

A Weak Link in the Chain: Records Scheduling as a Source of Archival Acquisition

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In his paper entitled "Recent Trends in the Management of Records," given at the ACA meeting in Hamilton in 1987, Jay Atherton said that it was ". . . useful to remind ourselves periodically that the discipline of records management has not exactly lived up to its promise in terms of archival selection and transfer."¹ Jay Atherton is unlikely now to be nearly so tentative in his conclusions on this subject, after having served four years as Director-General of the Historical Resources Branch in the National Archives, and thereby having presided over the development of an acquisition policy and development plan for an acquisition strategy. The title of this piece takes its cue from Atherton's observation; from my own experience in appraising and scheduling government records; and carries on from earlier discussions of this issue in the pages of *Archivaria*.²

This paper will focus on the effectiveness of the records scheduling function as a means of appraising and acquiring records of institutions, and draw in particular on the experience of the National Archives of Canada. It does not explore the experience of other archives in Canada with records scheduling. It also, finally, suggests a new approach to this records management/archival function that is being implemented within the National Archives.

Records scheduling has tried to meet several objectives from the time it began to be practised. First, it was developed to provide for records retention and disposal by the agency that created the records. Depending on their value, records can be retained, according to a schedule, for varying periods of time. A schedule is, by definition, a timetable; a records schedule is a timetable for retention that also specifies a date and method of disposal. The application of an authority is required to allow for the disposal of the record. The first recognized use in Canada of this method of disposing of records by an agency of the federal government took place in 1889. The first records schedule was initiated by the Post Office in that year, to establish a standard retention for certain routine documents, allowing for the longer retention of documents having more value. Approval for the destruction of the records at the end of the stated retention period was provided by the Cabinet.³ Secondly, the records scheduling process has been used as a means of identifying archival records and providing for their transfer to archives. This

is a very different objective. The practice of records scheduling has been in fairly extensive use by archives during the last five decades. It is in this combination of records retention, the identification of record values and the authority to dispose of records, that the interests of the creators of records and archivists have been played out.

The creator assigns retention periods to records based on the length of time the records are expected to be needed by the institution. The archivist identifies those of permanent value. An authority to dispose of the records is granted. The *instrument* by which this is carried out is the records schedule. A records schedule then, has several purposes for the various participants. It is to serve the needs of the records creator by permitting timely destruction of records according to varying periods of retention, thereby freeing needed storage space; to assist in identifying records of long-term corporate value to the creator; finally, as a tool to help ensure compliance with various statutory requirements. The schedule also helps the archivist to identify and preserve records of permanent value.

This is the link referred to in the title of this paper. The chain is the line, or the life cycle of the record, from its creation to disposal or archival retention. Records scheduling as a process, or the records schedule, is a link in this chain of the record continuum.

Records scheduling has been enlisted as a support in fulfilling an important statutory requirement of recent years. Privacy laws have been enacted within many public jurisdictions in Canada during the past ten years — at the federal level in 1983, at most provincial levels, and, as in Ontario within the past two years, in municipal governments. Many of these laws specify that personal information about individuals can only be gathered and used in defined circumstances, and that such information must be promptly disposed of when the purpose for which it was created or collected has been served. Rather than creating new processes to ensure the timely disposal of such information, records scheduling has been frequently looked to as the means of carrying it out. This has given higher profile to the task of controlling records, and not altogether positive: witness the press reports in recent years about personal information out of control, falling off the back of trucks and floating around the streets of Ottawa; stolen immigration fiche; or — in 1991 — an Ontario cabinet minister unwittingly quoting from an unexcised briefing document supplied by assistants.⁴ There has frequently been reference back to archives in connection with the disposal of the records. If disposing of personal information has enhanced the profile of records control and disposal, it has also burdened the scheduling function, and given it a direction it might not otherwise have taken.

