

# What's in a Name?: Broadening Our Horizons in the Pursuit of a Recordkeeping Profession that Cherishes Unity in Diversity

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*At the 1999 Annual Convention of the Records Management Association of Australia (RMAA) there was debate about the possibility of a merger between the RMAA and the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA). Since then the debate has continued on listservs, in Branch meetings and in back rooms. In April 2000 the national executives of the two organisations met with the aim of getting to know each other better and to explore avenues for increased cooperation and collaboration. Following this meeting the two organisations released a 'Statement of Joint Purpose and Cooperation'. In December 2000 the full national councils of the two organisations held their first ever joint meeting at which the Statement was endorsed. This paper is the text of a presentation made to the 17th National Convention of the RMAA, held in Sydney in December 2000, by the immediate past President of the ASA. It presents the author's perspectives on the state of current relations between the two organisations and where he would like to see the relationship go in the future.*

A record is a record is a record! Such is the mantra of the now dominant 'records continuum' school of thought in Australia. The logical corollary of this mantra is: 'a recordkeeping professional is a recordkeeping professional is a recordkeeping professional'. Or to put it another way, we are no longer archivists or records managers, we are now all recordkeeping professionals.

In this paper I will explore the implications of this assertion of professional commonality. I intend, in particular, to focus on the practical agenda that awaits us if we accept the underlying truth of this inclusive view of the recordkeeping mission. If I have one message that I would like each of you to take away with you it is this. Accepting a theoretical assertion of commonality by itself changes nothing, we each of us have to do something (and in many cases something quite challenging and fundamental) if we are to convert this theoretical vision into actual reality.

In other words, I do not agree with the assertion that we *are* now all recordkeeping professionals. Rather, it is my view that we *should* all be recordkeeping professionals, but that collectively we have some distance to travel before we can make that claim. Furthermore, it is my view that the road to this recordkeeping nirvana will be a difficult one. We need to plan our journey carefully to minimise the risk of getting lost or ambushed along the way. We have to have a clear, shared understanding of the prerequisites for a healthy and unified recordkeeping profession, and what needs to be changed in order to meet these requirements.

A subsidiary argument that I shall make is that if we think an immediate merger of the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) and the Records Management Association of Australia (RMAA) will automatically create a unified recordkeeping profession, we are kidding ourselves. On the contrary, it is my view that a premature merger of our two organisations could harm, perhaps even fatally, our chances of forging a meaningful and truly inclusive professional unity. Rather than being a precursor to a unified profession, such a merger, while certainly desirable in the longer term, should instead be the logical culmination of our collective efforts to forge a broad, cohesive and unified recordkeeping church. To be successful this broad church has to both welcome and rejoice in diversity. It also has to be founded on a shared appreciation of the importance of records, and their cornucopia of uses and manifestations.

### **Why is a unified recordkeeping profession an ideal worth striving towards?**

Records continuum thinking posits that the traditional 'life-cycle' division of records into the separate categories of 'current records' and 'historical records' impedes the pursuit of a holistic and integrated recordkeeping mission. As stated earlier, a record is a record is a record – it's just that some records need to be kept for longer than other records, and some records may end up being used by a wider circle of users or subjected to a wider variety of uses than other records.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the impetus for continuum thinking has come from the emergence of electronic records. Continuum and post-custodial thinkers argue that the effective long-term management of electronic records requires more than a minor tweaking of traditional practices. The imperatives of electronic records are such that a whole new set of strategies is required. The old ways of doing things simply will not work in the digital networked environment. According to continuum thinkers archivists cannot afford to be the passive recipients of records that are no longer required by their creators. The traditional post-hoc approach to the archival mission, which has probably always been unsatisfactory, is patently inadequate in the electronic environment.

The emergence of electronic records has highlighted the fact that we can no longer take for granted (if we ever could) that records once created will remain reliable, comprehensible, authentic, accessible, and durable for as long as they are required to be used. If electronic records are to survive as reliable evidence of human activity they have to be created and captured into well-designed, well-documented recordkeeping systems. These recordkeeping systems not only have to capture reliable records, they will have to be migrated across successive software and hardware platforms lest they become the useless casualties of the rapid cycles of technological obsolescence that is one of the defining characteristics of the digital age.

The design of durable, good-quality recordkeeping systems is something that cannot be left to chance. We have already witnessed more than enough electronic recordkeeping disasters where valuable records have been rendered useless or unreadable because of a lack of foresight and an absence of professional recordkeeping expertise during the system design and creation phases of the records life span. To quote Michael Piggott 'durable evidence-rich records don't grow on trees'. Good recordkeeping requires the involvement of recordkeeping professionals throughout the entire life of the records. Put simply, if archivists are to have any electronic records to put into our archives they cannot divorce themselves from the processes of records creation and recordkeeping system design.

