

## Wisconsin's Electronic Records Work, 1979-93: A Once and Future Program

by Peter Gottlieb

Wisconsin's State Archives holds a unique position in the history of state electronic records programs. It was the first state archives to experiment with the formal management and administration of what was then called machine-readable records. It was also the first to fail in an effort to make electronic records a component part of its responsibilities for public records and historical manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> After a hiatus of eight years, it resumed electronic records work in 1991, though in a very different environment and with a different strategy from that of the late 1970s. Both the past and the present phases of its electronic records work bear examination for the factors that hampered a promising beginning and those that may contribute to success in the future.

### Project Beginnings

In 1979, the State Archives won a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission to survey electronic records created at state agencies in Wisconsin and evaluate policies and records management procedures for them. A subsequent grant from NHPRC in 1981 provided support to the Archives for starting a records management program for electronic records, developing a capability within the State Archives to administer electronic records, and to prepare an electronic records manual. Margaret Hedstrom, a graduate of the archives administration program at the University of Wisconsin, served as project archivist on both grants.

Hedstrom's manual on electronic records -- an indirect result of these projects -- became their best-known outcome.<sup>2</sup> But their direct products were survey data, records schedules and disposition authorizations, procedures for handling electronic records, and recommendations for future work. Hedstrom worked with staff at several state agencies to analyze

---

1 Wisconsin's State Archives is a program in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin's Archives Division. The State Archives appraises, accessions, arranges, and describes records of the three branches of state government and provides reference services for those records. It cooperates with the Records Management Section of the Department of Administration in giving technical assistance and consultation to state government records creators/keepers.

2 Margaret Hedstrom, *Archives and Manuscripts: Machine-Readable Records* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984).

their information technology and the records it maintained, helped write records schedules for the records, and brought some electronic records series under archival custody and control. The projects also established procedures for public access to electronic records, through program relations with data libraries and data processing shops at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.<sup>3</sup> Though exploratory and tentative, these achievements represented the building blocks that could develop into a sustained program to manage electronic records.

This did not happen, and instead most electronic records work at Wisconsin's State Archives lapsed after 1983. The most obvious reasons for this abrupt halt after several years of progress was the ending of grant-funded work and the nearly coincident reductions in the Archives' Division budget -- the first round of state-wide budget cuts in Wisconsin during the 1980s that would affect the Archives' work. This double blow to the developing work with electronic records brought progress to a stand-still, but other aspects of the grant project approach in Wisconsin's context probably compounded the difficulties stemming from budget cuts.

Wisconsin's State Archives began its electronic records projects without any existing funding or staff support for such specialized work. Though the second project aimed to build a continuing electronic records program at the State Archives and included the training of one permanent staff member in appraisal, scheduling, accessioning, and reference tasks, adding electronic records work to archivists' existing responsibilities proved impractical in the wake of staff reductions and increasing workloads with conventional records. Finally, turnover at the State Archives between 1983 and 1986 gradually removed from its staff all archivists who had participated in the grant projects.<sup>4</sup> Those who took their places had neither training nor experience in archival management of electronic records. Seven years after the first project began, the State Archives had nearly returned to the position it started from. Electronic records capabilities had not taken root.

Wisconsin's state bureaucracy and the innovative nature of the projects posed additional barriers to progress. The state decentralizes responsibility for managing public records among state agencies and all branches of government. Statutes that mandate records scheduling and control disposition lack enforcement provisions. Sound records management depends on voluntary cooperation and understanding among hundreds of offices of the importance of records to good public administration and to long-term policy, educational and cultural needs of the state. The Public Records and Forms Board has statutory authority to develop policies, but in fact mostly authorizes records dispositions and advo-

---

3 Implementing A Machine-Readable Records Program: Final Report of the Wisconsin Machine-Readable Records Project (Madison, Wisconsin: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1983).

4 Margaret Hedstrom, "A Report on the Wisconsin Machine-Readable Records Program" (May, 1988), 1. (Unpublished report in the files of the Wisconsin State Archives)

cated proper records administration. In this type of bureaucratic setting, coordinated change progresses slowly, even when powerful agents are at work.

