored outside the agency, if sensibly managed.

"If sensibly managed" is the rub. The NRR revealed that the majority of OPRs were stored "in-house", i.e. in administrative/operational work areas, including registries and libraries. Of the ten record formats surveyed, only maps and plans, ADP/computer records and microforms showed higher percentages held in-house, and these represented minute quantities in the overall picture. In general the storage of other paper records by agencies is not cost efficient. The category OPR recorded the highest percentage (14%) which was both kept in-house and of which use was "inactive" (defined for NPR purposes as referred to less than once a year). It remains to be seen whether the problem is reduced through Archives' recent efforts to promote an automatic approval known as "Normal Administrative Practice" for the in-house routine destruction of, among others, this type of record.[8] Also relevant is the growing use of ADP equipment, particularly compact discs, to store and retrieve forms, master copies of publications, procedures, instructions, etc., previously held in multiple (hard) copies. Developments in the Australian Public Service (e.g. the CD-ROM known as the *Managers' Toolbox*) and in the US and Italian Tax Offices (concerning forms control and distribution) suggest that proportion of non-file paper records should fall.[9]

The second broad finding chosen for comment was the rate at which the NRR indicated records in agencies were growing. By comparing the quantity of records agencies created in the five years prior to the survey against total existing holdings, the NRR calculated that Commonwealth records (for all formats) were growing at over 10% p.a. An examination of growth rates identified in other government record surveys suggests that the NRR figure is certainly high. The 1986 New Zealand survey showed files to be growing at 8% p.a. (the NRR's equivalent was 12%) while the Archives' National Task Force survey concluded in 1978 a growth rate of 9% p.a. applied. One US estimate for federal government records claimed a 20% p.a. rate in 1982, while an earlier Canadian survey reported in 1962 stated there was a 10% increase each year in "records stored on government premises".[10] Though we may be slightly surprised therefore by the NRR's high growth rate, the Canadian and Victorian surveys did also corroborate the NRR in its conclusion that most records are of recent origin.

The situation suggested by a $+10\%$ p.a. growth rate is serious but not alarming. The NRR findings suggests that nearly 50% of the total holding of files was covered by disposal authorities, and a further percentage would be eligible for destruction as a normal administrative practice. The estimate of experienced Archives staff is that around 20% of all records in agency custody can disappear via destruction as normal administrative practice, and that approximately 30% is covered by General Disposal Authorities.

Explaining record growth rates, in particular the recent increases, is not easy. Given the local absence of official inquiries into paperwork reduction and indeed of case studies of the rate of current records accumulation in government offices, relevant empirical evidence is lacking. Expansion of government functions, and administrative, legal and even demographic change would be four factors affecting the rate.[11] Modern office technology, beginning with the typewriter and duplicator, followed by the photocopier and personal computer, has also been blamed for records growth. The Grigg report even suggested that a type of technological Parkinson's law operated in modern government departments.[12] Corporatisation and privatisation too would play a part in recent and future fluctuations in rates of creation, at least of Commonwealth records. The NRR does contribute something to our understanding, for example, through breakdowns of the figures for agencies of certain ages, location and functions which created more records in the five years prior to the survey than the total quantity of records they held when surveyed. A match of growth rates against format is also revealing. ADP/computer records for instance are growing rapidly, they require special storage conditions and contain large quantities of data (not measured in the NRR), and yet they represent only about 3% of the total quantity of records (measured

in linear shelf metres) held by agencies. By contrast, "other paper records", as explained above are also growing rapidly, represent 46% of the total holdings, and include the sort of material which wastes valuable office space. Influences of one growth rate on another should also be acknowledged — for example the proportions of ADP printout in "other paper records" and computer generated microfiche in "microforms" resulting from the high creation rate of ADP records.