The strict separation of the regimes for managing current and historical records has had other undesirable effects. While archivists have by and large been successful in achieving and retaining a degree of professional status and recognition, the separation has encouraged the tendency towards the 'clericalisation' and deskilling of current records management. This has been disastrous both for the records themselves and for those of us who are charged with the responsibility of managing the records. Arguably, it has also encouraged records managers to adopt a short-sighted view of the value of records, encouraging a kind of 'corporate myopia' whereby the broader

societal and cultural values of records are ignored. In other words, the case for a continuation of the strict separation of archivists from the concerns of current recordkeeping and records managers from the concerns of historical recordkeeping has become completely unsustainable.

Some records managers might be inclined to view the new-found interest of archivists in current records as a threat. I prefer to see it as an opportunity to make common cause with a cognate profession in order to lift our profile and to improve our chances of fulfilling the objective of good recordkeeping.

Similarly, some archivists might be afraid that taking an interest in current recordkeeping means abandoning their broader historical and cultural concerns. On the contrary, it is exactly these broader concerns that must be addressed in any new holistic approach to recordkeeping, for to ignore those concerns is to impoverish us all. Saying this, however, will not by itself assuage the fears of many archivists that their historical and cultural concerns will be marginalised in any new unified profession, just as they fear being swamped by a numerically much larger contingent of records managers.

### **How can we become a unified recordkeeping profession?**

Simply saying that we should be a unified profession will not make it happen. As I see it, the single biggest obstacle to achieving a unified recordkeeping profession in Australia is that too many archivists and records managers have not yet broadened their horizons in the way that is necessary for them to be able to claim to be recordkeeping professionals. Indeed, a large number of archivists and records managers have no desire to become recordkeeping professionals. They are perfectly happy being archivists or records managers and have experienced no direct imperative to do otherwise.

People are not going to broaden their horizons just because I say that they should. There needs to be an ongoing process of exploring and demonstrating the logic of unity and the benefits that will accrue from having a unified profession. An important part of that process should be stronger links and increased cooperation between the ASA and the RMAA. Because of the fear and suspicion that exists between some elements of the two professions, any pre-emptive merger is likely to end in acrimony and further fragmentation of our community – the very thing that must be avoided. We have to get to know, understand and trust each other better before we can seriously entertain the prospect of a successful merger between the two organisations.

Even more important than getting to know each other better is the need for all of us to broaden our horizons. While different professions always consist of different streams and specialisations, every single member of a profession

needs to have a solid grounding in the full range of skills and activities encompassed by that profession. This means that, to be a recordkeeping professional, a curator of historical manuscripts has to have a reasonable understanding of current organisational recordkeeping systems and strategies. It means that, to be a recordkeeping professional, a corporate records manager needs to have a reasonable understanding of the issues and strategies for appraising records in the context of the broad spectrum of human experience.

To be a recordkeeping professional you need to have a broad education. To be any kind of professional you need to have a university degree. I imagine that this may be a controversial talking point, but it is my firm belief that until there is general agreement on the need for university education, no meaningful unified recordkeeping profession will emerge in this country.

As many of you will know, the educational infrastructure for archives and records in Australia is undergoing a period of major readjustment. The introduction of full fees for postgraduate courses has had a serious impact on the viability of many such courses in archives and records. This situation, coupled with the current revision of the archives and records competency standards, has encouraged the ASA and the RMAA to cooperate with each other in revisiting such basic questions as the entry-level requirements for professional membership of our respective organisations, and how tomorrow's professionals will receive their education. Unavoidably, these deliberations also encompass the issue of continuing professional development. We have begun to ask ourselves the question – in today's rapidly changing environment is it good enough to assume that once someone has been recognised as a professional they can remain a professional forever more without demonstrating any commitment to keeping their skills and knowledge up to date? Our view is that this assumption is no longer valid. Being a professional means keeping up to date with the latest advances and developments in your profession. If together the RMAA and ASA can arrive at a consensus on these views, it will represent a significant landmark in the journey towards a single recordkeeping profession.

Another essential feature of a profession is the existence of a professional association which individual professionals pay to join out of their own pockets and to which they are prepared to commit some of their unpaid time and energy. By virtue of the large proportion of RMAA members who have their membership fees paid by their employer, it could be argued that the RMAA resembles not so much a professional as an industry association. This, together with the differences in educational requirements for professional membership, presents challenges for any proposed merger between the RMAA and the

ASA. In the longer term I believe these challenges can be overcome, but it will require the broadening of individual horizons that I have already described.

### **The relationship between the ASA and the RMAA**

Over the past couple of years the archives and records industry in this country has been engaged in some fundamental reconsideration of its representational structures. One of the most encouraging aspects of this reconsideration has been the pursuit of closer cooperation between the ASA and the RMAA.

Joint activities have been common at branch level for some years, particularly in relation to the running of joint meetings, workshops and seminars. Last year the two organisations issued a joint media release on the so-called 'Kennett shreadings' and are busy planning a joint conference in Hobart for next year. There are also a number of proposals for joint activity involving the ASA and the RMAA that emerged from last year's National Scholarly Communications Forum Round Table on Archives in the National Research Infrastructure, notably in the area of promoting good recordkeeping in the private sector.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most significant has been the highly successful collaboration in the development of the national and international records management standards and in the development and review of competency standards for the records and archives industry.

