

## Reinventing Archival Methods

Sydney 29-30 November 2012

Day 2: Panel Discussion: 9.45-10.45am

***Observations from the real world: panel discussion exploring the impacts of our existing methods***

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This paper is a two-part summary of the current recordkeeping practices observed in a range of contemporary organisations from the public, private and non-profit sectors. Comments are also made about how current archival methods are perceived by business, and are those methods working. It summarises some of the lessons learnt from the business environment and what might be needed to obtain business support and better outcomes.

### Recordkeeping Snapshot

- Recordkeeping practitioners are still working, or attempting to work at the micro level for record capture, control, appraisal and disposal. But the volume is too great, operational staff cannot be expected to perform at that level, and the comparative risks are not evaluated to determine where or what is really important. To a large extent the theory and standards available encourage this approach, or at least do not adequately present a different view.
- The ways of working and communicating are predominantly electronic, using databases, authoring tools, communications tools, and network drives for object storage and dissemination.
- But for the designated or perceived 'records' of the business – it is still commonly a paper world, with print and file for those that remember, and records controls and systems mostly used to control paper.
- There are many examples of hybrid recordkeeping operations and systems, resulting in parallel, partly duplicated paper and digital stores – and consequent retrieval issues for staff.
- Adoption and use of ECMs/EDRMs across business are middling at best, and frequently low. They are expensive, difficult to deploy, an additional overhead on staff time and patience and challenged in the increasingly web and mobile-based work environment. The best uses of ECMs/EDRMs are when deployed as a back-end service to a core business system and related business processes, e.g. a case-based process. The ECM is invisible to the user and the recordkeeping smarts are built into and performed by the supporting software.
- Hardcopy disposal continues on its usual path, often using function-based records disposal authorities (RDAs).
- There is very little controlled/authorised e-disposal, i.e. using systems and RDAs or equivalent. E-records linger on network drives, in ECMs (or equivalent), in databases, or on back-up media.
- There is very little e-archiving, i.e. the control and storage of records of long-term value, even with the Victorian VERS solution. It is still very much a manual process for sentencing and preserving e-records and tends not to be done.
- For business people the perception of current archival methods is off the radar. Such methods are either unknown or of little interest, with organisations mostly resorting to data warehousing or long-term retention of back-up media.

- For practitioners current archival methods are hard to implement. At the solution level – standards are voluminous and hard to understand. Digital archival solutions (such as VERS, and those relying on ECMs or equivalent) are generally expensive and difficult to implement, e.g. requiring compliant software, getting staff to use the software, labour/resource costs, and seemingly for only 5-20% of the organisations records that may have long-term value. There are also challenges at the practical level, for example: function-based filing structures with poor acceptance/adoption by staff; unwieldy thesauri to try to control the language around object identification; manual processes for e-sentencing as our current disposal instruments are not machine-understandable.
- In many organisations the archivist still has little or no influence over selecting and controlling digital archival records.

### Lessons Learnt

- There is still a large shortfall (Bearman 1989) between the understood needs of a business and what we are providing (methods, tools, technologies). Do we in fact understand their needs?
- Organisations will only do what they have to do (in terms of adequate recordkeeping), due to externally imposed compliance or performance requirements, their litigation profile, to compete or to mitigate high risks. The cost of 'compliant' recordkeeping (as prescribed by standards/best practice and as implemented) is too high and too onerous.
- An understanding of risk is paramount, and needs building into our ways of thinking, standards, models and practice.
- Risk analysis will support a macro-based approach to business needs analysis, record creation, control, and long-term retention, at the same time enabling a detailed treatment of records that are really important. It will enable better allocation of \$ and staff, and building of better recordkeeping processes, tools and rules. It will enable achievable outcomes, for organisations and society.
- Rafts of International, national and jurisdictional recordkeeping standards do not translate into better practice. Build a bridge between theory and practice. Organisations need clear principles that management understands and that relate to doing business, as well as practical guidance and use case scenarios for the practitioners.
- ECMs/EDRMs or equivalent are great at what they do, but as currently implemented they are not suitable for the common business environment and the way people work. Digital recordkeeping functionality or specialised software needs to be built into or behind existing systems and processes – and at an affordable cost.
- Recordkeeping processes need to be built into business processes.
- Our recordkeeping practitioners struggle with the modern digital environment – education and training at a range of levels needs to address this.
- Society will have minimal digital archives from the mid 1980's to current day. We need to act faster, smarter and focus on what is achievable.
- People find and use information in a totally different way than they did 30 years ago. Use technology to build smarter ways of describing, controlling, finding and using records and their content over time, and across diverse information resource domains.