



Records Management and Archives: Finding Common Ground

Today there is increasing integration of records management and archives in the workplace. But can the question of ownership be resolved?

Sue Myburgh

Of all the changes in the turbulent environment of records management, perhaps none has had greater effect over the past decade than information and communication technologies (ICTs). This has prompted many leaders in records management and archives to urge cooperation between the two professions, as both need to be involved in the management and administration of electronic records. Indeed, some contend that an integrated approach among records management, libraries, and publishing has become imperative. In his article “Ensuring Essential Evidence,” Adrian Cunningham warns that “[t]he case for a continuation of the strict separation of archivists from active recordkeeping has become completely unsustainable.”

While the development of ICTs has been a major change agent, there are multiple simultaneous changes that have had significant effects upon the information management professions: globalization, the Information Economy, the influence of postmodernism, and changes in society at large, to name a few. Some of these are intertwined. For example, the use of ICTs can influence society by changing the ways in which people work, as well as their expectations of how their lives can be led, both personally and professionally. In turn, carry-on effects give rise to new developments, such as the rise of e-commerce and the notion of the Information Economy. Finally, the concept of globalization is hard to put into practice without ICTs.

Changes in the environment have necessitated changes in the practice of both professions as they come to terms with concomitant issues such as privacy, security, intellectual capital, and digital preservation. These changes also are drawing the professions closer together. Perhaps records management and archives have always been similar in a number of ways, which are only now being recognized.

Similarities and Differences

There are some obvious similarities between the archives and records management professions. Both

- are called upon to identify which documents (records) they will manage
- need to be careful about maintaining the physical and intellectual integrity of the documents in their care
- describe and arrange records to provide access as well as contextual information
- observe necessary legislation regarding disposal, privacy, intellectual property, and other issues
- maintain the physical – including digital – condition of records

Differences between the two professions are based largely around cultural, societal, and historical dimensions.

Archives are political; they cannot be seen only as preserving records for historical research or as a warehouse for old records no longer in current administrative use. The institution behind archives – government or business organization – will provide a model for preservation, which frequently suggests keeping those records that support the dominant position, the metanarrative, or the status quo.

Records management, on the other hand, has emerged from a modernist, late-capitalist philosophy of management in both business and government. The emphasis is on efficiency, productivity, competitive advantage, strategic value, increase of profits, and avoidance of loss. Management of records is an integral part of business processes, is associated with workflow, and is based on administrative and legal necessity.

Evidence in the archival sense can be defined as the passive ability of documents and objects and their associated contexts to provide insight into the processes, activities, and events that led to their creation for legal, historical, archaeological, and other purposes. Evidence for the records manager means that the record must have sufficient integrity to be admissible in a court of law. The primary evidential values related to legal, fiscal, and administrative purposes are the domain of records managers; the subsequent cultural, historical, and social evidential values are determined and understood best by archivists.

The different societal needs to which each profession responds means that there are different groups of users seeking the services of records managers and archivists. For records managers, users are largely seeking legal evidence and administrative information; for archivists, users are historical researchers attempting to create new knowledge about past events, people, and organizations.

There also are differences in education and training for the professions. A survey conducted at the Records Management Association of Australia Convention in 2001 found that archivists typically have a university degree, and often post-graduate education, whereas records managers show evidence primarily of vocational training. This is reinforced by the development in Australia of competency standards (which are skills-based) and the emergence of recognized training organizations, though several Australian universities offer degrees in records management.

The separation between records management and archives is historically a North American device, which has been copied in the United Kingdom and in Australia. In the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, records creation and retention have always been recognized as an unavoidable

At the Core

This article

- ▶ discusses similarities and differences between the archives and records management professions
- ▶ examines how the continuum theory encourages both professions to engage with each other
- ▶ explores the integration of archives and records management

result of business activities; but the quality of recordkeeping and compliance with regulations has varied widely.

In Sweden, there are long-established links between records management and archives. According to Nils Brubach, archivists established records centers in Germany, although there were still clear distinctions between each function: records were instruments in decision-making, and archives were used to provide insights into the methods used. The manner in which business is conducted and records kept in Asia also is quite different.

The countries of the Caribbean have been influenced by a number of factors, from slavery to colonialism to independence and early regionalism through integration movements together with the influence of donor agencies. The British Registry system and the Public Office tradition figured significantly in the way records were dealt with. Today the regional university (the University of the West Indies) offers records management training that seeks to provide for the development of archival theory and records and information practices that fit within the culture of the Caribbean. This has led to contextualized interpretations of, for example, the international records management standard (ISO 15489) in Jamaica.

Similarly, the organizational status and authority of records managers varies from one employer to another across both the public and private sectors in different areas of the world. There appear to be more differences than similarities until these are put into the larger context of theory. There are similar considerations that need to be brought to bear at the points of creation and appraisal, yet each profession contributes different insights and values. The identification of the political, economic, social, and cultural milieu in which records were created is an area that more often involves archivists only. In other words, the records manager focuses largely on serving the organization, whereas the archivist attempts to serve society as a whole.

The Emerging Theory of Integration and Convergence

The records management function is frequently described as having responsibilities for records in all formats throughout their life cycle, from planning and creation to ultimate disposal. The lifecycle model of records management offers two choices of “death” for the active record – destruction or removal to an archives. This is misleading as records are not “disposed of” in an archives; in fact, they start another life. In records management,



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these two fates are often regarded as synonymous; both finalize records management’s responsibilities.

