

ELECTRONIC RECORDS MANAGEMENT IN TRANSITION

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*This article reviews Archives and Museum Informatics Technical Report, No 18 1993, **Electronic Records Management Program Strategies**, edited by Margaret Hedstrom, using it as a basis to make a number of observations about the Australian archival community's response to the management of electronic records. It identifies some areas for development by the archival and records management professions, in particular by building on the foundation of the Australian tradition of an holistic approach to recordkeeping, and offers some thoughts for advancing the electronic recordkeeping agenda.*

The literature on electronic records available within the archival corpus of literature has exploded in the last few years. Yet how much is theory and how much practice? The publication under review is an important account of results from programs predominantly based in North America. It would be satisfying to be able to assess Australian experience against that reported in this volume. Reports of activities in this arena are not readily available within Australia, however, it is worthwhile to attempt observations of our local professional scene using some of the issues raised in this significant state-of-the-art publication.

This is a collection of background essays prepared by eleven participants in a joint meeting of the Society of American Archivists' Committee on Automated Records and Techniques and the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators' Committee on Information Technology convened in April 1993 to discuss success factors and barriers to the development of electronic records programs. To these background papers has been added an assessment of the meeting and analysis of strategies by Margaret Hedstrom. The meeting did not reach agreement on the approaches best suited to archival management of electronic records programs but did agree that 'radical thinking' was required, leading to a possible transformation of the basic purposes of archives and archival methods. The inclusion of the essay 'Reinventing Archives' by David Bearman and Margaret Hedstrom is therefore a satisfying conclusion to the commentary of the volume, which then leads on to provide an extensive annotated bibliography and analysis of the literature on electronic records management by Richard Cox.

Margaret Hedstrom's assessment of 'only modest progress to date' seems fitting. The barriers to success identified by each of those reporting on programs, summarised by Hedstrom, seem depressingly familiar:

- lack of credibility of the archival community and individuals which undermines the ability to gain appropriate support and resources for archival programs;
- 'tyranny of obsolete methods';
- inability to express archival concerns in ways which are shared by executives, managers, auditors or information system specialists;
- lack of resources;
- problems of access to technology and appropriate expertise to develop effective responses to electronic records; and
- legal and structural barriers which limit both the view of electronic records as records and the jurisdiction of archives programs to effectively participate in the management of electronic records.

Success factors are not easy to determine from the essays presented. Modest successes are claimed. Individual programs are effective within the limited confines determined by the agencies. No one has the definitive answer and it will remain an elusive goal. In essence, to paraphrase Margaret Hedstrom, the keys to success seem to be: flexibility of approach; perseverance; working in conjunction with 'partners' in technology planning and management; and, perhaps most tellingly, 'every archives must craft a program and approach that is appropriate for the business needs and culture of the institution and customers it serves'.

I find it difficult to believe that we need this type of basic statement of relevance, however it is very clear that, as a profession, we do. This leads to the larger contemplation of the relevance of our traditional roles and methodologies in presenting and managing archival programs. Major groups of our 'clients', ones we rely on to obtain the source material necessary to perform our traditional functions, do not respect or see relevance in our activities. In such an environment, it is not difficult to see why resources are scarce and impacts are few. Lip service and superficial commitment to the 'history' and 'heritage' views of archives do not gel with the work being attempted in the archival management of electronic records.

This publication details the experience of eleven electronic records programs, primarily from the United States. The earliest electronic records programs, (then machine-readable) were established in the National Archives and Records Administration in 1972 and at the National Archives of Canada in 1974. The earliest reported US State to address such issues was Wisconsin in 1979. The experience of others provides a view of nearly two decades of work in this area.

The optimum organisational approach to the positioning of responsibilities for electronic records programs within archival institutions is not clear. From the initial response to set up separate 'special media' areas within institutions, we now have divergent views emerging on whether there is advantage to maintain separate 'specialists' or whether to integrate the management of electronic records into the daily work of all archivists. On the one hand is the reported experience of the National Archives of Canada. In 1986 it disbanded the specialised Machine Readable Archives Division and is now fostering the development of a 'second generation' of electronic records archivists, integrating electronic records into all archival functions. On the other hand is the experience of the New York State Archives and Records Administration (SARA) which initially (1988) integrated the approach to electronic records across existing archival responsibilities. In 1990, it was concluded that this spread of responsibility was impeding the development of the electronic records program, allowing insufficient resources to be devoted to electronic

records and diluting central direction for the program and a separate Center for Electronic Records was established.

