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Paths to Developing or Sustaining RIM Programs

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Despite the fact that archives, records, and information management programs, in various forms, have been around for a long time, there has been little systematically gathered information published about why organizations implement records and information management (RIM) programs. A search of the professional literature and a survey of RIM professionals were the basis of a recent research report that identifies the seven factors that most often lead to the establishment of RIM programs – and shed light on what RIM professionals can do to help strengthen and sustain their own programs.

At the Core

This article

- ▶ Identifies the seven factors that most often lead to the establishment of RIM programs
- ▶ Tells how RIM professionals can help sustain their programs by continuously demonstrating their value to the organization
- ▶ Encourages RIM professionals to contribute to research that will help identify the principles and trends that support the establishment and success of RIM programs

RIM professionals are products of nearly too many schisms to count. Records managers split from archivists; some records managers have gone on to become information managers; archivists have split into many different camps; and new variations, such as knowledge managers, have swept by and pulled with them some archivists and records managers. All of these different groups have different educational backgrounds, read different journals, and attend different professional meetings. These groups, then, also have their own definitions of what constitutes a RIM program. The RIM programs

focused on for this study were fairly traditional archives and records management programs, encompassing those that also defined their responsibilities to include information management programs.

Determining Factors Leading to the Creation of RIM Programs

An initial step for this study was to identify through a literature search the top factors leading to the establishment of RIM programs. This search revealed a strong consensus about the top seven factors:

1. Organizations tend to establish RIM programs, especially archival

What RIM Professionals Can Do to Help Sustain Their Programs

- Look for opportunities – events, anniversaries, and other special occasions – to celebrate in a manner drawing attention to the benefits of RIM work.
- Work to convince individuals to assume the role of champions or advocates for RIM programs.
- Use professional and technical standards to promote the practical benefits of RIM programs.
- Establish RIM programs as centers of advice (knowledge) and legal and compliance issues.
- Document when RIM programs have helped solve organizational problems.
- Build lasting and easily remembered lessons from crises and disasters that can support RIM programs.

units, when they reach a landmark anniversary or other critical juncture in their development.

2. Many RIM programs are the results of efforts of individuals or groups, mostly from within the organization but sometimes working from the outside, who function as champions or advocates for their creation or strengthening.
3. Professional and technical standards can be used to encourage organizations to create new or strengthen existing RIM programs.
4. Laws, the fear of litigation, and the news about the impact of mismanaged records and information systems on court cases all can influence organizations to pay closer attention to RIM.
5. RIM programs are often established because organizations believe that they will help their employees enhance their productivity, make

the organizations more competitive, enable the better use of information technologies, or contend with a problem such as the growing volume of records.

6. Various crises and disasters inflicting an organization, including threats about not complying with rules, best practices, and industry standards, often inspire or force an organization to establish a RIM program.
7. Organizations often see access to records and information as sources for supporting public relations and marketing.

A survey of Pittsburgh-area RIM professionals sought to validate and prioritize these factors by asking two questions:

1. What factor or factors led to the establishment of your program?
2. What are the most important factor

or factors in establishing a records and information management program?

The answers from 16 respondents, who represented a broad array of RIM programs, revealed consensus about the relative importance of the various factors influencing the establishment and sustenance of RIM programs. The respondents affirmed that administrative and legal/compliance needs are by far the most important factors. Crises, professional/technical standards, and the role of advocates/champions all ranked as important factors but considerably less significant than that of the legal and administrative factors. Public relations/marketing values and anniversaries were the least important factors.

The low ranking of anniversaries as a factor was a surprise, as it contradicted many references in the professional literature that it was an important factor in creating and, sometimes, sustaining, a program.

Visualizing the Factors

How should RIM professionals consider this group of factors? Since every organization possesses a unique culture and operates in different marketplaces, it is impossible to predict just which of the seven factors identified will prompt an organization to reconsider how it is administering RIM sources or when it will determine that it is time to establish such a program. Nevertheless, these factors can be grouped (tentatively) on a time continuum, as follows:

- As an organization ages and evolves, the problems it faces in administering records and information will grow until either a champion arguing for more systematic RIM approaches emerges or a disaster occurs.
- Renewed attention to RIM sources within an organization will begin to recognize these sources as being important for corporate memory.
- The establishment of RIM programs

will generate increased attention to professional and technical standards and the importance of records and information sources for organizational compliance, especially as RIM professional staff market the potential value of their activities.

