

Section II.

Case Studies

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Management of Electronic Records in the United Nations

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Based on a paper prepared for the joint meeting of the NAGARA Committee on Information Technology and the SAA Committee on Automated Records and Techniques, by Liisa Fagerlund, Chief, Archives and Records Management Section, United Nations, March 1993.

Historical Overview

The United Nations was established with the signing of the United Nations Charter in 1945. An archival function has been included among Secretariat offices from the organizing conference in San Francisco through to the present day. As has been the case for most of its history, the organizational placement of the Archives and Records Management Section of the United Nations is in the Office of General Services within the Department of Administration and Management.

The United Nations is the largest international organization in the family of organizations included in the United Nations system. The United Nations system includes subsidiary organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as well as specialized agencies including the World Health Organization (WHO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The United Nations Archives and Records Management Section stores and provides access to about 25,000 linear feet of archival records and manages a records center for an additional 15,000 linear feet. With staff of five professional and twenty-four technical and clerical staff, the Section provides records management services of files management and retention scheduling to United Nations Secretariat offices. The Section is also mandated to provide guidance and assistance for United Nations regional commissions, peace-keeping missions, and other offices away from Headquarters. No records may be destroyed without authorization of the Chief of Archives and Records Management.

Introduction of Electronic Records Management

In June 1991, the scope of the Archives and Records Management Section as expressed in administrative rules promulgated in a Secretary-General's Bulletin was redefined to include electronic as well as paper based archival records. As will be described in this paper,

the approach taken by the United Nations has been to integrate the management of electronic records with the management of other records and archives of the organization.

The United Nations was a member agency of an inter-agency technical panel which produced a landmark publication, the 1990 ACCIS study, *Management of Electronic Records: Issues and Guidelines*.¹ As a result of this study, the United Nations community has gained a reputation for leadership in the field of electronic records management which is only partially merited. Acceptance of the report and recommendations by the body representing the heads of all the international organizations of the United Nations system set the stage for the implementation of the recommendations of the report. Yet, to date, there are few United Nations system organizations which can be said to be implementing the guidelines and undertaking the management of electronic records following the process outlined in the study. While some organizations in the United Nations system have made significant progress toward the management of electronic records, others have yet to begin.

Background on the ACCIS publication

The ACCIS study was begun in response to an initiative of the professional association in which archivists and records managers in international organizations participate. Having been made aware of the needs of member agencies to address the management of electronic information, the Advisory Committee for the Coordination of Information Systems (ACCIS) established a Technical Panel on Electronic Records Management in 1987.

ACCIS is an inter-agency committee of the United Nations system. It meets every two years with representation from the United Nations and each specialized agency. Issues of common concern among the organizations are pursued by experts appointed by the various organizations through the mechanism of technical panels and working groups. Other issues dealt with by ACCIS panels include telecommunications networks, computer information security, access to United Nations databases, and inter-library cooperation.

¹ United Nations. Advisory Committee for the Coordination of Information Systems (ACCIS). *Management of Electronic Records: Issues and Guidelines*. New York: 1990.

Recommendations for Implementation of the Guidelines

One of the major features of the ACCIS study is the chapter on electronic records management guidelines, subtitled: A manual for policy development and implementation. This chapter was originally drafted for the panel by David Bearman and includes an identification of issues concerning the management of electronic records which must be considered and resolved for each organization. The study identifies 27 issues, ranging from the definition of electronic records to determining methods and safeguards for user deletion of data.

After a listing of the issues with alternate and recommended approaches, the study outlines a four-stage plan for implementing an electronic records management program.² Briefly stated, each organization should name an internal, inter-disciplinary committee to consider the identified issues and develop a statement of policy. A selection of information systems should be used to evaluate the adequacy of current methods and test the proposed policy statement. The scope of the program to carry out these policies should be defined by determining which information systems in the organizations are to be covered by the policy statement. Priorities need to be set for which information systems will be targeted for action and what type of action to be taken, for example developing an electronic archives repository or participation in new system design. Securing of support for the information policy, first from records creators and information managers and then from management, is the final step.

Immediately following the submission of the ACCIS report, ACCIS decided that greater awareness of the problems identified in the study was needed both by senior management of the organizations and by the information management professionals in various disciplines and institutional settings. Accordingly, a follow-up group was charged to develop curriculum for a management briefing and a workshop for the types of persons in organizations who would be targeted for inclusion in the internal working groups required for addressing the information policy issues. The working group reported on the importance of the open systems interconnection model and related international standards for the management of electronic records. The report, *Strategic Issues for Electronic Records Management: Towards Open Systems Interconnection*³, also features functional models of the organizational roles involved in the management of electronic records. Curriculum materials for an interdisciplinary workshop on information management were also published.⁴ Another ACCIS technical panel is currently working towards appropriate adoption and use of standards for electronic mail, document exchange, and directory services.

2 ACCIS. *Management of Electronic Records*, 1990, 65-67.

3 ACCIS. *Strategic Issues for Electronic Records Management: Towards Open Systems Interconnection*. New York: 1992.

4 ACCIS. *Management of Electronic Records: Curriculum Materials*. New York: 1992.

Evaluating the extent of implementation

As can be seen, attention continues to be given to electronic records management issues in the United Nations community, but the question of implementation remains. Several of the organizations have internal working groups which meet the profile described, archivists and records managers participate in system design for central information systems, and international information standards are recommended in guidelines for system development. If implementation of the ACCIS report means following the process outlined in the guidelines, then few organizations can be said to have implemented the report. If, however, implementation is tied to consideration of the issues and development of associated policies, closer examination is needed to determine the extent of implementation. To aid in that examination and to contribute to the discussion at the joint meeting, I have prepared a listing of milestones based on the ACCIS list of issues and my own observations.

