

# *From Life Cycle to Continuum: Some Thoughts on the Records Management — Archives Relationship*

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I should make it clear from the outset that in this paper I use the term “archivist” in the corporate context. That is, I am describing the caretaker of the official archives of an institution — as distinct from what our colleagues in the United States call a “manuscript librarian.” Over the past few years, a fascinating debate concerned with the extent to which an archivist is an historian or an information manager has alternately annoyed, pleased, and stimulated us through the pages of *Archivaria*.<sup>1</sup> A fundamental question arising from the debate is the extent to which a corporate or government archives is an administrative arm of its sponsor, and the extent to which it is a cultural agency. Or, to put the question another way: is the management of current records simply the first stage in an archival methodology; or is the archival concern, the requirement to ensure the preservation of permanently valuable records, merely the final step in a comprehensive records management process? The purpose of this paper is to suggest a practical model that may help to resolve these issues.

A decade and a half ago, Gerald Brown, Records Manager of the Union Pacific Railroad, attempted to describe the difference between archivists and records managers:

The archivist serves the needs of the scholar, the historian, and posterity, whereas, the records manager serves the needs of business which is usually profit motivated and which is interested only in information that contributes to or protects that profit or the goals of the organization. To put it another way, the records manager is basically a business administrator and the archivist is basically a historian.<sup>2</sup>

That seems clean, simple, and straightforward: archivists are interested in culture, history, and past events; records managers are concerned with efficiency and the present.

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1 See especially Hugh Taylor, “Information Ecology and the Archives of the 1980s,” *Archivaria* 18 (Summer 1984), pp. 25-37; and Terry Cook, “From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives,” *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 28-49.

2 Gerald Brown, “The Archivist and the Records Manager: A Records Manager’s Viewpoint,” *Records Management Quarterly* 5 (January 1971), p. 21.

Traditionally, the archivist has viewed himself as a scholar, interested in research and certainly the intellectual equal of the professional historian and researcher. To ensure that this developing status was not threatened in any way, archivists in the past generally refrained from showing any interest in such “unprofessional” activities as management or administration. Records managers, conversely, have viewed themselves as administrators, managers, interested in the development of systems and the increase of efficiency, with little interest in history or understanding of sophisticated historical research techniques.

How has each profession viewed the other? While I detect changes occurring, traditionally each group has operated from a position of self-interest. Many archivists have considered (and many continue to consider) records management as merely an element of archives. For them, the ultimate purpose of records management is the permanent preservation of “historically valuable” material in an archives. From this long-range point of view, the short time-span of administrative or operational use of records is a comparatively minor thing. A more pointed analysis of the relationship was given by a records officer working for the federal government in the United States over fifteen years ago: “an archivist is a records manager who has specialized [while] a records manager is an archivist who has become a general practitioner.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, he viewed archives as simply an element of effective records management: concentrate on efficient administration of current records, ensure systematic disposition procedures, and what remains is archives. While this model contains an element of truth, in the final analysis it is inadequate. An archivist is much more than a passive recipient of the records manager’s labours.

For some years the National Archives in Washington and the Public Archives in Ottawa have championed the “life-cycle” concept of the records management-archives relationship. This theory is based on the premise that it is possible to divide the life of a record into eight distinct, separate stages, starting with a records management phase consisting of:

- creation or receipt of information in the form of records,
- classification of the records or their information in some logical system,
- maintenance and use of the records, and
- their disposition through destruction or transfer to an archives.

This is then followed by a second, archival phase consisting of:

- selection/acquisition of the records by an archives,
- description of the records in inventories, finding aids, and the like,
- preservation of the records or, perhaps, the information in the records, and
- reference and use of the information by researchers and scholars.

The 1984 report by the National Archives and Records Service in Washington concerning its disposition activities described that agency’s interpretation of the life cycle as a series of related but separate functions and responsibilities. For example, the report indicated that the federal records disposition programme is divided into five activities, the first two of which are:

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3 J.J. Hammitt, “Government Archives and Records Management,” *American Archivist* 28 (April 1965), p. 219.

