

Archives and Museum Informatics Technical Report

ISSN 1042-1459

No.18

Electronic Records Management Program Strategies

edited by

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Preface

by David Bearman

Over the past decade the computer has moved from the back room where it was devoted to the rapid conduct of routine business to the front office where it has become central to the communications and control mechanisms of the organization. Unfortunately the move has not resulted in greater socialization of the beast which remains an untamed creature, out of sorts in polite company and at odds with many values of the corporation. As a youngster the computer was fed and maintained by a data processing staff unconcerned about how well he fit in with larger corporate purposes and images as long as he worked faster, more inexpensively and with greater accuracy than the human power he replaced. But in his new role as a vehicle for corporate communications and decision support, the unfriendly mainframe and his younger partners the anarchistic networked personal computer are being judged by different standards and found wanting.

Most importantly, the computer is seen to be failing to contribute in significant ways to overall corporate effectiveness. In part this failure stems from abdication of responsibility by managers throughout the organization to use the computer as a tool to achieve corporate ends rather than implement technology as an end in itself. As the computer takes its place within a myriad of other communication technologies including fax, voice mail and interactive high definition television, it will increasingly be called upon to behave as a good corporate citizen, rather than a prima donna.

Part of the new regime will be to subject itself to corporate requirements for accountability, continuity of operations and competitiveness. This demands that computerized information systems create and maintain records of the organization and that the organization know where such records can be found, be able to access them over time and have the knowledge needed to use them after they have been retrieved. Unfortunately these requirements will not be met if records managers and archivists wait patiently for the obsolete records of computer-based information systems to be referred to them after thirty years as they have been able to do with the paper record.

Archivists and records managers are finding that the challenges posed by the transition of the computer from a number crunching and data processing engine to a versatile knowledge representation and information dissemination tool include the challenge of re-engineering archival programs. The methods of the 1970's for archiving "machine-readable data files", those large compendia created as "master files" or "extracts" from routine databases, are not suited to capturing the electronic mail, multi-institutional relational databases with numerous applications and thousands of user views, and geographic information systems of the 1990's. The new communications and knowledge representation systems are bringing changes in the character of records, in the methods by which organizations conduct business and in the needs of users for documentation. All these changes are forcing the archivist to adopt a more active stance towards designing and managing recordkeeping systems.

This volume reflects the excitement and anxiety induced by these changes. In the opening section, Margaret Hedstrom reports on a joint meeting of two professional association committees in the spring of 1993. The papers prepared for that meeting, the discussions which ensued at it, and the endeavors it spawned brought this volume into being. Participants from programs experimenting with radical new approaches as well as those from more "traditional" electronic records programs felt unsure about their current strategies. Neither had much concrete evidence that their approach yielded useful results. In identifying barriers, they saw many different impediments, which led to formulation of quite different strategies. But they had no trouble agreeing that now was a good time to be examining the premises on which their current strategies were based, detailing the character of their programs and describing the frameworks by which they would measure success.

The second section of the volume provides just such a snapshot of the state of electronic records management programs in international, national and state governments engaged in the process of changing how they do business. The authors not only report on where they currently stand, but reflect on why the changes they have introduced into their program strategies were necessary and examine how well or poorly their efforts to adjust to the emerging realities of digital communications technologies are succeeding.

In the third section, Margaret Hedstrom and I use a framework for "re-inventing government" introduced by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler in a popular and influential book by that title, to critique existing programs and imagine alternative futures. We suggest even more dramatic changes in archival program strategies and structures that might be necessary or useful, and propose some criteria for even further departures from the way we currently do business. At the same time that we advocate change in practice however, we reassert the fundamental continuity in archival theory.

In the final section of the volume Richard Cox has compiled, abstracted and commented on the literature about electronic records management that the profession has written to date. He assesses it individually and as a whole, thereby launching us into the process of moving beyond what we know. I hope this volume will, someday, be considered the first contribution to a literature that carries us to another level in our analysis of the methods and approaches to managing electronic records.