The context in which records scheduling currently takes place is dramatically different from that which existed when it was first used, or that which existed twenty years ago when it began to be more frequently practised at the federal and provincial levels in Canada. As archivists, we need not be reminded, whether in the popular press or at conferences, that we are living in the ‘information age’. Evidence abounds, in the form of an explosion of recorded information, in an abundance of duplication, with which we who deal with records are expected to cope. The management of this information is a huge business in itself; indeed, the perfection of techniques for producing it faster and in a form more easily usable constitutes a significant and growing part of our Gross National Product. We all have our own favourite illustrations

of what this means in terms of quantifying record holdings. Whether we, in our imagination, convert the contents of federal government data holdings to paper form and then deploy the paper in boxes that stretch half-way to the moon,⁵ or, more concretely, speak of almost 4,000,000 paper case files opened annually by the RCMP in enforcing the criminal code, the point is writ large. My favourite illustration is that contained in a 1989 study by the (U.S.) National Coordination Committee for the Promotion of History which states that the U.S. federal government now produces, every four months, a stack of records equal to all those produced in the 124 years between George Washington and Woodrow Wilson.⁶ As archivists, these figures *do* attract and hold our attention.

Yet, the changed form of the record influences as much our discussion of records scheduling. Another U.S. study, done for Congress in 1990, concludes that by the year 2000, 75 per cent of U.S. federal government transactions will be electronic.⁷ These records are fragile, and cannot afford to wait out the active and dormant period of the so-called "records continuum."⁸ Their archival retention must, in fact, be scheduled before they are created. Those having responsibility for preserving electronic records of permanent or archival value cannot pass lightly over this fact; rather, they must change their practices accordingly. How, then, has records scheduling fared in this new reality? The answer, as one would expect from the title of this paper, is *not very well*. My experience — gained, admittedly, with the records of the Government of Canada, but also informed by some knowledge of the federal scene in the United States — brings me to the conclusion that the records scheduling link is indeed weak.

While the scheduling system has worked reasonably well at providing timetables and authority for disposing of large quantities of paper case files, it has not permitted archivists to identify and preserve important archival records. Moreover, in the late 1970s and early 1980s when archivists began responding to the apparent needs of the 'new social history' for records of people's interaction with government, by scrutinizing the destruction of case files more carefully, even the process of disposing of case files through records scheduling was slowed. It is not clear whether records scheduling has aided records creators in identifying documents important to serving 'corporate' needs. One suspects that in some instances important records have been so identified, in others not. However, the failure of the scheduling system as a means of archival acquisition has been apparent for some time. A concrete example from the federal scene will illustrate the point. A study conducted at the then Public Archives of Canada in 1979 indicated, rather conclusively, that the scheduling of federal government textual records had failed dismally as a means of identifying and preserving archival material.⁹ By the later 1980s, it was evident that the corrective measures taken in response to this study had not appreciably improved matters in respect to textual records. Moreover, government maps, architectural plans, photographs, pictures and film have seldom been acquired by the National Archives through records schedules. Rather, most of these records have been acquired by archivists through contact with the creators as was the case, until very recently, with electronic records. There was a comprehensive records scheduling policy adopted by the federal government for all records, except those in electronic form, in 1982.

Subsequent attempts to develop a records scheduling policy for electronic records, which would have been a mirror image of that applying to other records, founded in a

government bureaucracy more concerned with controlling the burgeoning costs of information technology than with managing the information created thereby. Archivists may have secretly applauded. They wondered, aloud, about the value of developing for electronic records a policy which appeared not to work for those in textual and other forms. Yet through the 1980s the National Archives continued to exercise authority over federal government records destruction. This process needed to continue; there was an infrastructure in the form of records management operations within departments to help to carry it out; more importantly, no viable alternative had emerged.

