

# RIM Professionalism in a Political Arena

Local government offers unique challenges for the records manager in public service. Taking a proactive approach to enhancing customer service will pay dividends.

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According to the U.S. Department of Interior, there are 3,141 counties / boroughs / parishes / independent cities in the United States. That suggests that there are more than 10,000 county-level offices. For those interested in local government records, these figures represent a significant opportunity for records and information management (RIM) services.

## A League of Its Own

Although some might expect county records and information management programs to be fundamentally the same as in other industries, they have many unique challenges. Their environments may, in fact, differ significantly even between one county and its closest neighbor.

Local government eccentricities include the constantly shifting political sphere, its close accountability to the public, and its savings consciousness. These factors create a climate quite apart from that of the private sector. It can correctly be said that local government is

closer to its constituencies than is business and industry, and in this sector there may be continual scrutiny of operations by the media and the voters.

The environment within which county records managers must be effective is also different than in other areas of local government. School district information management programs, for example, tend to be centered on – if not wholly controlled by – information technology (IT) departments. Municipalities, in further contrast to counties, place a heavy emphasis upon an appointed hegemony of executives and

department heads. County government, in contrast, elects most of its leaders. These elected department heads (who are fundamentally accountable only to the body politic) can be fiercely independent. It should be no surprise, then, that county government RIM is often inefficient, disjointed, uncoordinated, and decentralized – factors that often inhibit RIM program development. As any county employee will attest, elected county leaders sometimes have to be approached circumpectly by support services such as RIM. So the human relations component of RIM, significant across all types of RIM initiatives, is even more pronounced in courthouses and county office buildings.

## Working in Glass Houses

Another feature of local government further suggests its distinctiveness. Local government is that closest to the people. Thomas Jefferson once wrote in a letter to Samuel Kercheval that county government has the offices “nearest and most interesting” to the citizens.

More so than municipalities, county

### At the Core

This article

- ▶ Describes the challenges faced by a records manager in the political arena
- ▶ Offers tips for gaining positive exposure for a county RIM program
- ▶ Highlights key areas where the RIM professional can have an impact on county government

government handles citizens' fee-based and records-related transactions, such as business licenses, auto tags, and marriage licenses. Constant scrutiny may result from this closeness, for county operations – including recordkeeping and open-records mandates – are conducted in a goldfish bowl. Assessed variously by citizens, “blue ribbon commissions,” grand juries, the press, attorneys, special interest groups, auditors, state/federal agencies, consultants, and other parties, county employees may supply their own connotation of the term “public exposure.” This degree of examination, by parties from within and outside the local government infrastructure, reveals another dimension of the uniqueness of county operations: Any resident can call and complain to commissioners or administrators. If the commissioner “looks into” the situation, he or she is “standing up for good government,” and support services like RIM may be caught in the middle. In the private sector of

business or industry, what is the likelihood that a RIM professional will be called into a meeting of the board of directors for accountability purposes? A county records/information manager, in contrast, is far from immune to public or media interrogatories at a high level. Yet, there are two sides to this state of affairs. According to the RIM professional’s “savvy,” politics may be favorable rather than negative.

### Performing in a Political Arena

Politics drives – and controls – county business. It frequently rears its ugly head in matters of policy and practice, and it can reach down into any office or situation and affect any person. An effective county RIM professional, therefore, may need to be sensitive to the media and to politically influential people, cronyism, and the clout of special inter-

est groups (such as realtors, the bar, and the League of Women Voters). The politically charged environment can undercut individual effort and well being, and interpersonal relationships may become strained. A high degree of professionalism is needed to overcome an omnipresent politically charged system.

How can these types of outspoken key players be shaped into friends rather than foes? The short answer is: make them look good.

The sign in the basement of one courthouse reads:

#### Basement:

- Janitor
- Central Stores
- Records Management

The RIM service in this (actual) circumstance may have already lost the campaign. The program is physically and, perhaps, hierarchically, relegated to the local government catacombs. Such a lackluster image may invite downsizing or outsourcing. To counter such negative managerial assessments, county RIM professionals must develop a higher profile – provided that this exposure is positive and proactive.

Yet, as readily as all of these political factors or forces may work against RIM professionals, they may also work for them. If they are on the RIM profession-

al’s side, an iron-willed politico, a crusading reporter, or a campaigning council member can be the best of allies.

How can these types of outspoken key players be shaped into friends rather than foes? The short answer is: make them look good. County government leaders likely know how it feels to receive bad publicity. Any accolades – such as press releases, news clips, interviews, or awards – about RIM-related efforts that make them look good are welcomed. And if the political authorities learn, directly or indirectly, that the county’s RIM professionals facilitated this positive exposure, those professionals’ stature – and their department’s – will surely rise.

### Getting Positive Exposure

How can this positive reinforcement be realized? County RIM professionals must persistently toot their own horns. There are national associations that give awards not only to counties, but they may also recognize the counties’ RIM leadership during general

assemblies at annual conferences. This happy event may come about simply because someone in the RIM department persuasively filled out an awards application and submitted it. Suddenly, the county is award-winning, and the RIM program has become effective in public relations. Professionalism in a political arena, then, can lead to individual and program success.

### County RIM Experiences

Several examples of political astuteness are suggestive. Mindful of the realities of personal and program advocacy, one local government RIM professional in Florida demonstrated program advocacy by making certain that during the initial orientation program of each new council person, an agenda segment on RIM was included. She ensured that each member of the governing body knew

what RIM was and who she was as the records and information manager.