Reflecting their operational independence, some data managers and agency records managers during the machine-readable records projects frequently resisted the guidelines and procedures that the State Archives recommended and questioned the Archives' capabilities for working with computerized records. Sufficient staffing, operating budgets, and great persistence might have overcome these obstacles after 1983, but such resources were exactly what was lacking at the time. Those state agency data managers and records officers who would have cooperated with continued development of electronic records work at the State Archives needed organization and leadership which the Archives could not give.

The achievements of Wisconsin's machine-readable records projects of 1979-83 redounded more to the benefit of the archives profession as a whole than to the state's archival program. Margaret Hedstrom's writing and teaching since the end of the projects and Wisconsin's example to other state programs and other archivists stimulated further exploration and development in the electronic records field. This was no small accomplishment, but it left the sequel to Wisconsin's abortive start in question.

### **A Changing Environment**

Within the realm of state government in Wisconsin, three changes during the 1980s and early 1990s altered the setting in which any archival program for electronic records would operate. The most obvious change was the rapid growth and decentralization of office automation and new information technologies in every corner of state government. Where computers and the records they handled had been found in a few large data centers in the 1970s, this expansion brought them to every work area in all agencies and to public service desks at every type of public institution from court houses to recreation facilities. As a matter of course, archivists and records managers encountered public records in automated formats with increasing frequency and faced the necessity of understanding and working with them.

By the late 1980s, one source estimated that the State of Wisconsin was spending two hundred million dollars a year on information technology. This major allocation of state resources was a primary factor behind a second change with important implications for archival work with electronic records. The state government initiated a strategic planning process for information technology. Begun as a consultant's report,<sup>5</sup> this continued with a state-wide planning organization assisted by an advisory board of information technology

---

5 Ernst and Young Consultants, *Final Report, Information Technology Strategic Planning Initiative* (1990)

specialists from businesses and universities. Wisconsin's governor announced the final plan in October 1992 and gave it his full backing.<sup>6</sup>

The specifics of this strategic plan mean less for the State Archives than the very fact that it exists. It focuses mostly on coordinating and rationalizing the state's expenditures for information technology. Significantly, it requires all agencies to submit annual business and information technology plans to the Department of Administration for approval. Though this requirement aims primarily to reduce unnecessary or redundant technology purchases, it is a step away from the laissez-faire basis for agency operations. Except for its goals to increase inter-operability and data conformities across state government, the plan seldom directly addresses archivists' primary responsibilities or concerns. But through the creation of the plan and the bureaucratic machinery to steer its course, Wisconsin now has several functioning offices and forums where an archival component for the state's information technology superstructure can develop.

Growing interest in the state legislature in information policy is a third change in recent years which has affected the archival program. Spurred by concern over personal data collected by state agencies, the legislature began a study in 1990 of the state's policies and practices for handling information about individuals. The Special Committee on Privacy and Information Technology included a representative of the State Archives. Among several results of its work, the Committee drafted bills that mandated a system to track all personal data kept by state agencies and that created a Joint Legislative Committee on State Information Policy. Both bills won approval in the legislature and were signed by the Governor. Through the State Archives' participation in the Special Committee's work, the mechanism for tracking personal data was tied to the existing records scheduling process, bringing the State Archives and the Records Management Office directly into the continuing work on privacy, confidentiality, and information policy issues.

Wisconsin's public administrators remain primarily interested in information technology, though elected officials, lawyers, and newspaper editors frequently discuss the information policy topics of e-mail, Wisconsin's open records laws, and privacy and state data practices. Whether or not Wisconsin follows the precedents provided by Florida, Kentucky and other states and develops a policy framework for state information, its focus on technology and data architectures will probably carry it toward policy issues that must be analyzed and discussed in a systematic fashion.

The main point here is that these three changes have altered the setting in which the State Archives' work with electronic records takes place. During the 1979-83 grant projects, discussions often centered on whether or not electronic records were actually records. Archives staff were learning the nature of electronic data storage devices and

---

<sup>6</sup> *Forward..Through Information Technology* (State of Wisconsin, Department of Administration, 1992)

processing techniques. The State Archives turned to the University of Wisconsin-Madison's computer facilities and technicians for the support necessary to evaluate and duplicate computerized records.

The much wider use of all types of information technology in the early 1990s has produced not only a state plan for its coordinated development but more advanced agency-level data administration and information system policies than previously existed. The agencies' own computing resources and information specialists offer an alternative to the University's resources for supporting archival requirements. The pervasiveness of information technology and the beginnings of broad technology planning have formalized and structured the environment in which Wisconsin archivists perform their work with electronic records.