It is difficult to place these various factors more precisely. Most likely this

occurs differently in different organizations, but it is certainly a model worth exploring in future research.

Sustaining RIM Programs

The reasons for which organizations initially establish RIM programs may not be sufficient for sustaining them over the long-term. All of these factors

generally have to do with an event or the activity of one individual, and, as a result, the professionals staffing these programs will have to renew continuously their organizations' interest in supporting these operations. RIM professionals can build on these factors in the following ways:

Anniversaries. Because anniversaries are notoriously short-lived in any organization's memory, and the completion of a history marking the occasion can be seen as a project that has a finite ending, RIM professionals will need to look for other anniversaries to maintain a focus on the value of their programs. Every time an organization embarks on a new project, product development, or activity that is similar to the earlier key activities, the RIM professional must be prepared to make his or her resources known to the organization.

The positive value that these benchmark events can generate needs to be nurtured by the RIM program once it is established. Archivists need to convince others that their holdings are not merely dusty files that are never consulted, while records managers may need to convey the idea that they are not merely administering inactive files or only destroying records when they are no longer needed. The currency and relevancy of the RIM sources always need to be stressed.

Champions. The advocacy of champions for the establishment of RIM programs is, perhaps, the most vulnerable to having only a short-term impact on these programs. Advocates tend to have very short time periods in which they will be effective. The history of RIM programs is replete with testimony to the changing cycles of particular programs that serve as models or beacons to their professional communities. Under such circumstances, it is obvious that for RIM programs to continue to have support within organizations, they must work to gain the championing of additional effective leaders and advocates within these organizations.

Standards. The existence and use of

professional or technical standards perhaps provides one of the more stable ways of developing support for RIM programs. Standards are often succinct and universal, allowing records and information managers to adapt them to their own situations. Relying on these standards can be quite effective, especially in an atmosphere where organiza-

tions are striving to be compliant. The effectiveness of using standards to sustain programs rests upon the ability of RIM professionals to market, explain, and insert them into the daily activities of their organizations.

Legal. RIM professionals have long relied on legal requirements as guides for administering records. Legislative

acts and case law developed by court cases have always seemed to be excellent ways of conveying to upper management the importance of RIM systems. Professionals guiding these programs need to be persuasive, well-informed about the legal dimensions, and act with authority, making a conscious effort to explain how they are helping the organ-



Why RIM Programs Are Most Often Established

Anniversaries

Often, an impending anniversary stimulates interest in an organization having a commemorative history written, establishing an archives and records management program, and reconsidering the condition of the administration of records.

Sometimes, the interest is motivated by external events, such as national or international commemorative events. Celebrations marked by special publications and exhibitions have tended to generate positive support for existing records programs. These events tend to foster new interests in RIM programs by

- Stimulating reasons for marking a particular occasion in ways that focus on records and information
- Drawing attention to possible new uses of records and information
- Sponsoring the preparation of corporate histories and special reports
- Developing means for understanding basic, practical values of records and other information sources
- Bringing together the disparate interests of historians, scholars, and other researchers with the interests of organizational administrators

Champions

Probably the most obvious reason a RIM program is established is that a champion within the organization promoted it. Sometimes champions materialize as professional and citizen groups lobbying for creation or strengthening of a records program, access to records, and government and organizational accountability. But more often than not, they arise from within the ranks of an organization. Sometimes the most serendipitous of events – such as a request for records that cannot be found – leads to the establishment of a program. Records professionals like to fix things.

Champions must have interpersonal skills as well as a cogent message to market. They often create new interests in establishing RIM programs by

- Lobbying for the improvement of care and effective administration of records and information
- Identifying particular reasons, such as accountability, genealog-

ization be compliant and protect itself in this age of lawsuits, negative publicity, and constantly evolving laws.

Crises. Experience suggests that events that scare people into acting differently often have a short-term effect on their behavior. So may be the case with new laws, spectacular litigation cases, and the predictions about the

impact of new or revised legislation regulating organizations and their activities. It is incumbent upon RIM professionals to demonstrate other values for the duties they carry out in the organization or, if warranted, to demonstrate that there are other equally threatening laws and problems on the horizon. These programs, once established, must

continue to demonstrate some practical administrative value to their organizations. To do this, RIM professionals need to become experts in how their organizations function, the nature of their mission or mandate, and corporate culture affecting organizational values.

