

Book Reviews

The First Generation of Electronic Records Archivists in the United States: A Study in Professionalization. RICHARD J. COX. New York: The Haworth Press, Inc., 1994. xix, 220 p. ISBN 1-56024-644-8.

In his 1992 review article in *Archivaria*,¹ Terry Cook described the evolution of the archival management of electronic records in terms of two "generations." The first generation of the 1970s and early 1980s was characterized mainly by machine readable statistical data files managed by data archivists largely in isolation from "regular" or "traditional" archivists. The second generation, beginning in the mid 1980s, has been faced with increasingly sophisticated information technology which has brought more and more archivists into contact with a wide variety of complex electronic records and hence created an "archival reorientation" away from the library-based practices of the first generation.

Richard Cox, turning his ongoing examination of the archival profession to the question of electronic records, has taken Cook's definition of the generations and given us a view of the "first generation" of electronic records archivists in the United States. A revision of his doctoral dissertation, the book paints a bleak picture of the American archival profession and its handling of electronic records over the past thirty years through a study which he describes as "largely an analysis of false starts, wrong approaches, experimentation, poor professional priorities, inadequate leadership, and other problems that have prevented American archivists from embarking on more meaningful research and application to preserve records with archival value in electronic form" (p. 4).

Cox makes use of an extensive and well-documented array of sources, ranging from published archival literature and works from related areas such as librarianship and records management, to the more unusual tools of the human resources management field, namely job descriptions and job advertisements. Each of the six major chapters in the book is structured in a similar fashion: presentation of the research question or the assertion to be examined, an explanation of the research design/method used for that part of the study (including some of its weaknesses or omissions), presentation and analysis of the findings, and conclusions and suggestions for further research.

After an examination of the historical context of archives and electronic records, including a review of information technology and archival theory, principles, and practices in Chapter One, Chapter Two proceeds to examine archival job descriptions of state archives and their reflection of the duties and functions of archivists as they relate to electronic records. In the third chapter, Cox analyzes archival position

advertisements from 1976-1990 to determine if they reflect an increasing demand for skills to handle electronic records. An examination of graduate archival education programmes and how they teach students about electronic records follows in Chapter Four, with a short case study of one example of an advanced archival education programme, the NAGARA Institute held at the University of Pittsburgh between 1989 and 1992, presented in Chapter Five. Finally, Chapter Six presents an agenda for further research.

Cox notes that this study has its genesis in his involvement with the NAGARA Institute and his growing conviction that there are serious weaknesses in the infrastructure of the archival profession which prevent it from resolving many of the problems posed by electronic records (p. 5). But is the American archival profession really in such a bad condition with regard to electronic records as he suggests throughout the study? While appreciating the inherent difficulties of defining the parameters of the first foray into a new area of research, in this case the impact of technology and electronic records on the American archival profession, one cannot help but be struck by the narrow focus of this study. Calling it a "preliminary analysis" and "an exploratory rather than definitive study" (p. 6), Cox has chosen not only to concentrate mainly on the American archival profession, but also to limit his initial exploration specifically to state archives. Granted, the analysis of state archives, "traditionally one of the primary sources of leadership in the archival profession," may reveal some of the overall trends in the profession through an examination of their method of defining professional positions (p. 57). Nonetheless, the decision to focus on only one type of archival institution and to limit research on job descriptions to a single published source has created a somewhat unbalanced picture that appears to ignore the existence of significant contributions made by many other institutions.

While Cox has presented us with a fresh new way of looking at the American archival profession's handling of electronic records which was quite interesting to read, this reviewer questioned a number of the stark conclusions that he draws from this research. For example, after examining state archives' job descriptions and finding that they do not reveal a significant specialization in electronic records despite the increasing importance of computers, Cox says that "it is surprising that state government archives' position descriptions seem still to reflect a very traditional set of responsibilities and activities that pre-date the pervasive use of computers" (p. 81) and that the position descriptions show that "state archives do not yet adequately reflect the trends in specialization and in responsibilities and requirements that would allow the state archival programs to operate effectively within the modern electronic information environment, especially with electronic records" (p. 93). This implies that archival job descriptions are in fact an adequate summary of all of the functions and tasks performed by archivists, but is this true? How accurately or specifically do our own job descriptions reflect the various tasks that we are called upon to perform as archivists, regardless of whether they are related to electronic records or more traditional archival tasks? In my own experience, job descriptions are written in very broad and all-encompassing terms in order to avoid the constant revision necessary to keep pace with changing conditions, and as a result are not necessarily the best reflection of actual duties.

