

ISO 15489: helpful, hype or just not hot?

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The publication of ISO 15489, the first ever international standard for records management, provided the profession with a unique opportunity and tool for enhancing the practice and profile of records management. But will the opportunity be grasped? What impact will the standard have and why? This article examines the details of an ongoing two-year study which is assessing the impact of ISO 15489 in a range of organisations in the United Kingdom. It shares some of the early results in an attempt to promote awareness and use of the standard and provides initial views on whether the standard is helpful, hype or just not hot enough to handle yet.

Introduction

The 3 October 2001 marked the launch of ISO 15489 Parts 1 and 2, the first international standard for records management.¹ Members of TC46/SC11, the ISO subcommittee responsible for leading the work on the standard over the previous four years, and delegates at the ARMA

International Conference, Montreal witnessed the milestone event in the records management profession globally. Joining them via a live video link to Stratford-upon-Avon in the United Kingdom, the home of William Shakespeare, was the audience at The National Archives' annual *Records Management in Government* Conference. Everyone heard Sarah Tyacke, Keeper of Public Records (England and Wales), endorse the standard by saying it provided a 'strategic and holistic approach to the management of records that senior managers can understand'.² But will this unique opportunity be grasped by records managers and others, and if so in what ways and with what results?

The first ever standard devoted solely to records management, AS 4390, which was developed by Standards Australia and formed the starting point for ISO 15489, has had a varied impact in Australia across different sectors.³ It has been widely adopted by the state and federal governments and has influenced initiatives such as metadata frameworks and DIRKS, the design and implementation of recordkeeping systems model.⁴ But its impact in the private sector has been less apparent. Outside Australia, organisations have used AS 4390, in part at least, in the absence of their own national standard or an international one.⁵ Will these organisations and others turn to ISO 15489 as being more appropriate since it provides 'an officially endorsed benchmarking model of best professional practices for global emulation'?⁶

A research project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, is currently exploring this idea by monitoring the impact of the standard in a range of organisations within the United Kingdom.⁷ This article examines the aims, objectives and methodology of the ongoing project and shares some of the early results from the first year in an attempt to provide initial views on the question 'what is the value of such a standard in this field?' Is ISO 15489 a good thing — does it help, is it hype or just not a hot enough topic yet?

Research aims and objectives

The project, a longitudinal two-year investigation, which began in August 2003 and ends in July 2005, aims to assess the impact of ISO 15489 by identifying and monitoring a broad range of organisations in the United Kingdom. Some of the organisations are already adopting or using ISO 15489 whilst others are not; but the views of the non-

adopters are equally important and it will be useful to monitor if they become adopters during the lifetime of the project. Answers to the following questions are being sought:

- Which sectors and organisations are using the standard? Why and how are they using it? Who is driving the use of the standard – is it records managers, archivists, IT professionals, management, others?
- What kind of ‘return on investment’ are organisations expecting? Are organisations assessing, evaluating and/or measuring the impact or effect of the standard on their organisation and, if so, how? In practice how well do these assessment systems operate and what are the outcomes?
- What difference has adoption of the standard made to records managers and other recordkeepers? Has the standard changed the way in which managers and recordkeepers view records management and/or how records professionals are viewed?
- As a result of using the standard what revisions are required and what other related publications and initiatives would be useful for records professionals and others who have responsibility for managing their organisation’s records?

It is hoped that the outcome will be an understanding of what difference ISO 15489 has made to the management of records in organisations and to the records management profession.

Methodology

The project has two main strands – a macro-level and micro-level strand.

At the macro-level, fifty organisations were identified and are being monitored at a distance, using a web-based electronic discussion platform called Blackboard. They were engaged by sending invitations to the UK records management listserv⁸ and existing contacts, in an effort to make the audience inclusive rather than exclusive. The aim was to attract participants from a broad range of sectors, both large and small organisations, with more or less well developed systems for

managing records and, ideally, including both organisations which had already begun or decided to adopt the standard as well as others which had not.

At the micro-level, four organisations are participating, two from the public sector and two from the private sector, providing in-depth case studies. They were purposefully selected through personal approaches because it was felt important to have existing credibility with these organisations to support their sustained participation in the project over the two years. Each organisation is either committed to adopting the standard (or parts of it) or is very interested in it, ideally not in the same way or for the same reasons. They are being monitored through face-to-face interviews and group discussions with relevant personnel, supported by email contact.