### **A New Strategy**

Beginning in 1992, the State Archives took the initial steps to conform to this changed environment and to resume concerted work with electronic records. The strategy informing these steps involves a reallocation of existing resources (primarily staff time) and coordination with the state's developing information plan to make as much progress as possible in a short period of time. Instead of developing one staff expert and simply training other archivists in procedures for electronic records, it draws all public records staff into a very focussed effort where it is possible to learn quickly and fully share new knowledge. By demonstrating commitment to increasing its capabilities with electronic records and by widely publicizing initial progress to many concerned groups in state government, this work can increase the opportunities to obtain additional state funding for a dedicated electronic records program.

The strategy depends on a degree of acceptance and cooperation from state planners and state agencies. It also depends on the State Archives rapidly increasing its capabilities to work with electronic records. The Archives has addressed these needs by assuming an active role in the state-wide technology plan, by preliminary discussions with agencies and planners, by recruiting a fixed-term employee with archival training and automation experience, and by taking advantage of training at the University of Pittsburgh's Institute on Advanced Archives Administration and the Society of American Archivists electronic records workshop.

Implementing the strategy began with meetings at the Bureau of Information and Telecommunications Management (BITM), the Department of Administration office with

---

7 The Archives staff has also benefited from visits to the Center for Electronic Records at the National Archives and from discussions with electronic records specialists at other state archives.

responsibility for producing and coordinating the state-wide information technology plan. It had vaguely recognized the need for an archival component, but lacked the basic understanding to take the next steps. While the state information technology plan was undergoing its final review and revisions, the State Archivist offered to help BITM develop a general plan of work. BITM employees gladly accepted this offer, and the State Archives submitted a project outline which was quickly inserted into an existing blank section of the plan which BITM had labeled "Information Archiving Project". This project has become the framework for ensuing efforts, and its subsequent development has taken place under the umbrella of the state-wide plan and with BITM's sponsorship.

The State Archives launched the project in July 1993. Renamed the State Archives Electronic Information Project, it will analyze three systems operated by state agencies, with the following goals in view: (1) to define criteria for the long-term retention, preservation and access to electronic records; (2) to define the program requirements for the archival management of electronic records at the State Archives; (3) to develop records schedules for the three systems. The Department of Corrections, the Department of Natural Resources, and the State Historical Society itself agreed to cooperate with the State Archives toward meeting these goals before the project began. The Public Records and Forms Board also endorsed the project.

Publicity about the project and its results figures prominently in the work plan. Archives staff will discuss the project at meetings of information technology directors and state administrative officers. Through interim progress reports and written findings on the main areas of investigation, the Archives plans to keep the project's work visible among the state's information players. The results of the project will improve the State Archives' work with electronic records, add knowledge about policies and procedures involving archival aspects of systems development, and raise the Archives' profile among state agencies.

Though the Electronic Information Project currently stands as the centerpiece of the State Archives' work with electronic records, successful efforts on other fronts have been made. Archivists contributed their expertise to the drafting of a state administrative rule governing the use of optical imaging by state agencies and county governments. They have also been instrumental in compiling a manual for state and local offices which answers basic questions and suggests approaches for scheduling electronic records.<sup>8</sup> With growing regularity, they provide assistance and consultation to state agencies to write records schedules for information systems and data sets.

Though the State Archives has markedly increased its involvement with electronic records and has committed new resources to its strategy for achieving a continuing

---

8 *Guidelines for the Management of Electronic Information* (Madison: Public Records and Forms Board, 1993)

electronic records program, the significant achievements and milestones have not yet been reached. Much still depends on the automation archivist who works on a fixed-term appointment, and this limits plans and objectives to short-term schedules. The Electronic Information Project has not yet met its own goals that are in turn critical for progress toward a sustained program. The main players in the state information arena still regard the State Archives as quite marginal to their work (when they recognize it at all).

But what has been accomplished already is also significant. The State Archives has decided to increase its work with electronic records, with or without new means to do so. By aligning itself with the planners at the state level and with agencies' information technology offices, it has gauged its current work to help the state's information technology program and to meet the perceived needs of electronic records keepers and creators. Whether or not it can meet its programmatic goals in the short term, the State Archives staff is quickly learning the electronic records world and gaining a voice in the discussions of state information.