1. Scheduling Records for Disposition. Agencies are required to schedule all their records for disposition by proposing retention periods..., [and]
2. Appraising Federal Records as Archival. Agencies evaluate their records and propose retention periods based on continuing legal, fiscal, and/or administrative value to agency operations; NARS [the report was written before the National Archives received its independence] appraises the same records for value to future researchers in the National Archives.<sup>4</sup>

The report underlines this philosophy in further describing the records appraisal activity:

The appraisal of Federal records, a joint responsibility of the agencies and NARS, has dual objectives: the identification of permanently valuable records for preservation in the National Archives and the establishment of retention periods for temporary records, reflecting the expiration of the agencies' fiscal, legal, and administrative needs for them. The agencies generally determine the length of time records are required to meet their needs. NARS is responsible, however, for identifying the small percentage of permanent records that document the organization, policies, functions, procedures, and major activities of the Federal Government or contain other information of high research potential. The appraisal of Federal records for their permanent (or archival) value has long been considered one of the most difficult and important tasks assigned to archivists.<sup>5</sup>

While Canada certainly has its own traditions of records keeping,<sup>6</sup> it is generally recognized that the profession of records management was invented in the United States within the last fifty years. The first significant milestone was the establishment by the National Archives early in 1941 of a "records administration" programme. As Frank Evans has observed, this initiative was largely a response to "the need within the Government for planned programs of records disposal and for beginning as early as possible in the life history of records the process of selection for preservation and elimination."<sup>7</sup> In other words, archivists generated the first initiatives in records management, to serve archival ends.

In a report on the archival programmes within the General Services Administration published in 1983, the National Archives admitted this bias: "records management was not intended as an end in itself although there are obvious cost savings benefits which accrue from these activities." Proceeding from the evident fact that "the primary objective for establishing a national archives was to ensure that records of the Federal Government chronicling that aspect of the nation's history were preserved for the use of and dissemination to the American people," the report went on to complain that "this primary

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4 United States, National Archives and Records Service, *Fiscal Year 1983, Report to Congress on the Records Disposition Activities of the Federal Government* (Washington, 1984), p. 1.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

6 See, for example, Bill Russell, "The White Man's Paper Burden: Aspects of Records Keeping in the Department of Indian Affairs, 1860-1914," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 50-72.

7 Frank B. Evans, "Archivists and Records Managers: Variations on a Theme," *American Archivist* 30 (January 1967), p. 46.

mission [had] suffered because of the overemphasis of a program [records management] which was intended only to be a means of accomplishing the primary goal.”<sup>8</sup>

Of course, there is another side to this proposition. In a recent article in the *ARMA Records Management Quarterly*, its editor Ira Penn (also a senior management consultant in the Government of the United States) presented the counter-argument provocatively. One reason, he wrote, why “those at the highest levels of Government have been unable to come to grips with the records management problem is that basically, they don’t know what records management is. This remark is not meant to be disparaging; it is merely a fact. Examples abound which prove it to be true.” Penn then continued:

That responsibility for records management policy making was placed in the National Archives and Records Service indicates a complete lack of understanding of the records management function. That the rules governing the creation, maintenance and use, and disposition of Federal records are included in the Federal Property Management Regulations ... shows an appalling unawareness of the fact that it is the information in the records that is important, and not the medium in which the information is contained....

Penn commented on the fact that responsibility for the records management programme of the American Government had been assigned to the National Archives:

But functionally, archives is a part of records management. Archival preservation is but one of the elements of the disposition phase of the records life-cycle, and yet archives had agency status while records management was but an office within that agency. The entire arrangement was a textbook case of functional misalignment. The tail was wagging the dog.<sup>9</sup>

Penn’s words are useful simply because they do look at things from a different viewpoint and, to that extent at least, suggest that traditional approaches need to be picked up and given a good shaking every now and then. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that the new National Archives and Records Administration in Washington has re-established a records management function. It remains to be seen to what extent the new agency will view records management as simply a handmaiden of the archives programme, rather than as important for its own sake. We shall all watch with interest the progress of its “Documentation Standards” initiative.