To return to my main point, I offer several reasons why records scheduling has failed in meeting some of its objectives. These may be useful to those interested in examining their own appraisal/scheduling processes. Some reasons are almost self-evident. Records management programmes were originally created to control quantities of textual records and in this they have been fairly successful. Traditional records management operations have very little to do with electronic records, or with other non-textual media. These records are handled by specialists employed by government agencies. Moreover, even some of the most important textual records of government agencies are not under the control of records managers. With decentralization of government, control of increasingly important records is often outside the purview of records managers at headquarters, wherever it might be. Archivists usually deal with records managers in matters of scheduling. This means that many of the most valuable archival records escape the records scheduling net altogether. The negative consequences for the quality of the archival record are evident, if records scheduling constitutes a principal means of acquisition.

I submit that there is a less readily understood, but more fundamental, flaw in records scheduling as traditionally practised. It will be recalled that the purposes of the schedule, while varied, are viewed quite differently by the records creator and the archivist. Early federal (Canadian) records studies urged short retention of bulky, routine, transactional records and the segregation and preservation in the custody of one person, the archivist, of permanently valuable records. Following from this, records creators have been concerned with the efficiency of the scheduling process. An indicator of effectiveness for them might be the number of schedules processed, the quantity of records scheduled, or the speed at which approvals for destruction are obtained. Archivists, given their knowledge of poor appraisal decisions made in the past, are instinctively cautious. A successful outcome to the scheduling process for an archivist is the identification and preservation of archival records. In government, the creating agency usually wants loose, flexible authority to dispose of records. The archivist, requiring identification of the few archival records among masses of documentation, wants precision of records description in schedules. The archivist wants the schedule to be a retention tool for archival records; thus, the latitude for action by the individual within the agency applying the schedule should be reduced. The creator, on the other hand, wants efficient disposal and maximum latitude. Because of the extent of the records involved, the creator believes that the task of records scheduling can never be accomplished with the precision demanded by the archivist. The creator wants looser schedules and more flexibility in applying them. Finally, the records manager, acting for the records creator, often wants to address immediate problems, for example storage of textual records. Yet the archivist cannot make informed appraisal decisions based on one medium; rather information holdings must be addressed comprehensively,

across all media, for a major programme. This is particularly true for current records, given the present electronic/textual combination of information holdings in modern organizations. Only in this way, and with the least duplication, does the archivist believe that the best archival record can be selected.

I exaggerate the distinctiveness of the approach to records scheduling by the records creator and the archivist, for effect; the picture is at once more varied and complex. However, a disparity of viewpoint often leads to a distinctiveness in approach, or worse, to no particular approach at all. The disparity arises from the dual purpose served by records scheduling. Is it to serve in the first instance as a means of records retention, and secondly as a means of records destruction? Or vice versa? It is useful for those involved in records scheduling to try to answer this question. Resources are in short supply. To reinforce the point, it is improbable that all records in most large agencies of modern government will ever be scheduled. Accordingly, the approach to the activity becomes important. How shall it be directed? What objective shall it seek to accomplish first?

A reference to records scheduling practice within the past few years on the federal scene will illustrate the difficulty that can emerge if one does not carefully answer these questions. There is a requirement at the federal level, first established in policy and now in legislation, that no record of government institutions can be destroyed without the permission of the National Archivist. Accordingly, agencies make proposals to the National Archives to dispose of records. Archivists identify those of archival value, recommending their retention, and the destruction of the remainder. The approved records schedule becomes the authority to dispose of the record. The initiative for bringing forward proposals for records disposal has, until recently, rested with the records creating agency. The National Archives was largely in a reactive mode, yet the primary task being accomplished through the process was determining what to keep and what could be destroyed through appraisal of the value of the records under consideration. Frequently, archivists were hindered in carrying out their appraisal because the wrong mix of records was being considered in the particular proposal at hand. Archivists need to judge record values based on contextual knowledge of what records exist around, above and below any particular records being appraised, as well as knowledge of other sources of information such as publications, central agency records, etc. As practised, however, the agencies determined the scope of any scheduling activity, and the order in which the schedules were presented for approval. An example will illustrate the problem. The 1983 federal *Privacy Act* requires that personal information be collected only in defined circumstances, and be maintained for limited periods of time. It was believed that this requirement offered the National Archives a unique opportunity. The National Archivist was already the person with the sole authority to permit the destruction of records. Why not use this authority as a means of identifying archival records, particularly machine-readable or electronic records, for which no explicit disposal methods existed? Between 1983 and 1985 the National Archives participated in an exercise designed to schedule this personal information, vast quantities of which were held by the federal government. This large, government-wide effort saw more records scheduled, but failed to achieve archival objectives. The National Archives did not acquire better archival records. Archivists were frustrated in their appraisal work, as they dealt in isolation with masses of case files in textual or electronic form, without knowledge of other operational or policy records existing