Milestones in the development of an Electronic Records Management program

The following steps are proposed as ways of measuring the extent to which electronic records are being managed in an organization.

- Official definition of records which specifically includes electronic records;
- Official definition of electronic records which distinguishes records from non-records;
- Recognition of the role of archives and records management in management of electronic records through institutional placement, statutory authority, position descriptions;
- Membership of archives and records management staff in an interdisciplinary committee on information policy;
- Issued statement of policies regarding electronic records management issues;
- Participation by archives and records management staff in electronic records management decisions: document management software, electronic mail policy;
- Inventory of information systems, organization wide, in locator system, data administration software, or other automated system;
- Retention scheduling for automated information systems;
- Archives and records management staff included on systems design team or archives and records management requirements included in systems design;
- Statement of criteria for appraisal of records and defining historical documentation needs;
- Documentation strategy which identifies information to be retained for documentation of activity;

Agreements with departments to retain specified electronic information for archival purposes;

Online accessibility and usefulness of archives and records management database, integrating archival descriptions and metadata directories;

Method of linking electronic records and records in paper or other media;

Facilities for accessing data in departmental electronic archives and for accessioning electronic information when necessary.

Electronic Records Management in the United Nations

As Chief of the Archives and Records Management Section of the United Nations since 1992, I can realistically consider only the extent to which the United Nations Headquarters has addressed the issues identified in the report and travelled the road marked by the above milestones.

Electronic records are included in the scope of the Archives and Records Management Section in a Secretary-General's Bulletin issued in 1991. The position description under which I was hired assigns responsibility for life-cycle management of electronic records, ensuring that appraisal and preservation decisions for electronic records are incorporated in system design and that application layer standards are complied within electronic mail and other office automation applications. The Secretary-General's Bulletin which establishes the scope does not define electronic records adequately to distinguish between records and non-records. A detailed administrative instruction to clarify and further define electronic records management responsibilities has been prepared, but issuance of this administrative instruction has been delayed due, in part, to the ongoing reorganization of the United Nations Secretariat.

An interdisciplinary working group exists which could perform the role outlined in the ACCIS guidelines. Archives participation on the committee has not yet been formalized but has been solicited on several issues. It is expected that when the group is next authorized, the Chief of the Archives and Records Management Section will be included as a member of the group. This group, called the Technological Innovations Working Group, is a logical forum for the discussion and development of policies on the issues involved in electronic records management.

Archives and records management participation in the design of electronic information systems is not institutionalized, but input has been sought in the design of the Integrated Management Information System for financial and personnel data, in the development of an optical storage system for United Nations parliamentary documents, in the selection of institution-wide document management software, and in development of naming conven-

tions for word processing documents. The United Nations advocates the use of open systems technology for developers of new systems.

Viewed against the milestones identified above, the United Nations has an Electronic Records Management program in the very early stages of development. The following lists of obstacles to progress in the management of electronic records and critical success factors are based not only on my current experience in the United Nations but on previous organizational settings in the United Nations system and in government environments.

Obstacles to program development

Belief that electronic records are not official and official records will be copied to paper for filing and retention;

Lack of sound records management practices such as clear retention policies for traditional records which could be applied to electronic records;

Records management problems in offices increasingly require technical (hardware/software) solutions and systems analysts/programmers are called in rather than records managers because records managers do not have or are not seen as having desired technical tools and solutions;

Records managers have not developed or acquired applications for management of electronic information which can be used by departments for managing electronic records and integrating electronic and paper files;

Inventories and integration of paper and electronic file codes seem retrogressive to most managers who are more interested in LAN management and optical storage systems;

Lack of central data administration function with responsibility for maintaining information on decentralized departmental systems.

Critical success factors

Awareness by leaders in the organization and in the information management field that archives and records management are members of the information management team;

Official authority for the archives and records management role in electronic records;

Direct cooperation between archives and records management and personnel involved in computer functions;

Ability of archives and records management to sell the program and provide positive expertise and contributions to electronic records management issues;

Availability of application software for inventorying information systems, linking to records in other media, incorporating retention and appraisal decisions;

Budgetary resources to acquire needed software and expertise.

Current Initiatives in Electronic Records Management

An organization which succeeds in managing electronic records will be able to access, over time, information in electronic form which has been protected for archival purposes as the organizational memory. The milestones outlined earlier in this paper include alternate routes which are being taken by organizations in their attempts to achieve this success. One approach includes a bottom-up, organization-wide inventory of information systems which provides a rich database for retention scheduling and targeting of selected data for archival preservation; another approach emphasizes a top-down development of information policy, documentation strategy, and contracts with creating offices for archival preservation.

The policy development approach seems more suitable to an organization like the United Nations with its geographically dispersed responsibilities than an approach requiring detailed inventories. Consequently, current electronic records management initiatives of the United Nations Archives and Records Management Section include developing retention policies for use in electronic document management systems as well as for office filing systems; continuing to present archives and records management requirements for document management software selection; identifying and networking with other members of the information management team; and developing an automated infrastructure for sharing electronic information.