

Counterpoint

A Forum for Archival Debate and Discussion

Back to Square One: Records Management Revisited

Twenty-one years ago the Society of American Archivists heard Morris Radoff call members “to take a courageous stand”. The occasion was a presidential address directed to the Society’s qualms on the admission of records managers to its fold. Resting his challenge on Wayne Grover’s declaration on the folly of archivists and records managers to think of parting company, Radoff acknowledged how the records manager had dived headlong into the control of records creation and the archivist had fearfully withdrawn into a scholarly shell. While “the conscientious records management specialist regretted his lack of history; the few archivists who understood records management regretted their lack of knowledge of systems and machines”. He continued, “when we worked together we did a fair job by respecting each other; when we worked separately we did badly. Even working together however, is a makeshift arrangement”. The challenge was to “recognize as truth that a record being made is the same record which a few years later may find its way into our sanctum sanctorum, that in its course from here to there it needs physical care and guidance, and that it is the archivist’s field, whole and indivisible, to give it this care and guidance”.¹

Radoff’s view, confessed to be revolutionary in 1955, will be regarded in 1976 as a near-heresy. In his skilful survey of the various appeals for a closer relationship between archivists and records managers to 1966, Frank Evans pointed out that certainly in the U.S. there was no thought at the beginning of “creating a new profession, or even . . . adding a new dimension to an existing profession.”² Yet it must be very plain that the profession of records manager has arisen despite the innocence of the early World War II days and growing concerns of the likes of Radoff. Indeed, it is thereafter virtually impossible to find such a clear statement as Radoff’s in

1 Morris L. Radoff, “What should bind us together,” *American Archivist*, Vol. 19, no. 1 (January 1956), p. 4.

2 Frank B. Evans, “Archivists and records managers: variations on a theme,” *American Archivist*, Vol. 30, no. 1 (January 1967), p. 46.

professional literature—most subsequent offerings being directed towards a reconciliation of two diverging activities, sometimes in restless co-existence, more often in violent imbalance.

By far the most significant of such exercises in reconciliation to date has been Alan Ridge's archival perspective on records management.³ Ridge would more than likely tar Radoff with the same brush as he used upon Schellenberg's treatment of the relationship between records management services and archives services—"in somewhat cavalier fashion and is written boldly from the archivist's point of view". Notwithstanding his sensitive appreciation of the issues involved, Ridge totally accepts the two positions as a reality, argues persuasively for a precise understanding of their separate accountabilities, criticises each for their ignorance of the other in the same service continuum and end, somewhat weakly, with a plea for a more elaborate *rapport* between archivists and records managers:

we need a much greater appreciation of the range of control performed by the two. In talks to archivists, records managers' can expand upon the organization of current materials, the pros and cons of new equipment, the methods of approving constantly updated and superseded print outs, and significant changes in format. Conversely the archivists should talk about old organizational systems reflected in the archives (which may be useful practical information to his modern colleague), methods of information retrieval over the years and their views on information and evidential values in appraisal.

Radoff, one feels, would have accepted the premise of coequal separation so that *rapport* would not be the issue which Ridge, amongst a few others both records managers and archivists, would encourage. As to a near-heresy, the comment of the editor of *Records Management Quarterly* that "the author, a director of archives and management services, provides some highly provocative viewpoints" seems to be the clearest indicator that not only would Radoff's archivist, whole and indivisible, be beyond the pale to the records management profession in North America today but that Ridge's warm embrace of mutual service, while not unacceptable, is rather daring.

To enter these lists of context in the context drawn by Alan Ridge is to invite likeness to Don Quixote. Tilting at the records manager seems foolish and quite futile. Against such vested interest and proprietary ground, the archivist dubbed with the yellow stain of lost opportunity so often appears to the records manager forlorn and disconnected, even at times ridiculous. As Ridge rightly observes, the archivist is prey to many predators who lurk nearby and never more so than when, in jurisdictions where operational records are created, an archives is regarded as a dumping ground severed from records administration. Then the archives becomes dispensable

³ Alan D. Ridge, "Records management. The archival perspective," *Records Management Quarterly*, Vol. 9, no. 1 (January 1975), pp. 11-15.