The initial data collected in both strands aimed to establish a baseline against which a comparison will be made towards the end of the project. In addition to factual data about each organisation (eg sector, number of records management staff and existence of policy and procedures) the baseline data established what the participants' plans were in relation to using ISO 15489, or not, and why as well as how its effect on the organisation would be measured. No distinction was made between the standard per se (ie ISO 15489 Part 1) and the technical report (ie ISO/TR 15489 Part 2) and therefore in discussing the results later in the article the term 'standard' is used to cover both parts of ISO 15489. On reflection, it could have been useful to make a distinction but at that stage it was considered to be most important to focus on the use of ISO 15489 in general. Distinctions between the use and usefulness of the two parts will be addressed at the end of the project.

The macro-level group were also asked their opinion of ISO 15489 by giving them a series of statements to respond to on a four-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. These were:

- Using ISO 15489 will/would raise the profile of records management
- Using ISO 15489 will/would encourage consistent and/or best records management practice
- Using ISO 15489 will/would be useful to inform senior managers

- Using ISO 15489 will/would be useful for auditing current records management practice
- Using ISO 15489 will/would be useful as a guide for developing procedures
- Using ISO 15489 will/could be useful as a tool for additional resources
- That ISO 15489 is not a compliance standard is a disadvantage in my organisation

The development of the statements was influenced by the results of a preliminary investigation conducted by the author. The word 'will' was used in the questionnaire for the ISO 15489 users and the word 'would' for the non-users.⁹

The larger group of organisations is being monitored at three-monthly intervals. They are either asked to complete an electronic questionnaire or to participate in an electronic discussion. Questionnaires seek updates about the status of their plans, any changes to them and any effects the standard has had on them or their organisation. Discussions relate to an issue which has arisen from the previous data collected and selected by the project team. In both cases the participants are individually alerted by email of the task and deadlines, reminders are sent as required. All contributions are made anonymous unless the participant wishes to reveal their identity when participating in an e-discussion.

The four case study organisations, on the other hand, are being monitored at six-monthly intervals. In preparation for each visit the key personnel involved are asked to reflect on changes related to the management of records, both within and outside of the ISO 15489 implementation or sphere of influence. This includes activities and achievements relating to its adoption against their plans as well as events, incidents or issues which have had, or may have, an impact on its implementation.

At the end of the first year of the project the baseline data has been collected and analysed and summaries have been provided to all participants; two e-discussions have taken place with the macro-level participants and one six-monthly update has taken place in each of the four case study organisations. This article focuses on the results from

the macro-level strand with reference to the micro-level, case study strand for comparative purposes only.

Before examining the results it is important to present a brief summary of the current landscape that is having an impact on, or has the potential to influence, records management in the UK to provide the context in which they must be interpreted.

The current UK context for records management

Since the beginning of the new millennium much has happened in the UK which has had a direct or indirect effect on records management in the broadest sense. The most noticeable changes concern the developments in its regulatory framework which have resulted in the publication of its first freedom of information legislation as well as regulations concerning electronic communications and e-commerce, including digital signatures, and environmental impact.

In the public sector the one piece of legislation on everyone's lips is, without doubt, the Freedom of Information Act (2000) which comes into full force on 1 January 2005 along with the Environmental Impact Regulations 2004.¹⁰ From that date members of the public, anywhere in the world, will have the right of access to information, that is not subject to an exemption, from public bodies in the UK on submission of a written request which the public body concerned must respond within twenty working days. Effective records management will obviously be key to these organisations being able to comply with the legislation and, in order to support them, a range of guidance has been issued.

Probably the most important publication is the Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on records management issued under Section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act, which public bodies are strongly recommended to follow as the route to establishing a freedom of information compliant records management programme when the Act comes into force.¹¹ It will also support the development of systems for dealing with requests efficiently and effectively within the prescribed time limits.

In addition to recommending organisations have a records management policy and charge an appropriately senior member of staff with 'lead responsibility' for records management, the Code includes

recommendations on the creation, capture, maintenance and disposal of records. Given that there is a 'regulator', the Information Commissioner, who promotes observance of the Code and has powers of prosecution under the FOI Act, many organisations in the public sector have been prompted into action and have already developed a records management policy.¹²

But this new legislation, whilst no doubt enjoying the highest profile, is not the only driver for good records management in the public sector. Corporate governance, accountability and appropriate risk management, in response to the 'Turnbull Report', as well as quality and more informed decision-making are other important elements of the landscape.¹³ And for central government of equal importance to freedom of information, and with a similar deadline, is the modernising government, or e-government, agenda. This has set government departments the target of making all government services available electronically by 2005.¹⁴ Business systems clearly underpin e-service delivery and have important recordkeeping implications but electronic document and records management systems (EDRMS) are also being introduced to support e-service delivery.