In the general trends just described, three qualifications must be made immediately. First, the private sector seems more disposed towards the eminently sensible proposition of a combined records manager-archivist function. One need only consider models such as Imperial Oil or the Bank of Nova Scotia. Generally, it seems that public sector (government) records management-archives programmes in Canada have tended to emphasize cultural goals, while private sector programmes emphasize administrative requirements. Of course, exceptions exist. For example, in the public sector the records management and archives programme of the City of Toronto, was, we are told, “first and foremost ... created to meet the administrative needs of the corporation.... The City

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8 United States, National Archives and Records Service, *Archival Programs within GSA; a Report and Recommendations to the Administrator of General Services Administration on the Structure, Authorities, Programs, and Policies of the National Archives and Records Service* (Washington, 1983), p. 8.

9 Ira A. Penn, “Federal Records Management in the 1980’s — Is Just Like it was in the 1780’s,” *Records Management Quarterly* 18 (July 1984), p. 10.

Archives is a natural extension of the records management process."<sup>10</sup> (We can draw clues from the fact that it is also an excellent archives in the traditional sense.)

Secondly, the impact of the computer on the life cycle has been striking, for with electronic data the stages in the life cycle cannot be separated. The nature and volatility of the recorded data will not permit it. Creation, for example, is an ongoing process rather than an event in time. The record thus created is probably going to be altered a number of times during its period of administrative use. While most office automation systems may give the appearance of emulating a paper system, the data certainly is not processed in the same fashion. Data base management systems completely separate elements in a record, allowing the user to bring them together, perhaps altered, in any useful combination. Scheduling of data assumes a different perspective. Obviously, the archivist cannot wait, but must be involved even prior to the actual creation of the record. Finally, application of schedules becomes a continuous process, built into the system itself, because of the fluidity and continuity of the creation and re-creation of data.

The third observation is that external pressures sometimes cause a re-evaluation of traditional approaches. Within the Canadian government, this has happened as a result of the implementation of access to information and privacy legislation. Individual citizens now have a legal right of access to records that are still in administrative use in a ministry. The formal differentiation between the active, dormant, and dead stages in the life of a record is becoming decidedly fuzzy.

The life-cycle concept has been useful in promoting a sense of order, a systematic approach, to the overall management of recorded information. However, strict adherence to its principles undermines any trend toward greater cooperation and coordination of archivists and records managers. It ignores the many ways in which the records management and archives operations are interrelated, even intertwined. It may be convenient in a large bureaucracy to attempt to clarify roles and responsibilities by delineating carefully the records management and archival functions. It may also be counterproductive. Does the archivist really have no role to play in serving the creator of the records, in determining disposal periods, or developing classification systems? Does the records manager really have no responsibility in identifying permanently valuable records or serving researchers? To ask these questions is to answer them.

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What I have been suggesting, of course, is that the prevailing models for the records management-archives relationship are not fully satisfactory. In particular, I believe the split between the records management and archival phases of the "life cycle" is no longer acceptable. Recent studies support this conclusion. The former Archivist of the United States, J.B. Rhoads, in a recent report published by the International Council on Archives, urged "a comprehensive programme for achieving economy and efficiency in the management of current records, and for systematically identifying, preserving, and encouraging the use of archives." He described the elements of such a programme under "four major headings or phases representing the total life cycle of records." These four phases, according to Rhoads, are records creation, records use and maintenance, records

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10 R. Scott James, "Administration of Municipal Records: The Toronto Experience," *Government Publications Review* 8A (1981), p. 326.

disposition, and archives administration.<sup>11</sup> The Committee on the Records of Government, a blue-ribbon panel sponsored by the Mellon, Rockefeller, and Sloan Foundations, and the Council on Library Resources in the United States, recently presented a similar model. The “elements of a comprehensive government records program,” according to the Committee’s report, are information systems design, management of current records, micrographics, appraisal and scheduling, records centre operation, and an archival programme.<sup>12</sup>

I believe we should replace the life cycle with a simpler, more unified model consisting of four rather than eight stages, and reflecting the pattern of a continuum, rather than a cycle. The first two stages would be the same as those in the traditional model: creation or receipt of the record and its classification within some predetermined system. I then suggest a significant change in the order. Scheduling of the information, joined with presumed later application of the schedules, becomes a separate third stage. The final element, then, is maintenance and use of the information — whether it be maintained in the creating office, an inactive storage area, or an archives. All four stages are interrelated, forming a continuum in which both records managers and archivists are involved, to varying degrees, in the ongoing management of recorded information.

