

Records Managers in the Global Business Environment

The role of the records manager has evolved over time along with the technologies used to collect, manage, and preserve records

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The records manager's role has evolved from the Stone Age to the Digital Age, driven by changes in information technology, storage media, recordkeeping regulations, and the globalization of business practices.

Records have existed since the first human found a way to record an activity or event by scratching a symbol on a piece of stone or daubing ochre on cave walls. The first records managers may have been the owners, authors, or custodians of such ancient works as Sumerian clay tablets, the Rosetta stone, the pyramids' hieroglyphs papyrus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Domesday Book.

At the Core

This article

- ▶ examines the records manager's role in the age of electronic documents
- ▶ discusses records management in the Electronic Age, the international arena, and "The Compliance Age"
- ▶ explores the connection between RIM and IT in the business environment



Estate treasurers, tax gatherers, accountants, and lawyers performed recordkeeping duties for early paper records, often on behalf of the state, the aristocracy, and religious communities. But the need for such services quickly spread to anyone who needed to retain proof of their transactions or assets. Paper making and the printing press fueled a burgeoning paper-based bureaucracy with an attending need for managing large-scale filing systems.

More recently, government's public accountability has driven the need to retain and manage records. The U.K.'s Public Records Act of 1958, for example, states: "Every person responsible for public records of any description shall make arrangements for the selection of records for permanent preservation, and for their safe keeping." In response, the departmental records officer (DRO) emerged, some of whom had responsibility for overseeing records creation processes as well as retention.

Meanwhile, private-sector regulations throughout the world require all registered business entities to create and maintain records of their activities. Specialist functions such as finance, accounting, and purchasing tended to manage recordkeeping, but many entities centralized activities in an administration department, possibly under a records manager.

The advent of networked computers caused a virtual global records inundation. Duplicates in different media, stored in many locations, with multiple owners led to loss of control over versions and retention policies. Records' creators became their own recordkeep-

ers, leading to an increase in non-compliance with business rules and complications for records managers.

Records Management in the Electronic Age

Of course, electronic records are not confined to computers and their output storage media – disks, tapes, CD, DVD, and USB storage devices. They also

managers have since had to learn new technical terms in order to communicate with IT engineers, service providers, expert end users, and executives such as the chief information officer (CIO), chief finance officer (CFO), and executive board. And, most important, records managers have had to become "process owners" for records management – taking responsibility for raising awareness of business, legal, and regulatory risks and of the benefits of good recordkeeping practices. Doing this effectively requires well-developed communication, negotiation, and project management skills, in addition to technical knowledge. It also requires delegated authority and support. Acquiring those is never easy.

The U.K. National Archives and its counterparts across the world have produced guidance to match changing recordkeeping practices and have updated this to include electronic records. In the United Kingdom, the Cabinet Office's e-Government Unit has

published a handbook stating that proper electronic records management procedures must be followed to safeguard records against loss, interference, or electronic degradation. Thus, most public-sector records managers have a clear remit to manage all records regardless of storage media and locations. Similar mandates exist in the United States, Australia, and ex-Commonwealth countries. In most of Europe, administrators and archivists assume responsibility for recordkeeping. The job title of records manager is only now beginning to appear there.

Responsibility for electronic records has brought records managers into reg-



include sound recordings, digital photographs, videos, films, x-rays and other scanned images, voicemail recordings, mobile phone recordings, text and instant messaging, and information held on a wide range of powerful but portable devices. As the technologies have evolved, so too have the associated problems and business risks.

Records and information management (RIM) professionals have come to understand, probably better than any other business manager, the consequences that using these technologies has had on the ability to manage and preserve records over time. Having first had to learn the archivist's skills, records

ular contact (and sometimes conflict) with IT colleagues, many of whom assumed that their responsibility for IT infrastructure, desktop tools, databases, e-mail, IT backups, disaster recovery, and IT security provided electronic records management.

Records Management in the International Arena

In the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, records creation and retention have always been recognized as an unavoidable result of business activities, but the quality of record-keeping and compliance with regulations has varied widely. Similarly, the organizational status and authority of records managers varies among employers across both public and private sectors in different areas of the world. In some countries, the role simply does not exist.

As more and more local companies have grown into global traders and multinational conglomerates, their recordkeeping and information-sharing needs have grown in complexity. Global companies require global processes that take both international and local laws and regulations into account. In addition, there are language and cultural barriers to overcome that affect departments and functions at all levels. Overall leadership and control may rest with a single country or records manager – or responsibility may be divided geographically among several – but they must work closely together at all times to coordinate their activities. Physical records storage conditions and related risks may vary

according to local climates and political situations.