In the private sector the landscape is more varied and drivers more diverse. In general terms drivers include operational efficiency, effectiveness, economy and competition, which requires appropriate protection and exploitation of the information asset captured in records. Added to this are accountability, corporate governance and business continuity, particularly in the wake of high-profile cases such as Enron and British American Tobacco and the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. And, of course, freedom of information legislation will have some impact on those private sector organisations which have business partnerships with public bodies.

Together these are just some of the developments on the agenda for the records management profession and which have or are beginning to have an effect on the way in which organisations view records management in the UK. If the significance of records management were to be measured in terms of the number of seminars and conferences on the topic, or the number of attendees at the annual conference of the professional society, or the number of messages posted to the records management discussion list or the number of very helpful best practice guidance and standards being published by The National Archives UK

and other bodies such as JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee), then there is no question that its importance has increased significantly in the last two years.¹⁵

The macro-level participants

The fifty participants represent a wide range of sectors including central and local government, health, pharmaceuticals, education, archives and libraries, mining and consultancy companies. Twenty-nine (58%) are using the standard and twenty-one (42%) are currently not using it. Whilst it would be inappropriate to make any generalisations, given the size of the sample, all participants in the construction, energy and finance sectors *are* using the standard, whereas in the local government, university and education sectors there are almost equal numbers of users and non-users. In central government, perhaps surprisingly given the current focus on records management in this sector, most of the participants are *not* using the standard, but the reasons will become clear later. Overall, in this sample the take-up of the standard is similar in both the public and private sectors.

The number of records management staff working in the participant organisations ranges from zero to more than ten, the pattern being similar for both users and non users of the standard, with the most frequent staff size being two to five people in both cases. Size of staffing does not appear to be a significant factor in the standard's use, although, all current users do have at least one member of staff responsible for records management, indicating that records management is a recognised function in all organisations using ISO 15489.

Drivers and extent of records management in the participating organisations

Participants were asked to identify the top three drivers for managing records in their organisation from the following list of options:

- accountability/transparency
- competition/competitive edge
- corporate governance
- e-government/e-business

- cost savings
- legal compliance
- managing information as an asset
- regulatory compliance
- risk management
- sector standards/best practice

Alternatively they could select 'there are no acknowledged drivers' as their response.

The results were similar for both users and non-users of the standard as Table 1 shows.

<i>Users</i>	<i>Non users</i>
1. Regulatory compliance	1. Legal compliance
2. Legal compliance	2. Accountability
3.. Accountability	3. Managing information / regulatory compliance

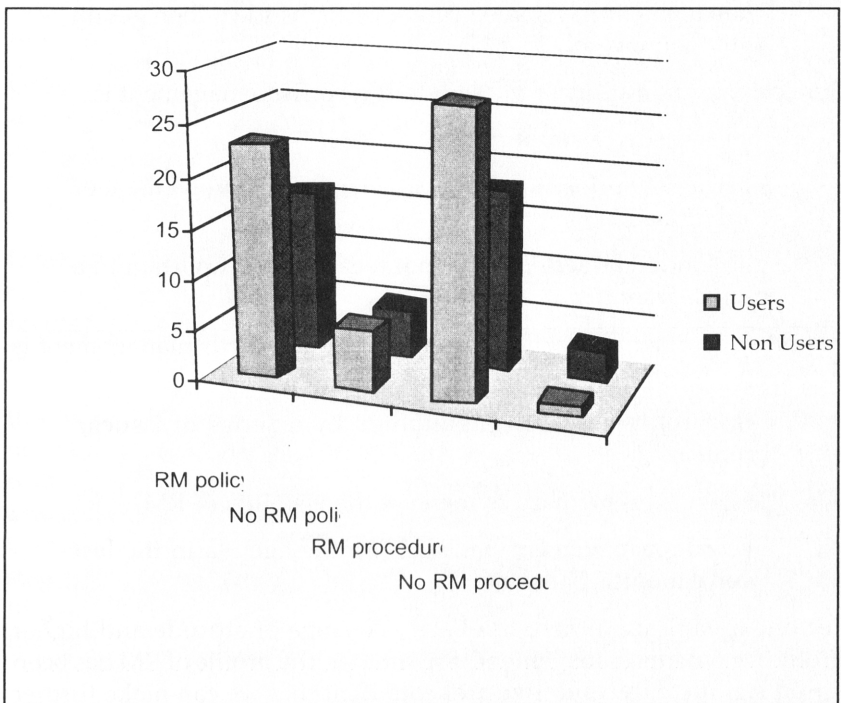
Table 1. Top three drivers for managing records

In the public sector by far the most influential external drivers for records management, irrespective of whether this involved using ISO 15489 or not, are the forthcoming Freedom of Information Act, data protection and e-government.¹⁶ Corporate governance and cost savings were also identified as drivers by some users and non-users, but neither 'competition/competitive edge' nor risk management are important drivers for managing records for either category. However, more views on drivers emerged as a result of the final question about the nature and status of records management in the participating organisations (discussed later).

