PROVIDING COHERENT AND CONSISTENT SERVICE that meets users’ needs has long been a challenge for records managers and archivists worldwide. It is even more challenging in a digital world. Timely access to accurate, reliable, authentic, complete, and readable records over time is always difficult for both users and custodians.

Some experts consider the internationally recognized and recommended records continuum model a best-practice model for managing electronic records and archives within a broader context of archival science. To fully understand the model, however, it is important to analyze its development periods, explore its best-practice methods in comparison with those of the lifecycle model, and examine its framework for managing electronic records.
The records continuum model’s purpose-oriented approach to records management changes the role of recordkeeping from reactive to proactive

The Records Continuum Model

As defined in Australian Standard 4390, a records continuum is “…a consistent and coherent regime of management processes from the time of the creation of records (and before creation, in the design of recordkeeping systems) through to the preservation and use of records as archives.” This definition suggests an ideal integration for documents, records, and archives management.

The earliest view of the continuum concept came from Australian national archivist Ian Maclean in the 1950s. He said records managers were the true archivists, and that archival science should be directed toward studying the characteristics of recorded information, recordkeeping systems, and classification processes. His view promoted the search for continuity between archives and records management.

The word “continuum” was not widely used in Australia until Canadian archivist Joy Atherton made it explicit at the annual Association of Canadian Archivists conference in 1985. According to Atherton, all stages of records are interrelated, forming a continuum in which both records managers and archivists are involved, to varying degrees, in the ongoing management of recorded information.

In her book *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: A Continuum Responsibility*, Sue McKemmish writes: “The model provides a graphical tool for framing issues about the relationship between records managers and archivists, past, present, and future, and for thinking strategically about working collaboratively and building partnerships with other stakeholders.”

In *Records Management: A Guide to Corporate Recordkeeping*, Jay Kennedy and Cherry Schauder explain the four dimensions that Upward used in his concept of the continuum model:

1. At level one, the model identifies accountable acts and creates reliable evidence of such acts by capturing records of related/supporting transactions. Records of business activities are created as part of business communication processes within the organization (e.g., through e-mail, document management software, or other software applications).
2. At level two, recordkeeping systems manage “families” of transactions and records series documenting processes at the work-unit or single-function scope of complexity. Records that have been created or received in an organization are tagged with metadata, including how they link to other records.
3. At level three, a seamless recordkeeping scheme embraces the multiple systems and families of records that serve the entire documentary needs (i.e., business, regulatory, and cultural/educational/historical) of a single juridical entity. Records become part of a formal system of storage and retrieval that constitutes the organization’s corporate memory.
4. At level four, a collaborative recordkeeping establishment under the guidance of a suitably empowered public recordkeeping authority serves the needs of the total society, its constituent functions, and the entities that carry them out. The recordkeeping establishment serves the documentary needs of many entities within its jurisdiction and ensures the accountability and the cultural memory of the society as a whole. Records required for purposes of societal accountability (e.g., by corporate law) or other forms of collective memory become part of
wider archival systems that comprise records from a range of organizations.

In the article “The Records Continuum Model in Context and Its Implications for Archival Practice,” Sarah Flynn explains that the records continuum model is significant because it

• broadens the interpretation of records and recordkeeping systems offered by the lifecycle model. Such broadening is helpful, given the variety of contexts in which archivists and records managers operate and in which archives and records are used.

• reminds us that records (including archives) are created and maintained for use as a result of business and administrative functions and processes, rather than as ends in themselves.

• emphasizes cooperation beyond the walls of repositories, especially between the closely related, if occasionally estranged, professions of archives administration and records management – a cooperation that is more important than ever in the contemporary climate of outsourcing and cross-sectoral working.

Comparing the Lifecycle and Continuum Models

The best-practice mechanisms behind the records continuum model may be explored by comparing the records continuum model and the lifecycle model. The records continuum model differs from the lifecycle model in

• origins of the model

• elements of records definition

• major concerns in records management

• records movement patterns

• recordkeeping perspectives

• recordkeeping process

• criteria for selecting archives

• time of appraisal

• role of recordkeeping managers

• undertaking records management tasks

The juxtaposition of the records continuum and lifecycle models shows that the records continuum model’s advantages outweigh the lifecycle model’s, particularly in electronic records management. (See chart on page 27.)

In “Life Cycle Versus Continuum – What Is the Difference,” Peter Marchall states that the records continuum’s primary focus is the multiple purposes of records. It aims for the development of recordkeeping systems that capture, manage, and maintain records with sound evidential characteristics for as long as the records are of value to the organization, any successor, or society. It promotes the integration of recordkeeping into the organizations’ business systems and processes.