Judging by the literature, crises and

ical research, and historical or other research, for why RIM programs should be cared for

- Rising above individual or group needs, concerns, and interests to make a compelling reason for the establishment of these programs
- Encouraging individuals with particular skills and vision to become advocates for the improved administration of records and information, often against commonly held stereotypes of RIM
- Building on memorable events, such as visits to established RIM programs or particular failures to retrieve evidence and information effectively, to grow interest and support within the organization to build such programs

Standards

Standards are the backbone of what records professionals do, and they are critical to helping others understand RIM work. RIM professionals have devoted considerable attention to the role of professional, technical, and other standards in supporting and improving their work.

Much of their activity has been in responding to particular standards, for example the ISO 9000 standards on quality assurance, which help them measure the effectiveness of their own programs and advocate for additional support. RIM professionals have also put considerable energy into creating standards that will help establish and support their programs. One of their main achievements was to develop the Australian national records management standard, *AS 4390 Records Management*, which subsequently was developed into an international standard, *ISO 15489-1: Information and Documentation – Records Management*.

Standards promote the establishment of RIM programs by

- Enunciating the nature and importance of such programs
- Providing clear and useful tools that can be used to advocate for such programs
- Providing benchmarks or models to measure the success and performance of RIM programs
- Helping organizations understand RIM programs by providing clear, unambiguous descriptions

Legal

Various U.S. federal legislative acts, such as The Privacy Act of 1974, The Paperwork Reduction Act of 1994, the Economic Espionage Act of 1996, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, and the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, have worked as catalysts for new and improved RIM operations. The risks of improper records management – censure or fines, litigation and high legal discovery costs, reduced market capitalization, regulatory suspension of normal business activities, and criminal penalties – are all good reasons for improving RIM programs.

The increasing uses of electronic information systems have also caused many organizations to reconsider the potential porous nature of these systems for RIM. New technological approaches are useful to organizations, but there must be safeguards concerning the nature and reliability of the records and information.

Legal requirements and litigation cases (or their possibility) have promoted the establishment of RIM programs by

- Focusing on the potential damage done to organizations when they keep records too long or destroy them too quickly
- Drawing attention to the potential role of RIM programs for assisting organizations in protecting their proprietary information or for dealing with intellectual property cases
- Highlighting government laws with implications for RIM
- Enabling organizations to understand the problems generated by digital records and networked environments
- Providing an interpretative framework for comprehending the corporate and government scandals with RIM implications

Administration

RIM programs are established when organizational leaders and managers recognize how these programs can support them. This relates to the classic formula of records values, long ascribed to by archivists and records managers, encompassing administrative, legal, fiscal, and research uses of documents, often used in conjunction with the concept of the records life cycle or continuum.

Successes where records are drawn upon can result in generating increased support for establishing these programs. This relationship between records and information and normal business functions is why so many records professionals try to sidle their

disasters befalling organizations and destroying or threatening records have had a lot to do with encouraging organizations to establish or strengthen RIM programs. However, unless they are continuous and severe, they do not stimulate continued interest in supporting RIM programs. As suddenly as these events occur and organizations

resolve to be better prepared the next time around, the memory and implications of these crises tend to fade. Records and information managers really can use these occurrences only as starting points for establishing or strengthening programs.

Public Relations/Marketing. Public relations and marketing values of

resources in RIM programs may have lasting power to help such programs sustain themselves. However, since records and other information documents often capture a wide range of evidence, good and bad, for the organization creating it, this factor may be a dangerous one to play with. Just as organizations have to be extra sensitive

programs up against key activities and projects in their organizations. RIM programs need to react to changing organizational trends and needs.

Institutions turn their attention to the necessity of RIM programs when they reach a critical point in their development. Consultants are often hired to establish RIM programs when organizational administrators realize that they need to be more proficient in how they manage records and information. Even when consultants are hired to do a simple analysis of records storage space needs or to recommend new information technologies, the end result might be recommendations for comprehensive programs. Good consultants can act as advocates, champions, and educators to transform their initial projects into more meaningful and influential projects with permanent or long-term benefits. When and how such programs are established is affected by an organization's corporate culture, as well as by how the RIM professionals portray themselves (deliberately or inadvertently) to management.

