Archives and Information Management

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Information management or, if you prefer, information resource management, is a management philosophy or approach which has as its goal the management of information as an asset, as a resource of strategic importance to the organization, analogous entirely to the planning and administration of human resources, financial resources, or any other asset.

Information resource management is not a specific function or set of procedures; rather, it is an umbrella concept which embraces a number of related yet discreet functions:

1. Information Strategic Planning: injecting an "information requirements" component into an organization's long-range business planning.

2. Information Engineering: planning, "architecting," and designing the data and applications which together produce the information required to support the organization's business functions and its long-range plans.

3. Information Technology Planning: "architecting" the nature, shape, and structure of an organization's technology requirements, as driven by the organization's data and application architectures.

4. Data Administration: managing the creation, use, structure, description, security, access, and life-cycle of an organization's data.

5. Records Management: managing the information media (i.e., the carrier of the information) on the basis of the recorded information's value to the organization.

6. Applications Development and Systems Development: self-explanatory, though driven by the data, applications, and technology architectures.

Put very simply, information resource management is the totality of planned and directed activities within an organization which result in useable, accessible, timely, secure, integral, economical, and accurate information for that organization.

Although I've described information resource management as a "womb-to-tomb" management approach to an organization's information requirements, the real

strength of information resource management lies in its front-end planning and design orientation. The intent is to make the downstream system development, technology acquisition, and data creation phases more coherent and effective through investing time, effort, and care in the front-end planning stages, and by tying that planning directly to the business needs of the organization. Consistent with this front-end planning orientation, information resource management is most effective when structured as a top-down, corporate (as opposed to local office) activity. The planning and design process involved in "architecting" and creating information should be driven by and in turn should support the basic directions, values, and visions of the organization.

This rather extended definition of information resource management sets the stage for the remainder of my presentation, that is, how records management and archives fit into the equation.

First, what of records management? I've already noted that I believe records management to be a component of information resource management. Records management is a mid- and downstream activity concerned with the efficient and effective handling of the carrier of the information, with determining life-cycles and final disposition of information or data, and with management issues of information access, security, integrity, timeliness, and so on. All of these functions are driven by what I believe is (or should be) the core of records management: information value analysis. What value does a set of information represent to the organization? How much has been invested in the creation, use, maintenance, and storage of the information? Who uses it and why? How broad is the client base, and how would it be affected if the information were not available? Questions such as these should lead the records manager to a determination of the value of the records and information, and from this value assessment a management programme flows.

The relationship between records management and information resource management is, in my view, clear: the former is a subset of the latter. One final point: labelling the activity I've just described as records management is becoming less and less meaningful as the functions of records management (with its traditional focus on the medium) and data administration (with its focus on format-independent data) begin to blend and merge.

So, if you accept what I have said to date, the question now arises: what is the relationship between archives and information resource management? Let's hearken back, for a moment, to my original point about being careful about terms. Having the equipment and the technical know-how to do archival processing of disks and tapes — in other words, having the ability to perform traditional archival functions with non-traditional records — is not the same thing as meaningfully participating in information resource management. In fact, this sort of activity has very little to do with information resource management.

Identifying, appraising, storing, and servicing tapes and disks, writing finding aids for them, answering research questions about them: all of this sort of thing is valuable, essential activity, but it doesn't involve anything more than the existing relationship between archives and records management. It is simply a more technically literate version of the status quo.

But, of course, this raises the question of whether or not the archivist should move beyond this necessary but essentially downstream role. Because of the environment of volatile data, on the one hand, and a growing emphasis on information planning, on the other hand, should the archivist now be aiming at becoming actively involved as a player or as a contributor to the information resource management process? And if so, what should this involvement entail? Should it limit itself to trying to push as far upstream as possible the identification of archival material? Should it involve insisting on certain formats, structures, and media conducive to long-term storage for potentially archival data identified early in the planning stages? Or, as I have heard seriously discussed, should the archivist sit at the apex of the information resource management pyramid as the "governor" or the "shaper" of the process?

These are heavy questions. I am not going to attempt to answer them in detail, but I am going to share with you some of my concerns regarding the concept of an expansion of the archivist's role in information resource management. While I think that it is obviously in your best interests to position yourself as far upstream in the information life-cycle as possible, I also believe that this positioning should be, and in practical terms always will be, very narrowly circumscribed.

Why do I think this? I have a number of reasons, both theoretical and practical. First, as I have mentioned, information resource management is primarily oriented toward the planning and creation of information which will directly support and forward the core business of the organization. Information resource management is a business-support function aiming at helping the corporation achieve its goals. Archives, on the other hand, have very little to do with the business of the corporation nor, for that matter, with its business planning activities. Archives exist for different purposes than, for instance, the enhancing of an organization's profitability. Now I know (and I believe) that archives form the corporate memory of an organization, and that corporations often find it useful to refer to the old files when formulating policy or reviewing current operations. In terms of an organization's total information requirements, however, and in terms of the business processes which information resource management endeavours to support, the archival corporate memory role is, of necessity, a function of lesser significance. Stated another way, the raisons d'être of archives and of information resource management are different, and any attempt to link the two closer than they are now, or to have the former assume an influence role over the latter, will founder because of inherent incompatibility.