According to McKemmish, the best-practice mechanism behind the records continuum model uses an integrated approach for managing records and archives. Records managers and archivists are brought together under an integrated recordkeeping framework with the same goal: to guarantee the reliability, authenticity, and completeness of records. The framework provides common understanding, consistent standards, unified best-practice criteria, and interdisciplinary approaches and collaborations in recordkeeping and archiving processes for both paper and digital worlds. It provides sustainable recordkeeping to connect the past to the present and the present to the future. It can coherently exist in a broader dynamic, changeable context that can be influenced by legal, political, administrative, social, commercial, technological, cultural, and historical variables across time and space. The integrated recordkeeping framework would

• facilitate provenance

• underpin accountability

• constitute memory
• construct identity
• provide authoritative sources of value-added information

The continuum’s purpose-oriented, systems approach to records management fundamentally changes the role of recordkeeping. Instead of being reactive, managing records after they have been created, recordkeeping becomes proactive. In partnership with other stakeholders, identifying records of organization activities that need to be retained, then implementing business systems designed with built-in recordkeeping capability, ensures capturing records of evidential quality as they are created. Built-in capture and assessment mean that records of value are created in the first place whenever electronic systems are used for business transactions. With appropriate metadata to ensure that they are accurate, complete, reliable, and usable, these records have the necessary attributes of content, context, and structure to act as evidence of business activity. And, Marchall notes, knowing from the outset which electronic records must be kept for the longer term means such records can be migrated across systems as hardware and software upgrades occur.

The lifecycle model uses a birth-to-death analogy to describe records as passing through a series of stages. It provides a fragmented framework for recordkeeping by

• artificially dividing the mission of records and archives management
• dismantling the responsibilities of records managers and archivists into divided roles
• limiting ways of thinking about custody through narrow selection criteria
• viewing records as tangible physical objects in a paper world and static environment

The lifecycle model regards electronic records as different media similar to film, recordings, and microfiche that only need special handling require-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model Aspect</th>
<th>Lifecycle Model</th>
<th>Records Continuum Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Origins</td>
<td>• evolved from the need to effectively control and manage physical records after World War II (half a century ago)</td>
<td>• evolving from the more demanding need to exercise control and management over electronic records for digital era (today)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements of records definition</td>
<td>• physical entity</td>
<td>• content, context, structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major concerns in records management</td>
<td>• records-centered, product-driven • focus on records as tangible physical entities, the physical existence of records themselves • paper world</td>
<td>• purpose-centered, process- and customer-driven • focus on the nature of the records, the recordkeeping process, the behaviors and relationships of records in certain environments • digital world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Records movement patterns</td>
<td>• time-based: records pass through stages until they eventually die, except for the chosen ones that are reincarnated as archives • time sequence: records processes take place in a given sequence</td>
<td>• multi-dimensional: records exist in space/time not space and time • simultaneity: records processes can happen at any point in the record’s existence, or even precede it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recordkeeping perspectives</td>
<td>• exclusive • single purpose • organizational or collective memory • current or historical value</td>
<td>• inclusive • multiple purposes • can be organizational and collective memory • can have current, regulatory, and historical value from the time of creation simultaneously not sequentially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recordkeeping process</td>
<td>• There are clearly definable stages in recordkeeping and they create sharp distinctions between current and historical recordkeeping.</td>
<td>• The recordkeeping and archiving processes should be integrated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria for selecting archives</td>
<td>• currency or historical value</td>
<td>• continuing value, including current and historical value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time of archival appraisal</td>
<td>• end of records movement</td>
<td>• from beginning to end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of records professional</td>
<td>• passive and reactive • locked into custodial role and strategies</td>
<td>Proactive post-custodians: • recordkeeping policy makers • standard setters • designers of recordkeeping systems and implementation strategies • consultants • educators/trainers • advocates • auditors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Records management tasks</td>
<td>• things are done to the records in fixed stages, in a given sequence by particular professional group • records managers and archivists have no business directing what records an organization creates; they are relegated to receiving the physical objects once created • fragmented and disparate accountabilities of creators, users, records managers, and archivists</td>
<td>• integration of business process and recordkeeping processes – the tasks can happen in almost any sequence by any professional group • records managers are accountable for not only the maintenance, but also for the creation of evidence of organizations’ purposes and functions • integrated framework for the accountabilities of players and partnerships with other stakeholders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Records Continuum Model vs. Lifecycle Model
The mechanisms of best practice behind the records continuum model are ideal for integrating records and archives management because the records continuum focuses on

- similarities rather than differences
- qualities and quantities rather than quantities alone
- positive and cohesive ways of thinking rather than disparate or passive ways

These arguments highlight the records continuum model’s importance as a best-practice model for managing electronic records when the aim is to improve responsiveness, increase efficiency, and satisfy users’ requirements.