In contrast, Australia’s continuum theory recognizes the interconnection between the roles of records manager and archivist and represents a paradigm shift in theory that closely links the two professions at a basic level. The idea of the continuum is not to indicate a life span or otherwise of a record; it indicates how such records should be managed and the chain of responsibility. The emphasis is less on archival arrangement and description, although it does indicate the organizational and social context in which records are created. In her paper “A Chinese View of Records Continuum Methodology and Implications for Managing Electronic Records,” Xiaomi An proposes that the continuum framework can provide “common understandings, consistent standards, unified best

practice criteria, interdisciplinary approaches and collaborations in the recordkeeping and archiving process for both the paper and the digital worlds.”

Adrian Cunningham explains in his article “Ensuring Essential Evidence: Changing Archival and Records Management Practices in the Electronic Recordkeeping Era” that “A key element of this [Australian] system was a rejection of the traditional North American division between the work of records managers (who work with current records) and archivists (who work with non-current or historical records). Intrinsic to the Australian system is the philosophy that if archivists are to have historical records to preserve they first of all have to ensure that the current records are properly created and maintained.”

The continuum model, however, emphasizes that as records end up in archives, records managers should have equal social responsibilities in deciding what is captured and preserved for posterity.

Records continuum management comprises a series of rather indistinct phases and therefore cannot be considered as a simple addition of two discrete functions – records management and archives – which may have irreconcilable differences. Both professions combine to form “recordkeeping” – managing records from creation to long-term preservation or disposal. The continuum theory encourages both professions to engage with each other at critical points along the continuum, notably at creation and when the record ceases to be active.

The continuum theory also deconstructs the notion of custodianship as an essential element of archival preservation, as owning a document or considering it at a certain place. Custodianship no longer applies to the same extent in a virtual

world. There is a focus on the process rather than the product, the concept rather than the item.

However, there is a parallel and equally important paradigm shift occurring across many information professions – the shift from a document-centered focus to an information-centered one. In the report “Enduring Paradigm, New Opportunities: The Value of the Archival Perspective in the Digital Environment,” author Anne Gililand-Swetland notes that “[t]he practices of many information communities focus on the best and most effective ways to organize and retrieve discrete information objects,” but a focus on documents alone is becoming less important, particularly in a virtual world. In addition, the value of the document is often located in the content or information of the document rather than the document itself.

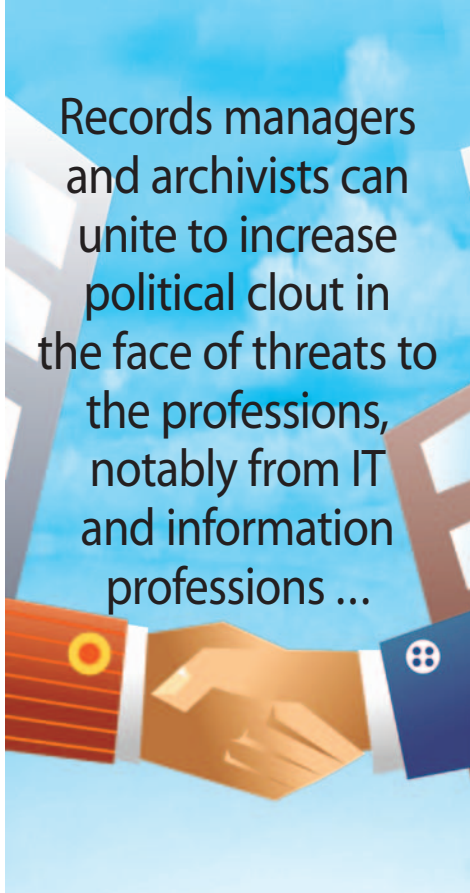
It is for this reason that clear and practicable definitions for the terms that are used in records management and archives are essential, particularly *documents*, *knowledge*, *records*, and *information*. Briefly stated, *knowledge* is identified as that which a person knows (through accumulated experience); *information* is that part of a person’s knowledge that can be communicated (via various channels); information can be stored in a document, which is like an information container.

The content of a record, or the information it contains, can have a strategic and competitive value, thus becoming the object of interest for strategic information managers and competitive intelligence professionals.

The influence of postmodernism philosophy is clear in these professions as they change. Notes An: “Postmodern archival thinking considers archiving to be a key feature of society’s communication processes in shaping the reality rather than just documenting it. It views archivists as co-creators of knowledge, culture, and society rather than just passive recipients merely guarding and retrieving records and knowledge created entirely by others.” Postmodernism also is claimed to be the foundation for the continuum theory.

Integration of Records Management and Archives

There is increasing integration of records management and archives in the workplace, but this is poorly understood and recognized. As mentioned earlier, today’s records managers and archivists have to manage digital documents, which can be created anywhere, at any time, and by an enormous range of people. Such records raise issues of privacy, security, preservation, intellectual property, surveillance, and access. As the technolo-



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gy is constantly changing, legislation follows rather than leads. There are also difficulties associated with the sheer number of records in the electronic environment.

Records managers and archivists can unite to increase political clout in the face of threats to the professions, notably from IT and information professions such as knowledge management. Given the fierce competition that now exists, it is only sensible that records managers and archivists should collaborate and cooperate, particularly as both groups draw on similar theoretical bases and share many tasks of practice. Formal integration between the professions is actually happening due to these factors.

To practically integrate records management and archives, there must be agreement that users need access to organized records, including both cur-

rent and inactive records. This requires a complete historical understanding of the organization and its processes and decisions, which demands input from both professions. Added to this, the question of custody and ownership as records pass from one phase of the continuum to another needs to be satisfactorily resolved, which requires a holistic view as well as the development of a classification scheme and thesaurus that will accommodate all types of records at all stages for all purposes. Recognition of each profession’s role in each of these tasks is essential if the work is to be properly done. ■

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