In April 2000 the executives of the two organisations met informally in Melbourne. Out of this extremely useful and productive meeting emerged a 'Statement of Joint Purpose and Cooperation'.<sup>3</sup> This memorandum of understanding was endorsed by both national councils and signed by Chris Fripp and I as Presidents of our respective organisations. I want to emphasise that the Statement is *not* a blueprint for merger. Rather, this landmark document commits both organisations to cooperation and collaboration in 13 different areas where we have identified mutual concern and interest and the potential for productive cooperation. These include reciprocal arrangements for membership and conferences, political lobbying, standards development, information sharing, professional development, recordkeeping promotion and course accreditation.

A few days ago here in Sydney we held the inaugural joint meeting of the full national councils of our two organisations. In addition to being a useful familiarisation opportunity, the meeting reaffirmed and extended the 'Statement of Joint Purpose and Cooperation' and explored options for the forging of broader strategic alliances with cognate organisations.

With regard to the latter, the ASA has proposed the pursuit of broad-based discussions regarding the possible establishment of an 'Australian National

Council on Archives and Records'. The ASA envisages such a Council acting as an umbrella confederation representing the major organisations concerned with the creation, management, use and preservation of records in Australia. The Council would provide a forum for the regular exchange of views and the pooling of effort between those organisations which, importantly, would retain their autonomy and separate identities within the confederation. The aims and objectives of this confederation might include the following:

1. To provide a voice of consensus on recordkeeping matters.
2. To bring to the attention of the public, government or relevant institutions or organisations, matters of current concern in the recordkeeping field.
3. To encourage, support, assist and facilitate ongoing initiatives and programs of education in and promotion of the importance of good recordkeeping and the importance of preserving and providing access to our archival heritage.
4. To determine sector-wide priorities for funding for research activities and national infrastructure projects.
5. To encourage and facilitate the provision of funding for archives and records programs, research activities and national infrastructure projects and to provide advice on the allocation of such funds and the development of suitable national funding models.
6. To encourage the development and adoption of suitable standards for recordkeeping and archives.
7. To encourage and facilitate collaboration and the forging of broadly based alliances with the aim of improving the state of recordkeeping and advancing the cause of archive services.
8. To encourage and facilitate the development of cooperative documentation strategies.
9. To work towards the development of a seamless web-based distributed national access infrastructure for archives and records based on interoperable descriptive and technical standards.
10. To commission regular studies of researcher needs with regard to access to archives and records.

Discussions concerning the creation of any sector-wide confederation are still in their infancy and it will be fascinating to see where these discussions lead. Last Sunday we made a good start when the joint meeting of the national

councils of the RMAA and ASA gave in-principle support to the idea of an umbrella confederation spanning the entire records sector and committed to holding further discussions to firm up the proposal. There now appears to exist an unprecedented level of widespread commitment to closer cooperation and integration of the efforts and representational structures in the archives and records communities. For its part, ASA Council is determined to capitalise on this commitment now before the momentum is lost.

The more our two organisations cooperate on joint initiatives and establish joint committees, the more our mutual understanding will grow and the easier it will be to pursue convergence and a possible future merger of the two organisations. I should stress that a merger between the ASA and the RMAA is only one of a wide range of possible future scenarios of sector-wide cooperation and convergence. Nevertheless, the trend towards collaboration and convergence is building a momentum that may well prove to be unstoppable. In turn this will encourage all of us who wish to reinvent ourselves as 'recordkeeping professionals', by creating a climate that is favourable to the kinds of broadening of individual horizons that I have argued is an essential prerequisite for a unified profession. Once we have broadened our horizons in this way, a merger of the ASA and the RMAA may well become an irresistible inevitability rather than a theoretical and ideological assertion, which is all that the proposition can claim to be today.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate my firm belief that any new organisation that might emerge from a future amalgamation of the ASA and the RMAA has to accommodate and be fully representative of the range of circumstances and preoccupations that exist in the recordkeeping community. The organisation has to have a professional focus that is founded on tolerance and respect for the diversity of uses of records, and includes all of the members of the recordkeeping community. Most certainly, we cannot afford to alienate or antagonise any of our members by marginalising or belittling their professional concerns and preoccupations. I urge each and every one of you, if you have not already done so, to commit to broadening your professional horizons in pursuit of a new recordkeeping profession that cherishes unity in diversity.

## ENDNOTES

1 Sue McKemmish, 'Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: A Continuum of Responsibility', in *Proceedings of the Records Management Association of Australia 14th National Convention, 15-17 Sept 1997*, Perth, RMAA, 1997.

2 See [www.asap.unimelb.edu.au/nscf/roundtables/r10/r10\\_resolutions.html](http://www.asap.unimelb.edu.au/nscf/roundtables/r10/r10_resolutions.html).

3 See [www.archivists.org.au/council/rmaa-asa.html](http://www.archivists.org.au/council/rmaa-asa.html).