**A Best-Practice Framework for Managing Electronic Records**

The records continuum model’s ideal of integration can be viewed as a best-practice framework for managing records within a broader context of archival science to connect the past to the present and the present to the future, particularly for electronic records. The best-practice framework consists of three components:

1. **Integrated frameworks** that provide levels of integration for best practice
2. **Integrated approaches** that provide positive ways of thinking about archival concepts
3. **Integrated control** that provides a set of unified criteria for measuring models and methods

**An Integrated Framework**

An integrated framework sees the management of records as an archival business geared toward customer-satisfaction, service, cost-effective management, and best value. It should be customer-driven and integrated into records management through work processes. It also should produce quality information. Five levels of integration should be built into the management of recordkeeping processes:

1. **Common culture** – common understandings and expectations among creators, users, custodians, and administrators on the values and functionality of documents, records, and archives
2. **Common standards** – consistent terminology and procedures to make the records continuum routine easier to maintain and interface with throughout the recordkeeping process
3. **Information sharing** – use of best-practice criteria, policies, and standards in the business management processes
4. **Coordination** – negotiation and exchange of records management policies permitting separate, but interdependent, management to respond to each other’s needs and limitations
5. **Collaboration** – partnerships of creators, users, custodians, and administrators in implementing integrated frameworks and policies, as well as in accountability for society
An Integrated Approach

The goal of an integrated approach is to develop collaborative ways of thinking in order to guarantee a reliable, authentic, and integrated memory for the organization and society, provide consistent and sustainable recordkeeping services to meet societal needs, and promote professional commitments and value-added contributions for best practice. Such an integrated approach should employ three tools of integration as a basis for dealing with electronic and digital issues:

1. **Client-led marketing strategy:** the needs of creators and users are priorities for the recordkeeping service’s mission and such needs should be met effectively.

2. **Post-modern archival thinking:** considers archiving a key feature of society’s communication processes in shaping 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. In his presentation, “Post-Modern Archives: the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives,” Tom Nesmith said studying archives is a vital aspect in the pursuit of human understanding. The study of archives is no longer just for archivists who want to be effective on the job, valuable as that is. It is for creators who want to be accountable to society and for users who want to receive the best value of archives service as well. Post-modern archival thinking should result in front-end control and the integrated control of records and archives management, and it should enable a collaborative approach for recordkeeping across borders, institutions, and disciplines.

3. **Records continuum regime model:** the internationally recommended records–continuum best-practice model applied as an approach for managing documents, records, and archives. Such a model employs an interdisciplinary approach to develop integrated frameworks and integrated control through documents management, records and archives management, and business management throughout the records’ life to ensure their accuracy, authenticity, reliability, and integrity.

An Integrated Control

The records continuum regime model is an integrated control, meaning that the control of product, process, and service should be integrated into the management processes of recordkeeping. Integrated control is a means for bringing together the contribution of each participant with something to offer. It is a means of increasing total contribution and completeness of records delivery, improving collaboration among creators, users, archival administrators, and custodians for better quality of service. Integrated control
provides criteria for measuring three aspects of best practice: product control, recordkeeping management process control, and client-oriented service control.

Product control measures the quality and quantity of a records and archives management program’s output. Indicators for quality are accuracy, authenticity, and reliability; indicators of quantity are completeness and integrity.

Process control uses integrated frameworks to measure the process of records and archives management. Indicators are effectiveness, economy, and efficiency.

Service control measures the delivery of service by the sustainability and consistency of service to the satisfaction of the clients. The indicators are records’ availability, accessibility, and readability.

The evolution of the records continuum concept shows records management and archives management moving toward integration. The advantages of the records continuum model over the lifecycle model demonstrate that the mechanism behind the continuum’s best practice is an ideal of integration for the management of documents, records, and archives. The idea of integration can be developed toward a best-practice framework for records and archives management. Integrated approaches, integrated control, and integrated framework are components of a best-practice framework and should provide positive ways of thinking, integrated requirements, and unified criteria leading toward best practice. The best practice can be measured by client-satisfaction service, cost-effective management process, and best-value records.

Xiaomi An, Ph.D., is a former associate professor at the Archives College of Renmin University of China. She holds a Ph.D. in records and archives management from the University of Liverpool. She may be contacted at xiaomia@yahoo.com.

References