Databases and information assets need to be readily available to all workers across the globe 24 hours per day, seven days per week, 365 days per year. Mergers and acquisitions have required diverse business processes, IT systems, and tools to be integrated. The much-hyped and feared “Y2K bug” and ever-

ples, giving them a modern focus and fresh relevance in light of current business practices. In particular, the standard emphasized that e-mail and other electronic records must be managed alongside their paper counterparts.

About the same time the standard was published, a number of major accountancy and e-mail-related scandals brought records management into

sharp focus for security and IT and for business managers in general. This was reflected in the number of software vendors – some of whom previously specialized in document, knowledge, or content management solutions – that began offering records management modules to “ensure compliance” with ISO 15489, DoD 5015.2, and other laws and regulations. It was also apparent in the software vendor mergers that began around that time.

Records Management – The Compliance Age

Many are calling today’s environment “The Compliance Age.” Organ-

izations in most sectors are subject to governmental, regulatory, and other external requirements; financial and corporate governance requirements are particularly demanding. Recent publicity highlighting poor or non-compliant corporate accountancy and recordkeeping, premature deletion of e-mail records, accusations of deliberate concealment or shredding of paper records, and consequent legislation such as the Sarbanes-Oxley Act have further strengthened the records manager’s global role to include compliance.

In many countries, more general – albeit potentially conflicting – legisla-



more sophisticated computer viruses and hackers have highlighted the risks of computer down time and the cost to businesses. Such attacks are having a greater impact because they infect victims’ computers around the globe. All this has affected the potential complexity and status of the records manager’s role in both positive and negative ways and has raised awareness.

The key international records management standard, *ISO 15489: Documentation & Information, Records Management*, which was published in 2001, formalized what were already well-established recordkeeping princi-

tion, such as the U.K.'s Freedom of Information Act and Data Protection Act, specifies precise recordkeeping requirements. Apart from ISO 15489, there are other standards relating to IT and physical security as well as the legal admissibility of electronic records. Compliance may also be voluntary. For example, companies seeking ISO quality assurance accreditation must maintain structured record systems. Many records managers are responsible for these compliance matters, or at the very least, must liaise with whomever is responsible.

A wide range of other professionals may share responsibility for different aspects of recordkeeping. Where this is true, the records manager's role is to act as a co-coordinator, a position that requires taking the initiative and handling conflicting interests and demands. Records managers' most natural allies – and potential career/status competitors – are those responsible for corporate governance, regulatory and legal issues, security, business continuity, risk avoidance, planning, audit, or IT.

Logically, the role of today's records manager should be strategic – spanning all aspects of recordkeeping and all related topics, across the whole organization, on a global basis. The ideal reporting relationship may be directly to the board. Failing that, records management should report to the CEO, head of legal, CFO, or CIO – or to some combination of these, such as a steering group led by a senior corporate sponsor. The most important thing is that the chosen lead role must reflect the strategic importance of records management and must ensure that RIM gets the appropriate support from top managers.

Records Management – The Technology Connection

Records management processes are not new but evolve in line with emerging technologies. The underlying principles remain largely unchanged as they

are applied to a wider range of storage media. The definition of a record is periodically reviewed and debated, especially within the profession, but for business, legal, and regulatory compliance purposes it, too, remains unchanged. A viable and auditable record simply must be created and kept, no matter how difficult that may be.

Technology may drive or enable electronic records management, but IT teams do not necessarily understand such key principles as:

- the differences between electronic records management, electronic records archives, and backups
- the legal requirement to manage e-mail and attachments as records
- the need to routinely and systematically implement retention schedules
- the requirements to enforce holds on destruction due to impending or ongoing litigation or audit
- the importance of permanently and

securely deleting redundant records

- the need to periodically migrate to newer formats and media so as to avoid loss of information

The best RIM professionals will be proactive in educating IT colleagues and others about these basic but vital requirements.

The fact that businesses rely so heavily on IT tools to store and access a complex mix of electronic information has tended to make electronic records management the responsibility of CIOs and IT departments. Reliance on electronic information – and the perception that successful businesses must be “information- and knowledge-driven” – has added status to managing it. Competition is therefore intense, especially among those championing library, information, knowledge, content, digital asset, and records management.

Positive and close cooperation between multidisciplinary teams consisting of records managers, archivists, and representatives from legal, regula-

tory compliance, quality assurance, audit, finance, IT, research and development, human resources, and other key business functions is the minimum requirement. Anything less will have a negative impact on the business. At best, the records manager will assume a strategically important lead role, with a short reporting line to senior executives.

To survive, the modern records manager must learn new skills and continue to evolve – those who do not face extinction or will revert to being simply the custodians of paper-based record-keeping systems. ■

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