The function that ties the process together is that of service — to the creators of the records and all other users, whoever they may be and for whatever reason they may wish to consult the documentation. Records are created to serve an administrative purpose, usually to document a transaction or decision. Their value is directly related to their availability to those requiring them. Hence the need for effective systems of classification, filing, and retrieval — and the need to ensure that records of permanent value are preserved and made available when required. Much of the use made of records in any corporate archives usually comes from agency officers or employees, searching for precedent or background on current policies and administrative procedures. Here the archives acts simply as the continuation of a process that started at the moment of creation, ensuring the preservation and availability of records of enduring value. If you like, acting as the memory of the creating agency.

The new records management policy adopted by the Government of Canada in 1983 reflects this concept of a corporate records management-archives programme operating within a continuum — a unified approach to the administration of records. It does so in two ways: through its definition of a comprehensive “records management” function and through its delineation of the responsibilities of the government official responsible for the effective management of the overall programme, the Dominion Archivist. The term “records management” is defined as including “the identification, classification and retrieval, storage and protection, receipt and transmission, retention and disposal *or preservation*” of the records of an organization.<sup>13</sup>

The policy then defines the “records management function” very broadly, to include all aspects of the management of records except such creation functions as correspondence, reports, and forms management, etc. Unfortunately, in the Government of

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11 James B. Rhoads, *The Role of Archives and Records Management in National Information Systems: A RAMP Study* (Paris, 1983), p. 2.

12 Committee on the Records of Government, *Report* (Washington, 1985), pp. 168-69.

13 Canada, Treasury Board, *Administrative Policy Manual*, Chapter 460 (March 1983), section .1.5.2. Emphasis added.

Canada, no agency has responsibility for providing leadership and direction with regard to these records creation activities. Virtually no overall policies exist. However, the “records management function” does include “scheduling and disposal to ensure the appropriate retention and destruction of records and the preservation of records designated by the Dominion Archivist as having archival value” and “use of the Public Archives for the preservation of archival records.”<sup>14</sup> Finally, the responsibilities assigned to the Dominion Archivist by Treasury Board include appraising records and selecting, acquiring, and preserving “those records which have archival value.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, while the *use* made of records in the archives is, by omission from this policy, assumed to be singularly an archival concern, ensuring the permanent *preservation* of those records (through the normal scheduling process) is clearly a joint records management-archives responsibility.

As I have said, a major concern of the continuum as a whole must be administrative efficiency. Records are not created to serve the interests of some future archivist or historian, or even to document for posterity some significant decision or operation. They are created and managed to serve immediate operational needs. Unfortunately, most records managers have insufficient resources to keep on top of their normal records management functions. All too often, insufficient time and lack of staff restrict a records manager’s area of activity to maintenance and use of whatever records he has managed to bring under control: putting away, bringing forward, retrieving paper files, and returning them to storage. Generally, the records manager is lucky to have control over all the operational, relatively inactive paper records, never mind the very active ones, the files of senior officials, or other media of record. He often has little time for the records creation function, records improvement, design of new file systems, scheduling of records, or application of schedules.

This priority given to service should carry over into the archival stages of the continuum. It would be very tempting for an archivist, thinking things through logically, to insist that a priority be given to, say, acquisition — based on the proposition that one cannot provide service to records that one has not acquired; therefore, the first priority must always be acquisition. A variant of this thinking might give the nod to the function of conservation, for much the same reasons. To some extent, such errors are the result of confusion between long-term and short-term objectives. According the service role the status of first priority does not mean that it is the *only* priority. It just means that, when the chips are down, this function must be served before the others. While an archives obviously is obliged to acquire the right material and ensure its preservation, that archives had better be prepared to serve its immediate clients and serve them well if it wishes to prosper.