within agencies. Poor appraisal, and decisions which preserved too many records, were the inevitable result. Archivists, in fact, began to question the very assumptions on which the records scheduling process was based. It is possible that the federal experience may not be an isolated one. Without a clear statement of purpose, the effectiveness of any process will be hampered. The same is true of records scheduling. By which yardstick would it be measured? On whose behalf is the activity being carried out, the records creator or the archives? What purpose does it serve? Is it efficiency and economy? If so, the scheduling of bulky records might become the priority, and the acquisition of archival electronic records should be pursued by other methods, as they would presumably never be scheduled. Is the objective the archival record? If so, the approach adopted may be quite different.

In arriving at a conclusion as to the purpose served by the function of records scheduling, it is wise to look beyond the exercise of the authority over records destruction as an end in itself. The responsibility thus afforded needs to be directed to a particular purpose. Providing authorities to dispose of records efficiently is unlikely to be the objective; rather, a definition of the purpose at which the function is aimed must precede a determination of how to carry it out effectively. Early on, archivists in public institutions realized that the best means of ensuring preservation of archival records was to exercise the authority over records destruction. They were right. Archivists of this generation owe a considerable debt to those who, by whatever means at their disposal, convinced those in power to allow them to monitor or control records destruction. Through their efforts, modern legislative authority slowly emerged. I would suggest that, as a general rule, while archivists have exerted themselves with good effect to grasp the authority over records destruction, they have been slower in influencing practices such as records scheduling to suit the particular objectives of their institution. If records scheduling is to be an important means of acquiring archival records, it should be given a focus to ensure that it achieves this purpose. If not, then alternative means of acquisition need to be found. Given the size of tasks confronting archivists in the contemporary world of records, we cannot afford to waste either opportunities or resources in carrying them out.

Within the National Archives, certain conclusions were reached as a result of experience gained which, while they were not formalized, became guiding principles for action after 1987. Records scheduling as it had been traditionally practised, that is, departments making proposals to dispose of records and the National Archives approving them, did not serve as a useful means of acquiring archival records. It had worked imperfectly for textual records, and not at all for records in other media. Moreover, it was unlikely ever to do so, because the imperatives of space and efficiency, which had driven the process in the past, did not apply non-textual media such as electronic records. It was possible, even probable, that not a single electronic record would have been acquired through the scheduling process as traditionally practised. And it was probable that any records that did not present storage problems for government agencies would never be included in the scheduling process. It was concluded that tinkering with this reactive, passive process would not suffice, records scheduling needed substantial review and change, and a proper focus. Discussions leading to a new approach began between managers in the former Machine-Readable Archives and Federal Archives Divisions in 1986. Consensus on the elements of a new, active approach was achieved through lengthy discussions on an acquisition policy, to be put into action by building

an acquisition strategy, a set of appraisal criteria, a sampling methodology and a new approach to implementing the appraisal/disposal process within the federal government. All of these instruments took several years to develop, approve and implement. It is not surprising that implementation solutions did not begin to emerge until after the *National Archives Act* was passed in 1987. Before 1987, the Archives lacked the authority, on its own, to introduce substantial change. With the Act came room to manoeuvre; this accompanied the opening of many records doors in Ottawa which had hitherto remained locked!