The basic aim of the NRR was achieved, and the Australian Archives now possesses an invaluable bank of intelligence about agencies' records and associated matters. Since the late 1980s, it has been drawn upon in numerous ways for broad level planning as well as for regional and agency specific purposes. By providing comprehensive information for the first time about agencies and because its methodology required a direct approach to every agency, the NRR served the double purpose of improving dramatically Archives' market knowledge and of raising the market's awareness of Archives. Nevertheless, in sober hindsight, it must be seen as no more than a snap-shot in time, and the task remains not only to fully understand its findings but eventually to resolve whether (and if so, how) future shots should be taken.

FOOTNOTES

1. In no way do we intend to imply that the archives and records management literature on records surveys generally is not extensive (particularly due to the efforts of John Fleckner in the US), nor helpful in a general way. Our point is that there seems very little English language literature describing surveys spanning an entire population of national government record creating agencies. For Australian sources, we found the survey work of the Public Record Office of Victoria particularly helpful. See Public Service of Victoria, *Report of the Task Force on Records Management. Vol. 2. Survey of Records Management in Departments.* Melbourne, 1978.

2. For the Victorian survey see note 1. For the New Zealand reference, see *Information can be managed: a records management review sponsored by State Services Commission in cooperation with National Archives.* Auckland, Action Information Resources Management Ltd., 1986.

3. Coopers and Lybrand, *Information and Image Management: The Industry and the Technologies.* AIIM, 1987, pp. 4 and 59. The local estimate appeared in *GO* October 1988, p. 7.

4. To cite just one example, see Susan A. Chapdelaine, "The Paperless Office: Hope of the Future or Grand Illusion?", *Provenance* Vol. VI, No. 2, Fall 1988, pp. 35-42.

5. For a recent survey of this rapidly changing field, see the series of articles under the general title "Paperless Trading: Technology of the Future", in the *Financial Review* 30 January 1991, pp. 19-26.

6. See her "The impact of convergence on the life cycle of records" in Cynthia Durance, comp., *Management of Recorded Information: Converging Disciplines.* Munchen, K. G. Saur, 1990, p. 123. Similar points were made at the same conference by Ronald Weissman (p. 51) and Diana Sangway (p. 177).

7. The report of a survey of the British Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency testifies to the prevalence of "the usual folders, ring binders and piles of papers" as well as other miscellaneous items ranging from forgotten personal property and used envelopes to spare pairs of jeans, teapots and dusty cups! See F. H. C. Wyatt, "A trial initial records survey and document storage review", *PRO RAD Newsletter* No. 28, January 1988, pp. 3-7.

8. Advice for Australian public servants on applying such approval was issued in 1990 by the Australian Archives as an eight-page booklet titled *JUST FOR THE RECORD . . . How to destroy records as a normal administrative practice.*

9. The Toolbox currently holds the equivalent of 50,000 A4 pages but has considerable unused capacity and will be expanded in future editions. For a complete list of edition two's contents, see *Finance Circular* 1990/14. The tax forms CDs are mentioned in Terry Blake, "Doing his byte for a paperless society", *Australian Business* 11 July 1990, p. 74.

10. The unreferenced US estimate was mentioned by Lawrence J. McCrank in his *Archives and Library Administration: Divergent Traditions and Common Concerns.* New York, The Haworth Press, 1986, p. 68. The Canadian figure appeared in Vol. 1 of the report of the Royal Commission on Government Organisation, *Management of the Public Service.* Ottawa, The Queen's Printer, 1962, p. 482.

11. For two of many discussions of this subject, see Paul Mullins' paper to the 5th National Convention of the Records Management Association of Australia published as "Storage of Commonwealth Records — An Underestimated Field of Management", in Elaine Eggleston, *ed., Managing Information: A Bicentennial Perspective.* Canberra, RMAA ACT Branch, 1988, pp. 57-8, and the *Committee on the Records of Government Report*, Washington, 1985, pp. 21-2.

12. Great Britain. *Committee on Departmental Records. Report.* London, HMSO, 1954, p. 18.