A baseline measure of the extent of records management in the participating organisations was established by asking if their organisation had a records management policy and/or records

management procedures. Figure 1 shows that most of the participants who are using the standard do have a records management policy (79%) or records management procedures (96%). But there appears to be no correlation between the existence of a policy or procedures for managing records and use of ISO 15489, because a similar proportion of non-users also have a records management policy (76%) and a large proportion have records management procedures (85%). The requirement to have a records management policy under the Code of Practice for freedom of information referred to previously, may explain this but further analysis of the data is required to be confident about this deduction.

Figure 1. Existence of records management policy and procedures



Status of records management in the participating organisations

Given the high percentage of participating organisations with a policy and/or procedures for managing records it would not be unreasonable to expect the status of records management to be good. However, the responses to the question 'how is records management regarded in your organisation and have there been any changes to this in the last twelve months?' are extremely varied and very interesting.

In some organisations the perception of records management is not very high. Amongst the comments from those using the standard were:

- 'records management has had a fairly low profile in the organisation'
- 'a great deal of lip service is paid to the value of records management, but in reality it is a low value activity'
- 'management pay some lip service to the idea, then get on with their day jobs.'

Similarly, for non-users of the standard records management is:

- 'not regarded as important'
- 'seen as low priority ... no top management involvement or commitment'
- 'the Cinderella service' and 'not regarded as important ... a necessary evil.'

But other comments suggest that the profile of records management is increasing, for example:

- 'RM profile has been highlighted by a series of issues/problems'
- 'we are working hard to increase the visibility of RM'
- 'records management has risen up the agenda in the last twelve months.'

For one organisation there has been 'a change of attitude and higher profile for records management'; for another 'the profile of RM has been raised significantly' and '[we are] confident that we can make further progress in 2004/2005'.

This was sometimes explicitly linked to preparations for FOI legislation and e-governments as in, 'FOI has caused a degree of panic', and 'RM is officially tied in with FOI'. For one public sector organisation, records management is now enjoying a 'relatively high profile – mostly because of FOI requirements', for another the 'Freedom of Information Act has provided the driver for a records management function ... combined with modernising government', with a third saying that:

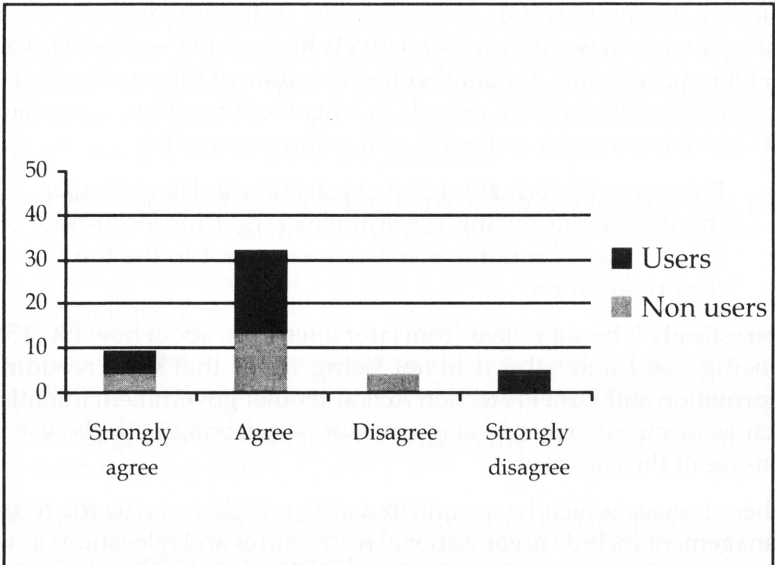
Freedom of Information, Data Protection and in particular the 2004 modernising government target for electronic records have brought records management to the top of the organisation.

Interestingly it became clear from later questions, about how ISO 15489 is being used and why it is not being used, that the Freedom of Information and Data Protection Acts and other government initiatives, such as electronic records management, are driving both the use *and* non-use of the standard.