A new approach was adopted by the National Archives in 1990, which attempts to use the authority over retention and disposal conferred by the *National Archives Act* to full advantage in pursuing the institution's objectives. While the Act states that no record of government agencies may be destroyed or otherwise disposed of without the approval of the National Archivist, it does not specify the order in which such approval is to be obtained. The new approach seeks to have this authority applied first to the most important records of government, in order that they may be preserved as archives. The approach thus becomes an acquisition strategy. Identifying important records, and providing for their eventual transfer to the archives will, in turn, facilitate the disposal of records having no permanent value. The approach is based on 'records disposition' planning, which encompasses direct transfer of archival records and any other methods of records disposal, as well as records scheduling. There is, first, a government-wide plan listing government agencies in the order of priority with which they are to be dealt in the records disposition process, agreed to by the Archives and agencies. Plans for the disposition of records are in turn formulated and signed with each agency. These are based on the individual needs of the agency, as well as an archival agenda. In addition, government-wide research studies identify common functions and processes, allowing government-wide appraisal of certain types of records.

Archivists, of course, play the key role in this strategy. They are uniquely equipped to do so, as the focus of their work is traditionally record values, which can best be perceived from a 'top-down' analytical view of the functions of government and its agencies. Archivists ascertain, first on an agency-wide basis, the significance of programmes through a review of their organizational structure, functions and processes; secondly, by a study of records systems, their linkages and interconnections in support of the programmes; and, finally, by appraising the records themselves. Special attention in the research is paid to functions and processes which cross agencies, in view of making the best possible appraisal decisions by having adequate knowledge of similar record holdings. The strategy recognizes the reality of the interconnection of modern organizations and information systems, both within government and between government and the rest of society.¹⁰ The strategy is based on traditional archival methods. Record values, regardless of media, are determined by examining the context in which records are created, more specifically, by analyzing the structure, function and processes of the programmes that created them. Yet there are differences. I am unaware of previous attempts by archives to rank institutions in order of the importance of their contribution to government and society. Archivists, moreover, traditionally analyze structure, function and process while appraising the records. This new approach requires that much of their analytical work precede an evaluation of the actual record holdings.

The advantages of such an approach may appear evident to archivists. Better planning of work based on an archival agenda aimed in the first instance at preserving archival records, is the first obvious benefit. As opposed to the passive mode, this active approach has the advantage of enabling archivists to examine government programmes and the information holdings that support them in broad context. This should permit the identification of the most important records through the 'top-down' application of global appraisal criteria. I have already remarked on the sheer volume of recorded information with which archivists are expected to cope in the 1990s. This approach gives a framework within which appraisal of such records can take place. It should be possible to have more confidence in appraisal decisions, if they are arrived at through a logical analytical process established for the purpose of making them. Of course, the preservation of more valuable archival records is the objective, not a better process. Finally, work undertaken during appraisal in studying institutions and their programmes can, with little effort, be used in records description. A useful consideration for the future is capturing appraisal information in a standardized format, so that it may be used directly in such descriptions without further change.

For the government department, the focus on protecting important records in support of corporate objectives is useful in itself; agrees with current government information policy; and should help to enhance the status of those entrusted with information management. It is recognized that no approach will be successful unless departments and agencies properly control their records. It is also recognized that this approach will not be successful unless it is implemented collaboratively between agencies and the Archives. Finally, however, identifying and concentrating effort in controlling records of the highest value may be useful to the department as well as to the Archives.

The approach should help to solve the conundrum concerning the levels of detail in records description, in order that sound retention/disposal decisions can be made. The depth of detail may be tailored to meet both the specific situation and the difficulty of arriving at an appraisal decision. Just as importantly, identifying and preserving archival records will, it is expected, expedite approval for the destruction of those records having no value. Reaction by government departments to the leadership shown by the National Archives in establishing this new approach has been positive.