Policy and guidelines for incorporating electronic record concerns into the larger recordkeeping regimes have been developed by various entities, notably the United Nations and the Australian Government (represented in this publication by Dagmar Parer). In neither case has effective implementation of such strategies been demonstrated. 'Clients' greet the initial policy statements with responses ranging from interest to disinterest, but without some form of sanctions or the extraordinary commitment of agency personnel, the implementation of policy and guidelines is difficult.

A brief paper reporting of the Canadian IMOSA, FOREMOST and CIMA projects is included in this volume. The results of these projects seem to be more accessible to the information technology community than to the archival community, and at least one of our Australian records management software developers has taken the findings from these projects as a basis from which to assess future directions for electronic recordkeeping requirements. The projects, based on partnerships both within and outside the Canadian government, have identified and addressed areas requiring further development and the details of a number of ancillary publications, studies and reports are included in the paper presented.

As the essays are summary documents, written to a specific brief to address critical success factors and barriers to success, there are some tantalising glimpses of projects which sound fascinating. One such project is the development of a 'information locator system', an electronic macro-finding aid and system level records management tool, being developed in 1993-1994 by the State of New York.

One of the recurrent themes in this publication is the need to re-forge the links between archives and records management. In the Northern American context this seems to be forcing a re-definition of records management to emphasise active participation in record system design and maintenance and away from the more entrenched focus on the management of non-current records and specific storage media concerns. Such an alignment fits in more comfortably with our Australian view of records management.

The concluding essay by Bearman and Hedstrom provides a positive approach to the gloomy conclusion of 'only modest progress to date' and offers a way of rethinking some of the traditional approaches to archival management. While aimed at envisaging more appropriate ways in which to further the archival management of electronic records, the essay has wider implications for all archival institutions, building on the critique of traditional archival methodology presented in Bearman's *Archival Methods*.¹

Using the principles and concepts of Osborne and Gaebler from *Reinventing Government*,² Bearman and Hedstrom present potential approaches to rethink archival techniques and reposition archival programs. Ideas ranging from the far fetched, to the surprisingly achievable are thrown up under headings of 'create legal rules and sanctions', 'empowering others rather than serving', 'enterprising archives', 'customer-driven archives' and 'decentralised archives'. The ideas which emerge are not all seriously proposed. What they do is force the healthy realisation that the way that we have traditionally done things is not the only way. An alternative model of archival activity is presented in summary form as the conclusion to the essay.

The alternative model of archival activity proposed focuses on the environment of the current organisation, defining its functions, determining what should be captured as records, deciding on the appropriate metadata to describe the records and their system environments, identifying the appropriate levers to ensure compliance with the requirements established, and finally to establish ways of managing the records so defined. In one interpretation of this model, the activities being defined are those of records management. What we have called archives administration or management has been regarded as a subset of appropriate records management in some quarters for a long while. The distinction between the formal labels placed upon such activities do not matter much, but the consequences of adopting such a model do matter and these are issues which need to be debated within the profession.

The ability to envisage alternative futures for archives, moving away from the cycle of always insufficient resources and scant attention to our professional concerns, is vital for the development of our professional thinking. This essay should become mandatory reading for all archivists.

Concluding this volume is a fifty-eight page bibliography on archives and electronic records compiled by Richard Cox. Separated into sixteen sections, the bibliography (not claimed to be comprehensive) lists articles and publications in English, accompanied by either original abstracts or annotations compiled by Cox. Guidance on which writings are assessed to be important or essential reading has been included. In addition to providing an extensive bibliography, Cox includes a brief analysis of the literature, noting the recurrence of a few authors in the area and providing graphs on the types and quantities of work published across the period 1973–1993. Even since its compilation in 1993, the archival literature on electronic records has escalated.

So, where do we stand in Australia in relation to electronic records management? I cannot present a factually based analysis of current projects and concerns across the Australian scene in relation to

electronic records management. I can but indicate some areas of concern, some possible areas of exploration and indicate some issues under current discussion within the Australian profession.

We are not badly positioned here in Australia to address the issues of electronic records management and its archival impacts. We start with a profession which is relatively unified in its acceptance of the relationship between records management and archives administration. Thanks largely to the CRS system, the Australian Archives impact on the training of many of our profession and the broad acceptance of professional education, we are professionally attuned to concepts such as mutability of organisations and notions of accountability.