Other changes which have contributed to a higher profile for records management include organisational restructures and relocations as well as a greater focus on audit and risk management, sometimes as a direct result of the media-prominent cases in corporate America, mentioned earlier, and the resultant Sarbanes-Oxley Act.¹⁷

Users and non-users alike highlighted that the current perception and role of records management within the organisation is a very important factor for the acceptance and implementation of the standard. If 'there is a lack of commitment to implementing RM generally' then the standard will be deemed to be less important to the organisation, and if the profile of records management is low then successful implementation of the standard is less likely. However, when asked if using ISO 15489 will raise the profile of records management, the majority of those answering the question, both users and non-users alike, believe it will. Curiously, some of those who were already using the standard feel strongly that it will *not* help raise the profile of records management (Figure 2). It will be interesting to find out if this holds true at the end of the project.

Figure 2. Will ISO 15489 raise the profile of records management?



Establishing the range of participants in the project, together with key drivers for managing records in their organisations, as well as the extent of and current regard for records management, is important because it provides the context for the following analysis of their views about the standard.

Why ISO 15489 is being used

The key reasons for using the standard are:

- best practice
- development and/or review of policy/procedures
- promotion and profile.

These compare well with the previous study conducted in 2002/2003. Although of less significance here are the uses of ISO 15489 as a starting point for managing records or in supporting the development of a retention schedule.¹⁸ The endorsement of best practice, as a guideline for managing records and making a link to existing policies and

procedures are the most popular uses of ISO 15489. Other internal benefits include its explicit use to promote recordkeeping within the organisation and to demonstrate the need for a new EDRMS (electronic document and records management system). It is also being used indirectly to raise the profile of recordkeeping by being 'useful for other specialists ie IT' and giving staff 'confidence to deposit records with us', and it is felt that it will be used for future planning.

ISO 15489 is also seen as having external benefits 'as a reference document for client projects' and financial benefits because the 'ability to say that we use the standard helps in gaining contract work'. But even among users of the standard there are those who 'are still finding out about its use'.

Reasons for not using ISO 15489

Responses from the non-users as to why the standard is not being used are equally interesting and the key reasons are:

- lack of priority and/or relevance
- lack of awareness
- implications for additional resources
- lack of expertise.

Lack of priority was a popular suggestion for not using the standard when other issues were more important, as illustrated by the following comments:

- 'work is being undertaken on physical records ... to ensure that we are ready for freedom of information' and 'at present we are working towards the Lord Chancellors Code of Practice' (which also relates to Freedom of Information legislation)
- 'time is being used on [an] EDRM project'
- 'records management is mainly ignored in our organisation ... we are implementing EDRM and this is a good driver.'

And perceived relevance was highlighted in comments such as:

- 'most of what we do would comply with ISO 15489, but I cannot see the benefit in us carrying out an exercise to ascertain whether or not we do'
- 'the organisation is still very young, there isn't a great deal of incentive to attempt to follow the ISO standard as well'
- 'lack of commitment to records management generally ... reluctance to adopt complex regimes ... mindset.'

Lack of awareness of the standard was cited as a reason for not using it, as was the lack of expertise or a champion to support its introduction – 'there is no-one to introduce or champion ISO 15489'. ISO 15489 does not yet have the same profile as other standards such as ISO 9000,¹⁹ where organisations are keen to show that they are using the standard and are formally accredited. 'On a more cultural level, the organisation does not appear to see accreditation generally as a driver for improvement – for example we do not have Investors in People or ISO 9001'.²⁰ If neither of these high profile and prestigious initiatives has been adopted, then it is unlikely, at this early stage at least, that the ISO standard will be implemented.

There is also a fear, particularly from senior managers, that introducing the standard will require additional resources:

- 'the Director of Admin resists because he suspects that additional expenditure will follow any attempt to use the standard'
- 'we have insufficient resources to drive both e-government and focus on the implementation of the standard.'

Having established the main reasons for using or not using ISO 15489 it is perhaps the comments about the standard itself that are most interesting and more illuminating about its current value and how it is viewed.

Is ISO 15489 helpful?

One respondent described ISO 15489 as being 'useful as an overview' and another that 'it has shown that we are compliant to varying degrees', perhaps implying its usefulness as a benchmarking tool. Both users and non-users are in almost total agreement (96% of users and 90% of non-users) that ISO 15489 will be useful for developing procedures. For instance, one is 'using ISO 15489 as a checklist to tell [them] how to manage their records in a consistent way' and another has 'produced a simple matrix of mandatory and nice to haves'.