because its justification is at worst mere corporate whim, at best a vague regulation. Even in government, where a sense of both national economy and public responsibility might reasonably be expected to prevail upon the back of enabling legislation, the archivist who exercises only residual authority of veto on records disposition is scarcely able to compete with the tentacles of administrative power available to the records manager. The rewards for performance may be considerable within the administrative hierarchies of government, business and institutions since a visibility may be maintained through demonstration of effective services to management levels totally beyond the recognized purpose of the archival agency and the capacity of its staff. If some records managers have felt the pinch of a tightening economy, how much more suicidal can the archivist be who remains isolated or separate from a total integrated system of records administration? With great respect for the desirability of *rapport* between equal partners, let it be understood that in general records managers do not *have* to recognize the equivalence of their colleagues' responsibilities or positions in order to perform their function, yet no self-respecting archivist can function without a records management program. Most inequitably of all, the records manager has access to the tools of management and is able to exploit them according to need and ability. Command of systems and machines is the key to power and upon these commodities most archivists have little or no grasp. Records management has become a virtual fortress of skills and devices, immensely adaptive, productive and confident.

To combat the effects of the rising star of records management at the expense of archival services, it sometimes seems that a veritable revolution in the firmament will be necessary. But the issue is not so much as how to abate the effectiveness of records management, rather it is a matter of being capable as an archivist of administering records from their creation. Wrote Ernst Posner grandly, just before the outbreak of war and the management science which it engendered in the United States:

We may assume that gradually the archivists will become the nation's experts who must be consulted in all questions of public record making and record keeping and likewise become the trustees who will safeguard the written moments of the past, of the present day, and of the future.⁴

This trusteeship, applying most directly in the public sector but equally valid within commercial and institutional circumstances, cannot conceivably be fulfilled unless the archivist is a thoroughgoing records administrator, responsible for all phases in the quite properly espoused continuum of records creation and use. Only then will archives as a records function gain real credibility within an organization. In consideration of this, Alan Ridge is remarkably brief. Pursuing the dual service viewpoint, he sees each party

⁴ Ernst Posner, "Some aspects of archival development," *American Archivist*, Vol. 3, no. 3 (July 1940), p. 172.

“looking to different ends to be achieved by different methods”. Practical achievements may sell records management—a cultural role in society has to justify archives though he allows that “where one has a combined records and archives service one can achieve the most satisfactory results”.⁵ In such circumstances, it really does seem that far from encouraging *rapprochement* the two services are more than likely to become diametrically opposed. Back to the continuum: to quote Radoff again “at a point in this life history we have drawn a line, and we have said that here is the province of records management and there of archives administration, the line normally being drawn at the point where the ageing record has acquired historical or potential historical interest and has lost most or all of its administrative value. And who should make this decision?”⁶ Who indeed—*l’archivistique au secours!*

I share the sentiments expressed by Morris Radoff, acknowledge the caution of Frank Evans and understand the position of Alan Ridge, but above all I believe in the assumption of Ernst Posner. I cannot see that the archivist, especially the keeper of the *public* record whatever its medium, can be anything less than a thoroughgoing records administrator with all that this implies in care and use of records, operational and beyond. To consign the archivist to a terminal position in the total process and suggest that some familiarity be gained with activities determining earlier segments of the process appears to me to be an abdication of that wider and far-reaching responsibility wisely called “trusteeship”. It is not without some sense to acquaint archivists with records management practices if they are unfortunate enough to gain employment in an archival agency without archival education or experience but surely it is wiser to transcend this degree of tokenism by making available in the first place an archival education which goes all the way. Only then will the archivist really ‘come of age’. I am therefore at odds with arguments that draw lines between archivists and records managers, whether in terms of *fait accompli* or preference or pragmatism, for in truth they are one. I have to support present *rapprochement* because archivists need records managers but I do not surrender to the fact of our weakness. Rather would I urge archivists, through a thoroughly revised system of professional education because I have little faith in the current provision of on-the-job initiatives, to confront more keenly the objectives of archival operations, establish a code of principles and accordingly equip themselves with the tools and know-how to meet, and where desirable be, their own records managers.

Gordon Dodds
Archives of Ontario

5 Ridge, “Records management,” *Records Management Quarterly*, p. 14.

6 Radoff, “What should bind us together,” *American Archivist*, p. 4.