You can see the practical results of this incompatibility every day on the job or every time you pick up a professional journal. It has been my experience that staff involved in information resource management functions do not perceive any relationship between their function and that of the archivist. In the few cases where a relationship is acknowledged, it is exclusively the existing one of the archives eventually assuming custodial responsibility for historical records once the record's active life is at an end. None of the literature on information resource management that I am aware of (save articles written by archivists) proposes a role for the archivist in the discipline. And I would argue that the people writing this literature and the people involved in information resource management functions aren't bad, or misguided, or misinformed; nor would I argue that it is because archivists

somehow haven't sold their programme well enough. No, I believe that the status quo (in the literature and in practice) is not an aberration at all. To posit otherwise would mean having a relatively small tail wagging a very large dog.

Another problem, from my perspective, relates to some fundamental questions about the nature of archival science, and about where the archival profession properly fits into the information life-cycle. I have already told you what I think information resource management is all about: it plans, it structures, and it directs the creation of information and information systems which support an organization's operations and its decision-making, and which reflect its corporate values and visions. Should the archivist have anything to do with this process? Let's look at some of the questions I asked earlier: Should the archivist try to be involved in, say, the data architecture or applications architecture phases to better identify potentially archival material? I'm not going to answer yes or no here, but I will note that I believe that archival judgements, assessments, and processing are a downstream exercise in the information life-cycle; they cannot be undertaken confidently until the record has been used, has been acted upon, has supported decisions, and has produced consequences. Information resource management's biggest area of pay-off, by contrast, is in the development of the upstream platonic information ideal.

Another question: should the archivist try to influence decisions regarding the format or the medium of potentially archival data, with long-term storage requirements in mind? It is obviously in your interest to do so, but if I were a senior information executive, I would be loath to enshrine that sort of thing in policy. Records first and foremost are created to support primary business functions. And although it is true that archivists rightly serve future generations, within the confines of your organization, the archivist is a servant of the corporation, and not the other way around. The corporation will always be more concerned with its primary business, and with making sure that it has the information it needs, in the format it needs, to carry forward its business.

The third question I asked was: Should the archivist actively participate in the planning function, as a "shaper" of the information and of information systems? Should historical research considerations, or the requirements of future generations, be part of the "user requirements definition," or be part of the architecture development process? A radical question, perhaps, but a logical extension of the natural desire to position the archival process as far upstream as possible. To be involved directly in the creation process would be to put the archivist into a serious conflict of interest. His or her role would become circular: the archivist would be appraising the fruits of his or her own labour.

This brings me to my last point as to why I am concerned about archives and information resource management. A very real, practical, limiting factor in any attempt to involve archives more deeply in information resource management is the complexity of the information resource management process, the substantial resources required to make it work, and the extended time frames needed before any pay-off can be seen. Even if you could solve the theoretical problems of the tail wagging the dog, or of the archivist being present at creation, even if you could convince a data modeller that you had a role to play in his process, you would still be faced with time and resource demands far beyond the capabilities of any

archives of which I am aware. Indeed, information resource management is proving to be almost beyond the capabilities of most parent organizations.

I fear that all of what I have said has sounded very negative, and that is unfortunate because I was, am, and will remain a fan and a supporter of the archival profession and of its essential role in preserving our documentary heritage. But talk of evolving relationships between information resource management and archives misses the point. Certainly, there is a relationship, but I do not see that relationship extending beyond the existing linkage between archives and records management, specifically the retention scheduling aspects of records management (i.e., the means by which you identify and acquire records of long-term value). And I perceive that even within that existing linkage, there is a mountain of work yet to be done.

If you'll permit me, I'll leave you with a bit of advice: aside from gathering what you need to know about the processes surrounding the genesis of a record, I suggest that you not focus your efforts on forging links with or participating in information resource management. There is simply no percentage in it for the archivist. Instead, I believe that you should focus your efforts on specific, pragmatic, achievable objectives, none of which go beyond existing theory, practice, or mandate:

> 1. Acquire the hardware, software, and technical know-how you will need to be able to receive, store, process, and service your organization's digital information.
>
> 2. Develop and put in place the least onerous and least obstructive procedures and documentation standards required to ensure that archival digital information is forwarded to the archives.
>
> 3. Develop the arguments and selling points (both hard dollars-and-cents and "future generation/priceless heritage" kinds of arguments) necessary to convince your parent organizations that your role is not a peripheral one.
>
> 4. Take a long, hard look at your track record at meeting commitments and in delivering service to your clients.

These are simple objectives, and they have little to do with information resource management. But upon their satisfactory resolution rests the future of the archival profession in the information age.

Notes

*   In preparing the original version of this paper for the annual meeting of the Association of
     Canadian Archivists, which took place at Hamilton in 1987, the author encountered a major problem:
     what exactly is "information management?" It has been his experience that some have used the
     term to describe what most people would call "office automation," that others have used the term
     as a politically smarter way of labelling "records management" or "data processing," and that still
     others have made the term synonymous with "database management" or "infotech planning." He
     has never been happy with these verbal gymnastics, and this paper therefore presents a definition
     of "information management" which is an amalgam of existing literature and institutional practices.