Other positives are that:

- it sets out a broad framework to adopt
- it represents best practice
- it supports the policy and procedures for records management and in particular the retention schedule
- it supports other initiatives (eg freedom of information)
- the project methodology is useful
- it is more relevant than PD0008²¹
- 'the internal auditors love it'
- 'a quote from the ISO 15489 standard helps the business take records management more seriously.'

One participant said they will 'audit (themselves) against clauses of the standard, qualitative as well as quantitative' and another thought a 'quality assurance/audit programme would be developed'.

It is felt that the standard tends to reinforce practice rather than institute new ideas, its value lying in its articulation of core concepts which are already known. One user summed it up by saying 'the value of the standard is that it makes the distinction between "doing the right thing" and "doing things right"' (as in the DIRKS methodology).

Both users and non-users said the standard is being used with other initiatives, not simply by itself. They identified it as being helpful in relation to electronic records management initiatives and training, with many also citing its use in the context of freedom of information preparations.

However, when participants were asked whether the standard would be useful to inform senior managers, there was a complete split in opinion with 59% of users disagreeing or strongly disagreeing and 62% non-users agreeing or strongly agreeing. Perhaps this is a reflection of their respective knowledge of the content and nature of the standard, which were causes for concern and the focus of many of the negative comments. (The baseline questionnaire did not ask users to rate their knowledge of ISO 15489 and the approach it advocates and therefore, unfortunately, it is not possible to assess the impact of knowledge and understanding on usage and responses).

Is ISO 15489 all hype?

Some of the negative comments relate to:

- its use of 'technical language'
- it being resource intensive
- the need to adapt it to local needs
- the need for it be applied by records managers.

In fact some respondents prefer other documents about managing records such as those published in relation to managing records for freedom of information compliance such as the Code of Practice on records management.²²

Whilst the value of ISO 15489 is clear to its current users, as demonstrated by earlier quotations and comments, it was questioned by others:

- 'a great deal of value is placed on these standards but the behaviours which these standards are meant to encourage do not bear much scrutiny'
- 'would refer to [the] standard but will produce more focussed advice/guidance on managing records.'

A common thread to emerge is the need for ISO 15489 to be reviewed so that it will better meet the needs of the full range of potential users, as illustrated by the following comments:

- 'some of the statements in it are difficult to understand/interpret'

- ‘readers who are not records managers will probably be looking for more practical assistance and the document could be disappointing’
- ‘revision – with contents to allow non specialists to comply with its requirements’
- ‘I would have welcomed more guidance re examples of functional classification schemes.’

This may well explain why, for instance, some organisations are planning to produce their own guidelines which refer to ISO 15489. Whilst it is not necessarily hype or a hindrance the standard does present something of a hurdle for some participants and their organisations, if only by virtue of its language and lack of sufficient practical examples and tools. One could argue that it is better to develop more practical tools separately which then support the standard’s implementation though the language issue is a barrier to be considered carefully given that all of the potential users will not be records professionals, at least not in the UK.

Is ISO 15489 a hot topic?

Although there is some support for the standard from those not currently using it, with some wanting to use it in the future, these participants did not make specific comments about it. What is interesting, however, is that even where the standard is not being used, it has actually been considered as an option. One participant felt that ‘the time is not right. We have a lot to do to get ready for FOI’ and provided a catalogue of other initiatives happening within the organisation that were felt to be more useful, including the introduction of retention schedules, a pan-organisation information audit, the development of a corporate taxonomy and production of a business case for EDRMS.

The support or otherwise of senior managers is extremely influential in deciding whether or not the organisation should use the standard. As mentioned earlier, events in the USA have already impacted on those organisations who are using the standard. As one pointed out ‘records management has just begun to register in the radar of senior executives because of BAT (British American Tobacco), Enron and Sarbanes-Oxley’,

while another senior manager agreed that 'the main driver for this has been the Enron case'.

It is clear for both users and non-users that, where the culture of the organisation does not recognise the importance of records management, it will be a difficult process to introduce the standard. Even for an organisation where records management is the core business, this does not ensure that the standard is being used. As one non-user pointed out 'RM and storage is our core business and any changes are largely driven by the market and the type of customer that we manage records for'. And, when it is claimed that 'senior management have endorsed its importance' the standard is not always being used. So is one to accept that it is the nature of the standard itself that is a major factor in its non-adoption?