The implementation of access and privacy legislation in the federal government has put special pressures on the records management community, and has certainly re-emphasized the importance of the service function. Senior bureaucrats have realized that in order to give access to information, they must be able to find the records containing it. In fact, federal government institutions are under legislated obligation to account for all their information holdings and make as high a proportion of them as possible available to the public on request. The operative principle is that the records are considered *under the*

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14 *Ibid.*, section .3.

15 *Ibid.*, section .1.4.2.

*control* of each institution. The idea is catching hold that efficient access to information depends upon effective management of records. There is a fair amount of scrambling under way to improve outmoded systems. In addition, by implication, the concept of service to the creators of the records has been extended to the general public. That is, public servants are expected to make their records available to the public in just as efficient a manner as they do to their fellow administrators.

Traditionally, records managers have devoted their first (and often only) attention to the operational and administrative records of their institutions. Recent evaluations of the state of records management in the federal government have revealed that virtually none of the records of senior officials (deputy ministers, assistant deputy ministers, etc.) are under control, that is, in the subject file classification system, scheduled, and with the schedules being applied. At the same time, records managers frequently complain about a lack of senior management support for their programmes. Surely there is a relationship. Why should busy executives and senior managers support a function that does not support them? Perhaps it is time for records managers to place an emphasis on serving their senior executives, in effect contracting with them to provide top quality service in return for their support. Once that support has been secured, the records management programme should be in a position to move down through the ranks, bringing the whole records system under control from the top down. To those who might reject such a proposal outright on the basis of comparative volumes of records holdings, I would suggest that they consider the relative value of the information and of the decisions made based on that information.

Serving the senior executives involves some serious investigation. Our traditional subject file classification systems, designed to function at the operational level, often do not work too well with executive information. New systems, with greater attention to individual items, are sometimes required. We may find ourselves getting involved with the design and control of information systems — which necessitates cooperation with information experts of various persuasions. Effective use of miniaturization and automation is often involved. Success — that is, high quality, efficient service — impresses senior managers with the need for progressive use of technology throughout the system. Of course, a major concern in the design and operation of any such system must be to ensure the permanent retention and availability of the information of permanent value.

Unfortunately, too high a proportion of those who make decisions simply do not know or care about the importance of effective records management. Records managers are becoming aware of this situation, and are trying to remedy it. The concept of marketing the records management function is gaining credence. Obviously, an acceptance of the primacy of the service function would do much to raise the profile of the profession. I suggest that archivists have a role to play, too, down in the trenches with their records management brethren, selling their valuable product. As Alan Ridge wrote over ten years ago, we should “spend more time concentrating on the numerous similarities between our functions rather than harping on the differences....” Ridge urged us to “acknowledge our mutual interdependence and work in harmony in the field of service and information retrieval.”<sup>16</sup> We are starting to see movements in the direction of greater understanding and cooperation, but the pace needs to be accelerated.

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16 Alan D. Ridge, “Records Management: The Archival Perspective,” *Records Management Quarterly* 9 (January 1975), p. 25.



Richard Berner of the University of Washington recently proposed a wording for a single records management-archives goal: “responsible records use and administration leading to either authorized destruction or archival preservation and administration.”<sup>17</sup> The professions of records management and archives, while distinct, surely are working towards the same objective: the effective management of recorded information through all stages of the continuum, from creation to disposal. Effective management of recorded information (what Berner calls “responsible records use and administration”) requires ongoing cooperative interaction between the records manager and the archivist in order to:

- ensure the creation of the right records, containing the right information, in the right format;
- organize the records and analyze their content and significance to facilitate their availability;
- make them available promptly to those (administrators and researchers alike) who have a right and a requirement to see them;
- systematically dispose of records that are no longer required; and
- protect and preserve the information for as long as it may be needed (if necessary, forever).

A symbiotic relationship between an archivist and a records manager should facilitate the achievement of these ends. The intellectual training and historical perspective of the archivist will enrich the practical, immediate concerns of the records manager. And the records manager’s knowledge of his institution, as well as his concern for efficiency, practicality, and immediate service, will help the archivist to perform his responsibilities. Working as a team within the records management-archives continuum, they will ensure that their ultimate goals — administrative and cultural — are achieved.

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17 Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle and London, 1983), p. 178.