The distinctions between the records management and archival professions — apparent in the USA — have never been that clear in Australia. A holistic approach to recordkeeping is not foreign to us. The Registrar program of the Australian Archives in the 1960s might be regarded as a forerunner to the notion of decentralising archival endeavours, acting to place agency priorities foremost. The hybrid professional who has not known whether he or she is a records manager (by action) or archivist (by training or inclination) has been a noted phenomenon of the 1980s. The reshaping of the professions into a 'recordkeeping' profession underway at Monash builds upon such earlier implicit linkages.

However, there is also an apparent divergence occurring within the Australian archival profession. It is the appraisal archivists, working with organisations which are attempting to manage records in electronic media, who are constantly striking the need to increase the relevance of the archival profession to their clients. It is this group within the profession that is pushing for the development of a wider records management approach and a redefinition of the endeavours of the archivist. The same impetus is not, in general, being generated by archivists concerned primarily with reference work. Yet once the end users of archives (researchers) begin consistently to demand access to electronic records, the battle about what we should be retaining will be over. Are we able to educate appropriately for the divergent strands of the profession within the one curriculum?

The regulatory, standard setting, or 'best practice' approach to recordkeeping has been adopted by Australian Archives and is being advocated within the NSW government through the proposed State Records Authority. The establishment of 'best practice' and standards for recordkeeping in the electronic environment, leaves agencies free to impose the controls which they regard as necessary for the management of their own functions. This is a neat solution for archival agencies, but there is increasingly a gap between the standards, which can be settled, and how to ensure compliance with such standards.

We must ensure that the standards are clear and, if prescriptive, are capable of being implemented. It is in the implementation arena where a gap in current expertise is obvious. Archivists are not at present able to provide the necessary advice in steering organisations towards effective implementation of recordkeeping requirements. We must also be aware that imposing disciplines, in previously unstructured and undisciplined areas in order to capture appropriate records in the electronic arena, is unpopular with the end user and requires a significant degree of management support. The clear focus of any implementation strategies must be on business needs and the culture of organisations.

Our records management practices, with their focus on managing current records, provides us with an alternative avenue through which to explore electronic records management systems. We have a number of established records management software packages, currently aimed at managing paper records, which are increasingly being marketed overseas. While the current software packages do not address the larger issues of electronic records management, some projects are in place to integrate elements of electronic recordkeeping into these systems. Through a lengthy process of re-design over a number of years, these packages have been tailored to satisfy most of the demands for our traditional records management. With appropriate specifications, and significant user demand, there is a good basis here to build systems which are capable of meeting electronic recordkeeping requirements.

Many of the packages being currently marketed as electronic document systems have been designed initially as something other than records management systems — as enhancements to word processing systems or text retrieval systems. We have been through that process with 'records management systems' which were essentially slightly altered library systems, or asset management systems. We should explore opportunities for building on our experience in specifying records management requirements for the paper environment, and in conjunction with software developers seek to develop improved systems capable of satisfying electronic recordkeeping requirements. Our basic conceptual building block, the CRS system, is a very flexible and powerful tool with great potential in the development of 'locator' systems, even on an individual agency scale.

In Australia, we must currently look to, and work with, the Commonwealth's Information Exchange Steering Committee, for developments analogous to the Canadian FOREMOST and IMOSA projects. This body, with its recent publication *Management of Electronic Documents in the Australian Public Service*,³ is exploring concepts of electronic document management relevant to all

organisations. While this is not the only body capable of defining electronic recordkeeping requirements, it is one that represents a very significant consumer market and therefore a body to which software developers will attend.

The debates on the definition of record in the electronic environment and its appropriate management, are re-shaping our professional boundaries. The profession is involved in questioning fundamental concepts — primarily, the nature of the record. In the paper world, the methods of recording transactions led to the creation of entities which cumulatively present a concise summary of experience of those grappling with the problems of establishing electronic records management programs. It would be even more significant if we could acknowledge a solid set of Australian achievements in a publication akin to this. In the meantime, we cannot do better than to learn from the strategies and experience detailed here and hope to identify trends which we can pursue.

ENDNOTES

1. David Bearman, *Archival Methods*, Archives and Museum Informatics Technical Report, vol. 3, no. 1, Spring 1989.
2. David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*, Penguin, New York, 1992.
3. Information Exchange Steering Committee, *Management of Electronic Documents in the Australian Public Service — a Report prepared by the IESC's Electronic Data Management Subcommittee*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1993.