For the majority of participants (86%) the use of standards, in general, is not important in their organisations, which will obviously have a bearing on the acceptance and usefulness of ISO 15489. And the fact that ISO 15489 is not a compliance standard could also have a bearing on its implementation. When asked if it was a disadvantage that the standard is not a compliance most of the users (72%) and non-users (81%) agreed that it was. Because the use of standards was generally not felt to be an important issue, one might have expected that the standard's lack of compliance status would not be an issue. In fact the reverse was true with one participant subsequently saying that it would be 'an advantage if ISO 15489 carried more legal/regulatory impact'. Interestingly, an interviewee in one of the case studies actually felt it 'had the look and feel of a compliance standard'.

It is perhaps because the standard is a voluntary one, not bound to any formal compliance or audit framework, that there is a reluctance (or no drive) on the part of some to adopt it, one respondent commenting that they 'do the minimum that we can legally get away with'. Others, however, identified compliance as a key issue. Even though ISO 15489 is not a compliance standard it is 'highly regarded because of compliance issues'. Given the range of contexts in which the word 'compliance' was used in the responses, it was felt that this was an issue to pursue, partly to ensure the conclusions drawn were accurate, in terms of the need for the standard to be a 'shall' standard rather than a 'should'

standard, and partly to dig deeper to understand the views. It was therefore selected as the focus of an e-discussion for the first quarterly update.²³

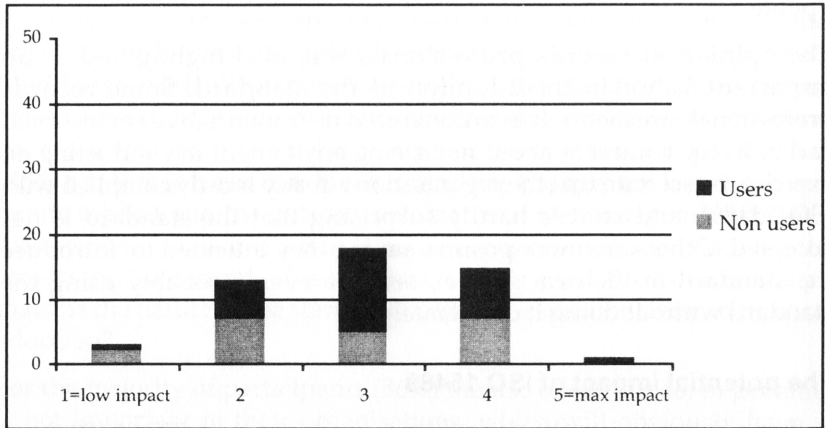
The opinion of records professionals was also highlighted as an important factor in the adoption of the standard. Some records professionals are themselves unconvinced of its merits (as demonstrated earlier in the comment about not seeing any benefit in conducting an exercise to ascertain that the organisation already mostly complied with ISO 15489), and so it is hardly surprising that the standard is not accepted. Others are more positive saying they intended to 'introduce the standard in the near future', or were even 'probably using the standard without doing it deliberately'.

The potential impact of ISO 15489

Perhaps not surprisingly given this range of views on ISO 15489 there was a complete cross section of opinions about its potential impact amongst from both sets of participants.

On a five-point scale (where 1=no impact and 5=maximum impact) most of those who are using the standard feel that it will have a medium impact, with small but similar numbers feeling it will have either no or maximum impact. Non-users of the standard are more evenly divided in their assessment of potential impact, their responses covering the full range of the scale with the exception of maximum impact. At this stage they seem to be less sure that ISO 15489 will have a great impact. (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. Potential impact of ISO 15489



The verdict: helpful, hype or just not hot ... yet?

It is clear from the baseline data that those who *are* using the standard feel that it is a good idea to have an international standard for recordkeeping, even though they may be using it to establish different outcomes or goals. And this is corroborated by the four case studies which form the other strand of the project. But it is equally true to say that there is room for improvement. Suggestions include improvements to the wording, inclusion of checklists and possibly status as a compliance standard like the international quality standard ISO 9000. However, it is generally accepted that ISO 15489 is a good thing and that it helps to raise the profile of record management within individual organisations.

Generally, it is not because of any negative perception about the standard that participants are not using it, rather there are other things in the way stopping its use. These are mostly different, more urgent priorities, such as freedom of information and electronic records management, which have a much higher profile and, for those in the public sector, very strict deadlines, which means that management are more willing to support action to reduce risk. This highlights a potential contradiction – some participants are using the standard because of FOI, data protection and e-government initiatives, to support them, whilst others

are saying it is because of the demands, and priority, of the latter that there is no time or resource to implement ISO 15489. This is an intriguing finding which will be interesting to return to later in the project.