In another case, a county RIM professional successfully garnered an important award for his county. To his many existing duties, he formally added public relations. Since the umbrella over his RIM duties was that of director of general services, he could manage this sleight of hand. The division then volunteered in the effort to write a "County of the Year" application, made sure that RIM loomed large in the county's story, and even printed the award application in the county print shop – also part of the general services department. The county won the statewide "County of the Year" competition based on the efforts of the general services application. County officials were called up to the dais at the state association of counties at its annual convention and praised as champions of good government. General services had become Madison Avenue. RIM, as a division of county government, gained exposure, credibility, and favor. Advocacy yielded positive results; this is professionalism in a political arena.

**Constituent Service – Or Else!**

Professionalism requires a further look at several key areas in county programs. Is RIM customer-centered? There are more "customers" served by RIM in a county government than in most other types of organizations: citizens, county officials, county government offices, and state government, to suggest a few. To demonstrate full and effective customer service, it is important to document customer responsiveness continuously. RIM professionals must tout high levels of performance in assisting customers, both within and beyond county operations. Another service that RIM departments provide customers is cost consciousness. There is a universal language in local gov-

ernment revolving around cost-savings. The higher in the county chain of command, the more this budgetary vernacular is spoken. Randy Johnson, Hennepin County (Minnesota) Board Chair, put it this way in a statement on the Hennepin County website: "One of the essential jobs of counties is allocating scarce resources among many needs. As we get better and more information through data sharing [systems], we will make a

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fairer allocation of funds." The greater the RIM professional's role in making this happen, the more favorable the political payback will be.

Commissioners, administrators, finance directors, and other ranking officials in the local authority must not only seek out cost-saving opportunities, they must champion them as well. Rather than getting caught in a sudden savings initiative, RIM professionals can make this cost-preoccupation work for them. Sensitivity to economy of everyday operations will reveal ways to improve cost effectiveness. RIM professionals are (or should be) in the mainstream of local government operations. This is a terrific vantage point to perceive and capitalize on cost-savings potentialities. In an environment that

exalts efficiency, a proactive RIM professional – constantly demonstrating and quantifying cost reduction results – can thrive.

In light of the idiosyncrasies in the county RIM sphere, certain suggestions are in order. What follows is a checklist for key RIM areas:

**Online Operations**

Information management in county government is electronic records, electronic records, and electronic records. County government is either wholly committed to electronic records or going in that direction as quickly as possible. A county RIM professional must also be moving toward a true proficiency with optical disk, local area networks, wide area networks, the Internet, and other areas of electronic records technology. It is true that this technology propensity can be dangerous and that some county RIM professionals have had a bad experience with electronic records. Therefore, astute RIM professionals in counties will want to align themselves with their IT counterparts, practice IT thinking, and employ appropriate technologies.

**Files Management**

Every county office has files. Meaningful guidance on how to manage these files, be they hardcopy or electronic, will have a pervasive and positive impact across local government. For hardcopy files, applications of open-shelf file systems, color-coding, and the production and use of files manuals are recommended. For electronic files, efforts to ensure the creation, access, coordination, and preservation of computer files with uniform effectiveness across county offices is a level of RIM not yet reached in many locales.

**Correspondence Management**

This area of records management has

totally changed: first, by the advent of the computer, then by the Internet. Computer applications have made the generation of letters and memos infinitely easier, attacking the toughest part of correspondence, which is composing them. However, new problems emerge in managing such communication. There are problems in areas such as file-naming conventions, revision control, and voice recognition. What is important is creating a depth and breadth of management that not only reaches across all county offices but also encompasses each computer on every desk. While computerization of correspondence has revolutionized the system, the training, coordination, management, and involvement of the individual drafter or user of correspondence has not evolved to the optimum level. This is another opportunity for RIM professionals.

**Copy Control**

This is an area of records management for which government is infamous. With the advent of “smart” copiers and electronic mail, technology has created significant changes in copy control. As RIM professionals become more involved with copy control, they must watch both supplies and equipment (and their new features), but they should not lose sight of staff time as the single most important cost factor in copy management. Extra trips to the copier and time spent to recopy poor-quality copies because of poor copy skills both contribute to increased costs. RIM professionals can conduct time-motion and cost analyses that can reduce costs and improve efficiencies in this increasingly important area.

**Computer Use**

This is the most technical and complex sphere of influence for RIM depart-

ments. Consequently, some of the touchstones for success are analysis, comparison, prudence, and testing. Perhaps the greatest impact of computers is putting all (or most) parts of the organization online. Personal computers, printers, and intelligent copiers are some of the devices that are often networked.

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**Imaging**

The full text of county documents can be captured and stored on microfilm or optical disk. The key to making decisions about imaging methods rests upon the records themselves, the requirements placed on the office, and budget/time constraints. The conversion of a document to an electronic image enables full text data to be online, indexed at unprecedented levels, and more readily updateable. For

example, mortgage satisfactions (pay-offs) – so cumbersome in the era of hardcopy recording and microfilming – have become more easily produced, verified, and accessed through optical disk systems than through microfilming.

**It’s All in the Attitude**

It is simplistic to say that all government at the county level is the same. Counties vary in size and complexity. For example, they range from Taliaferro County, Georgia (which is so small that it only recently started its own school system), to gigantic Maricopa County, Arizona, the fourteenth largest county in the United States with a \$2.5 billion budget and a population of 3.2 million. The Maricopa County budget almost equals that of the state of Rhode Island. Further, county government is dynamic, and change is inherent in the process. King County (Washington) Manager Ron Sims stated on the King County website, “Looking back over the past 150 years, you will see that there has rarely been a status quo for King County government.”

Nonetheless, despite the differences in size and complexity and the dynamic natures of government in transition, the principles suggested here may apply in most local government circumstances. Although not visible or quantifiable, the savvy that comes from a positive attitude and proactive advocacy is critical to success in county records and information management. ■

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