This discussion of records scheduling may be useful for those considering a review of their own records appraisal processes. In a wider framework, perhaps it will serve as a reminder that traditional archival practices need constant revision to ensure that they remain useful. Records scheduling as practised in the 1960s will not work in the 1990s. We need to examine critically long accepted concepts, modify them as necessary, and change practices accordingly. Archival work in relation to the concept of the records continuum, when disposing of the information holdings of modern institutions, is one such example. And, as archivists, we should constantly explore the limits of our influence, seek means to enlarge upon it, and use all of it in support of our efforts to identify, preserve, describe, and make available archival records. The pages of *Archivaria*, and the platforms of archival conferences have been filled, virtually since the formation of the Association of Canadian Archivists, with anxious questionings as to the role and status of archivists.

It need hardly be said that the skills necessary for successful archival appraisal, whether this be within the venue of records scheduling or not, are those which we

admire most in the profession — aptitude in research, analysis, evaluation, and interpretation. The approach discussed herein certainly makes prime use of the basic archival principle of provenance.¹¹ Archivists alone bring this perspective to coping with the world of records in the 1990s. Archivists alone have the tools of *context* and *provenance* when dealing with records, enabling them to extract from the contemporary explosion of recorded information those records essential to an understanding of our time by future generations. To accomplish this most effectively and efficiently, archivists need processes which best serve this objective. Records scheduling can be made to serve this purpose first and others simultaneously. The potential exists for the schedule to become a strong rather than a weak link in the chain joining records creation to archival retention. It is up to archivists to forge it accordingly.

Notes

- * Paper delivered at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Banff, Alberta, 24 May 1991.
- 1 Jay Atherton, "Recent Trends in the Management of Records," paper delivered to the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Hamilton, Ontario, June 1987, p. 1.
- 2 See, in particular, Bryan Corbett and Eldon Frost, "Acquisition of Federal Government Records", *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84), pp. 201-232.
- 3 Quoted from Jay Atherton, "The Origin of the Public Archives Records Centre, 1897-1956," *Archivaria* 8 (Summer 1979), p. 38.
- 4 The Privacy Commissioner referred to the theft of immigration fiche as ". . . the Chernobyl of privacy disasters . . ." *Annual Report*, Privacy Commissioner, 1986-87, Canada. The Ontario Minister of Health resigned as a result of this incident in 1991.
- 5 Address by Jay Atherton to a training and development seminar, Toronto Chapter of ARMA, January 1986. Printed in *Records Management Bulletin* 1, no. 4 (Jan.-March 1986).
- 6 *Developing a Premier National Institution: A Report from the User Community to the National Archives*, (The National coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, 1989).
- 7 "Taking a Byte Out of History: The Archival Preservation of Federal Computer Records," *Twenty-Fifth Report by the Committee on Government Operations* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), p. 2.
- 8 See Catherine Bailey, "Archival Theory and Electronic Records" *Archivaria* 29, (Winter 1989-90), pp. 180-196 for a fuller discussion of archival implications of the electronic record. Bailey argues persuasively that the theory of the 'life cycle model', if viewed at a conceptual level, need not be altered in respect to electronic records. This is accepted. In fact, one can validate her thesis further by distinguishing among various types of electronic records. The development of retention/disposal specifications in information management systems for electronic records created in offices imitate active, dormant and inactive cycles long in use for textual and other records. Survey data, being in the nature of a periodic snapshot, is rapidly superseded by the next 'picture', giving rise to its destruction or, if of permanent value, its transfer to an archives. This is not dissimilar to the handling of records of a commission of inquiry. Records in transactional databases may have a wide variety of retention periods, depending on the purposes served by the system. Finally, permanent retention of nineteenth-century seismographic readings in paper form is identical to that of the same type of record now contained in a cumulative, permanent database.
- 9 See Corbett and Frost, *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84), p. 201-232.
- 10 A fuller description of the strategy is contained in *Acquisition Research Strategy for Government Records*/internal document of the National Archives of Canada, October 1991.
- 11 Readers wishing to explore further the issue of provenance in archival literature might refer to the seminal work on the subject by David A. Bearman and Richard Lytle, "The Power of the Principle of Provenance," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1987-88), pp. 14-27.