Both users and non-users of ISO 15489 believe that it will be used to audit current records management practices, develop records management policy and procedures and encourage consistent practice, based on best practice. The only contentious issues relate to its ability to raise the profile of records management, its status given that it is not a compliance standard, and its likely impact. Without doubt, however, ISO 15489 is having greatest impact when linked to other initiatives and priorities, especially freedom of information, electronic records management and training. But, interestingly, most participants do not have explicit systems or methods in place for assessing its impact.

It would seem therefore that the use of the standard has increased and gone beyond merely being a starting point for managing records, progressing a stage further in its evolution.

Conclusion

So, are standards a good thing, or at least is ISO 15489 a good thing? The professional consensus, particularly amongst those involved in any way in its development, is surely 'yes'. ISO 15489 provides a sound, generic framework for developing and implementing best practice for managing records. But, for the practitioners who adopt or adapt the standard and use it in the 'real' world, with all its associated and competing pressures, the results highlighted here are by no means conclusive – the jury is still out. This is not necessarily surprising or disappointing since, in the lifetime of a standard, this is a very early stage. However, by the end of the project the hope is that the analysis of all of the data collected, from both strands, will provide a firmer view from the UK about how well ISO 15489 is fulfilling its purpose and promise in supporting better records management. The outcomes might have wider relevance and value to the international community.

In the meantime these results, together with a 'snapshot' of data being collected by the ISO committee responsible for the standard (ISO TC46/SC11), are feeding into a review of ISO 15489.²⁴

Endnotes

1 ISO 15489-1, *Information and documentation – records management, Part 1: General* and ISO 15489-2, *Part 2: Guidelines*, ISO, Geneva, 2001.

2 In Mike Steemson, 'Arabs and US agree on RM standard ISO 15489 as it sweeps around the world', at <<http://www.caldeson.com/1548904.html>>.

3 AS4390: 1-6, *Records management*, Standards Australia, Sydney, 1996.

4 Mike Steemson, 'Cricket, rugby and records management ... we've set the standard', paper presented to a Melbourne records management seminar November, 1999, at <<http://www.caldeson.com/crimby.html>>.

5 *ibid.*

6 Stephens, p. 68.

7 The Arts and Humanities Research Board, shortly to become the Arts and Humanities Research Council within the Office of Science and Technology, is one of the key research funding bodies in the United Kingdom. It 'funds research and postgraduate study within the UK's higher education institutions and provides funding for museums, galleries and collections that are based in, or attached to, higher education institutions in England', AHRB homepage, at <<http://www.ahrb.ac.uk>>. Its subject domain is wide and includes research in the field of archives, records management and librarianship.

8 UK Records Management mailing list, at <<http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/RECORDS-MANAGEMENT-UK.html>>.

9 Julie McLeod, Assessing the impact of ISO 15489 – a preliminary investigation. *Records Management Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2003, pp. 70-82.

10 Information Commissioner, Environmental Information Regulations 2004, at <<http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk/eventual.aspx?id=36>>.

11 Department for Constitutional Affairs, Code of Practice on the Management of Records under Section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act, at <<http://www.dca.gov.uk/foi/codesprac.htm>>.

12 *ibid.*, paragraph xvi

13 The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, 1999, Internal control: Guidance for Directors on the Combined Code (The Turnbull Report), at <http://www.icaew.co.uk/cbp/index.cfm?aub=tb2I_6242>.

14 Cabinet Office e-Government Unit, Responsibilities, at <<http://e-government.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/Responsibilities/fs/en>>.

15 Records Management Society of Great Britain, at <<http://www.rms-gb.org.uk>>; UK Records Management mailing listserv, JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee), at <<http://www.jisc.ac.uk>>.

16 Freedom of Information legislation comes into full force in the United Kingdom on 1 January 2005.

17 Sarbanes-Oxley Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act, 2002, at <<http://www.sarbanes-oxley.com/>>.

18 Julie McLeod, pp. 70-82.

19 ISO 9000, *Quality management systems*, ISO, Geneva, 2000.

20 Investors in People home page, at <<http://www.iipuk.co.uk/>>.

21 PD0008, *Legal admissibility and evidential weight of information stored electronically*, BSI, London, 1999.

22 Department for Constitutional Affairs, <<http://www.dca.gov.uk/foi/codesprac.htm>>.

23 S Ferguson and J McLeod, 'Should ISO 15489 be a compliance standard', *Records Management Society Bulletin*, in press.

24 ISO TC46/SC11 is the sub-committee responsible for archives/records management, at <<http://www.iso.org/iso/en/stdsdevelopment/tc/tclist/TechnicalCommitteeDetailPage.TechnicalCommitteeDetail?COMMID=4718>>.