Many of the reasons why organizations create RIM programs derive from fairly straightforward administrative reasons, including

- Recognizing successful and valuable uses of records and information to support organizational mandates and goals
- Supporting critical organizational functions such as strategic planning
- Contending with increasing volume of records and growing complexity of digital records and information systems
- Hiring of consultants to pinpoint solutions for administering RIM systems
- Administrative leadership assuming the role of champions in supporting work with RIM systems

Crises and Disasters

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the corporate scandals that occurred nearly at the same time have changed the way people think and write about the nature, mission, and activities of the RIM profession. While the impact of these events will linger in public memory, whether they will transform RIM work and status within organizations and public policy remains to be seen.

Of course, disasters and crises have been generating organizational and societal interests in RIM work for a very long time.

There are countless examples of disasters, such as hurricanes, that leave in their aftermath a new or strengthened RIM program. Even planning for the possibility of a disaster can pay dividends for an organization. The increasing use of information technologies, especially those that are networked, has led to concern about another form of disaster – the security breach.

Organizations, in facing crises or recovering from disasters, often focus anew on RIM functions by

- Creating new programs focused on security and recovery to deal with the kinds of disruptions potentially caused by terrorist attacks
- Preparing disaster preparedness plans to protect RIM, including establishing programs where none existed
- Stimulating reformatting and offsite storage of records and information sources in order to protect such sources
- Providing new opportunities for RIM professionals to make a stronger case for establishing or strengthening a program
- Creating an environment for organizational and external champions to make a case for RIM programs
- Contending with security breaches on digital and networked RIM systems, highlighting the importance of the evidence and information these systems maintain

Public Relations and Marketing

In an age of hype and advertising, there are few organizations, for-profit or not-for-profit, that do not engage in public relations and marketing. Many seek to draw from their archives, records centers, and corporate libraries the materials that will demonstrate their historic functions, positive societal benefits, and significant societal connections.

Organizations engaged in public relations and marketing may focus on RIM programs because

- They begin to understand that these programs contain ample records and information that may help them construct positive public images
- They may grasp that open access to their records and information, even on controversial and contentious issues, may in itself be received very positively by people on the outside

to discovery and spoliation when considering the destruction of records, they have to be careful not to elevate the public relations and marketing values of their RIM programs to give the impression that records will be sanitized to protect the corporate image.

Taking the Next Step

There is considerable need to analyze over time how, once established, a RIM program fares. RIM professionals need to understand the managerial styles and practices of their employing organizations to understand how and why records and information systems are used, as well as how to make their programs better appreciated within these organizations.

This suggests additional research. Developing richer case study research would enable the RIM community to extract general principles and trends concerning their programs and allow it to theorize about how such programs are established, evolve, and either succeed or fail over time within particular kinds of organizations.

While waiting for substantial case studies to be written, RIM professionals could put more detailed information about the origins and evolution of their programs on the ubiquitous World Wide Web sites. One could imagine slowly building a clearinghouse of case studies that provides a fuller portrait of the origins, evolution, and success and failure factors for RIM programs.

RIM professionals, in an effort to gain more understanding about how and why their programs are established and how they are supported or not supported, will need to do the following:

- Conduct comparative analyses of factors leading to the establishment and support of other programs, such as knowledge management, information policy, and libraries
- Study programs longitudinally – over time – to see how they fare, what strengthens them, and what weakens them

- Analyze different managerial styles and corporate cultures to understand their implications for sustaining RIM programs
- Ramp up more systematic case study research about RIM programs in a wide variety of organizational settings that can generate principles and theoretical models about the factors involved in their origins and continued development

This is a long-term set of activities, but they promise great benefits, both practical and academic, in our under-

standing of RIM programs.

Editors Note: This article is based on a study conducted with funding from the ARMA International Educational Foundation (AIEF). The full results of the study are available in the report, “A Minor Nuisance Spread Across the Organization: Factors Leading to the Establishment and Support of Records and Information Management Programs,” available for free download at the AIEF (www.armaedfoundation.org) or the ARMA International bookstore (www.arma.org/bookstore). ■

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