A Records Management Program that Works for Archives

Clearly defining records management responsibilities ensures the capture of significant records and facilitates their transition to archival custody and use.

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The quality of an archive’s holdings depends on the effectiveness of the records management program responsible for the records before they reach the archives. Without a records management program guiding the organization and disposition of active and semi-active records, an archives program will not receive a comprehensive, reliable, and authentic body of records, but rather a miscellaneous collection of varying value and usefulness, transferred on an ad hoc basis according to individual interests, priorities, and workloads.

A records management program is indispensable for an archives program. It ensures

- the identification of records of long-term historical value and their orderly transfer to the archives
- the regular, orderly elimination of large amounts of records that have no long-term value beyond their administrative usefulness
- efficiency and economy in the management of the archives program by facilitating planning regarding space, records description, and records preservation

A records management program contributes to an effective archives program by differentiating record value as identified in records schedules, which specify required retention periods and ultimate disposition based on that value. Permanent records document significant transactions, policies, decisions, or services and are of lasting historical, legal, or administrative value. Records of permanent value that are transferred to an archives program’s custody in regular, orderly fashion are more readily accessible for reference use and provide more reliable information for future users. Fixed-term records have administrative, legal, or financial value for a specified period of time or...
until the occurrence of a specific event, after which they are destroyed.

Transitory records have no enduring value and are retained while there is genuine need for them. However, the regular and consistent destruction of transitory records saves time, space, and money and facilitates the identification and location of truly significant documents.

Effective records management programs ensure that records of permanent value that are transferred to the custody of an archives program in a regular, orderly fashion will be more readily accessible for reference use and will provide more reliable information for future users. An effective records management program also ensures that records of no enduring value are not transferred to the archives simply as a means of disposing of them.

If an archives program is implemented in an organization that has not had a fully operational records management program or has had a records management program that did not include all units within the organization, then special projects such as large-scale records appraisal and preservation projects must be undertaken in order to allow both the records management program and the archives program to function effectively.

The records life cycle is a key element for both records management and archives. Consideration of the records life cycle by both concerns ensures that only records worthy of permanent preservation are retained in the archives. The lifecycle approach to records is particularly important for electronic records because it is difficult to differentiate between electronic records of substantive, fixed-term, and transitory value. To do this, records managers and archivists need information on the creation process of records and the context in which they are created.

Clearly defining records responsibilities within the records management program ensures the ultimate capture of significant records in the archives.

Without defined and acknowledged responsibilities for records management, an archives program may be left with no archives at all or with only occasional transfers, which will not provide an accurate and thorough reflection of the organization’s activities. This is particularly important for electronic records because the medium allows records to be created, maintained temporarily, and then lost permanently – without ever being affected by records management or appraisal for possible long-term value.

Additionally, the organization of records in their active and semi-active phases, through classification, indexing, and registration, or through the use of other administrative finding aids, facilitates the transition of records to archival custody and use.

**Elements of Success**

The following records management program elements are key to a successful archives:

- policies and procedures regarding the transfer of physical and intellectual custody of records to the archives program; reciprocally, the archives program must establish policy and procedures for access to records once custody has been transferred to the archives
- records retention policy and schedules
- procedures and standards for appraisal of records (in the absence of applicable retention schedules or in exceptional cases)
- records disposition procedures that ensure that destruction is authorized and adequately documented (metadata and destruction forms must be retained, especially for electronic records)
- a well-designed, documented, and implemented records system that addresses
  - capture of both paper and electronic records
  - records registration
  - classification
  - application of metadata
  - storage conditions for both paper and electronic records
- monitoring and auditing of the records management program
- training for records creators

In cases where the responsibility for the archives rests with the creating organization (e.g., international organizations belonging to the United Nations), an integrated records and archives program needs to be established to manage the organization’s records efficiently while safeguarding and making accessible those records to be permanently preserved. Such a program recognizes that records follow a life cycle and acknowledges the importance of a continuum of professional care.

The critical structural elements for successfully integrating records management and archives programs are as follows:

- The program should be designed and under the responsibility of an information professional (records manager and/or archivist).

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**According to the World Bank, the purpose of an integrated records management program is:**

- to preserve records and archives in an accessible, intelligible, and usable form for as long as they have continuing utility or value
- to make information from records and archives available in the right format, to the right people, at the right time

Source: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank
What’s in a Name?

**Records management programs**

The international standard on records management (ISO 15489) defines records management as a “field of management responsible for the efficient and systematic control of the creation, receipt, maintenance, use and disposition of records…”

Records management programs handle records throughout their life cycle, especially in their active and semi-active stages.

**Archives programs**

Archives are those records in any medium that, because of their enduring historical or legal value, are retained permanently.

Archives programs are responsible for the preservation, description, and retrieval of records once transferred to archival custody and for providing access to them. They handle records once they reach the inactive stage of their life cycle.

- Program responsibilities should also include electronic records management.
- There should be close collaboration between the records manager and the archives manager in training staff, developing records and archives tools and policies, and promoting an understanding within the organization that the two programs are working together. The records and archives programs should also work closely with any other information management-related programs within the organization, such as knowledge management or library.
- Policies and procedures should be in place to ensure compliance with national and international legislation, policy, and standards.

Records management programs are not designed to produce archives, but to manage records efficiently and systematically through their life cycle. However, while managing records well for the advantage of the creating organization is a necessary and valid goal, a functional and operational records management program will also have an archival dimension.

An archives program completes the work initiated with a records management program and provides further motivation for implementing effective records management practices. An archives program safeguards and makes accessible the records that must be permanently preserved in order to maintain the organization’s institutional memory, for its own benefit and the benefit of society as a whole.

**References**