Similar scepticism greeted Cox's assertion that "[the] job advertisements certainly seem to suggest that the American archival profession is not oriented to managing electronic records." He goes on to compare these results with those of the state archives' position descriptions and concludes that "[overall], these programs now have few electronic records specialists and show no signs of shifting toward such specialization and creation of similar programs" (pp. 124-25). It is difficult to be completely convinced by the results of a study of job advertisements from one albeit important source (the *SAA Newsletter*), especially when Cox also notes at the outset a few limitations to the study. Not only do some job advertisements not appear in the *Newsletter* and are instead found in the companion publication *Job Employment Bulletin*, but other factors also work against publication of archival job advertisements in the *Newsletter*, such as reliance on personal contacts for recruitment, the reluctance of smaller programmes such as local history societies to publish advertisements because of low salaries or part-time work, and the need for government archival programmes to deal with hiring deadlines which do not necessarily allow them to recruit through the *Newsletter* (p. 102). The results, while interesting, also point to a curious omission: where does the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and the Center for Electronic Records, one of the premier American institutions for electronic records, fit in? Although the focus of the study is on the treatment of electronic records by state archives, NARA is hardly visible throughout the book; it is mentioned only briefly in the chapter on job advertisements, where it is noted that such advertisements are restricted to certain kinds of archives (i.e., state archives) and that the "temporary decline of the National Archives' influence in this area in the first part of the 1980s, after a promising start, has made the New York program one of the few successful case studies that the profession can cite" (p. 124). NARA has been involved with the archival management of electronic records in some fashion for the past thirty years and has acquired numerous electronic records; presumably, this has been done through the efforts of staff members with specialized skills in electronic records. More information on the methods which this institution uses to recruit its staff, if not through the *SAA Newsletter*, would have acted as a useful contrast or a counterpoint to balance this study and therefore added more weight to the discussion of the conclusions relating to job advertisements.

Canadian archivists will no doubt be pleased to see that their efforts are recognized within the chapter which Cox devotes to a study of graduate archival education and electronic records. The University of British Columbia's 1989 hiring of a faculty member specializing in electronic records is cited as an encouraging sign for the profession (p. 133), while the ACA's *Guidelines for the Development of a Two-Year Curriculum for a Master of Archival Studies* (1989) is cited to show that "[theoretically], at least, the North American archival profession has recognized the importance of these topics in its basic graduate educational programs" (p. 140); the ACA's *Guidelines for the Development of Post-Appointment and Continuing Education and Training Programmes* "has more deliberately and purposely dealt with the matter of advanced education, providing a useful paradigm for advanced archival education" (p. 168). With the addition of graduate archival programmes at the Universities of Manitoba and Toronto, one wonders what impact the existence of such a strong graduate and post-appointment educational structure would have on a similar study of archival job descriptions and job advertisements here in Canada.

This is without a doubt a thought-provoking book. Despite the scepticism that may greet the study results, the strength of this book, as with so many of Cox's works, lies in its assessment of the need for further research. Many of the disquieting issues raised earlier are addressed by Cox in the conclusions of the chapters where he makes recommendations for further areas of study. On position descriptions, he notes that "[an] examination of position descriptions alone is a very limited view of archivists' work with electronic records" (p. 93) and calls for broader research into the staff needs of state archives using a number of techniques employed by human resources managers and vocational or occupational psychologists, all of which might help shed new light onto archival staffing requirements (p. 94). Cox also notes that with job advertisements, the "first noticeable problem in conducting such job advertisement analysis is the lack of context of other studies on the archival profession. There are virtually no other such studies...that provide a basis for comparison with benchmarks for change and progress in general characteristics of the individual archivist and archival institutions" (p. 128). He goes on to suggest a need to find out where archival institutions which have been successful in establishing an electronic records programme have actually recruited their staff, and perhaps conduct a study of archivists' attitudes towards computers to determine why it has taken so long for the profession to respond in a practical fashion to electronic records (p. 130).

Only with careful and thoughtful analysis of past practices, failures, and successes can any profession hope to develop in order to meet future challenges; the archival profession is no exception. With the rapid development of information technology and electronic records, we will clearly be entering uncharted waters for many years to come. *The First Generation of Electronic Records Archivists in the United States* may be just the first of many steps on a road of professional self-analysis which could offer direction and guidance for electronic records; it might not be the right one or the definitive one, but it is a step in the right direction.

Note

- 1 Terry Cook, "Easy to Byte, Harder to Chew: The Second Generation of Electronic Records Archives," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92), pp. 202-16.

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Preserving the Present: Toward Viable Electronic Records. T.K. BIKSON and E.J. FRINKING. The Hague: SDU Publishers, 1993. 170 p. ISBN 90-399-0498-7.

This study was commissioned by the Dutch National Archives and the Ministry of Home Affairs to promote improved electronic records management in the Dutch government. The work was a response to concerns about the impact of new information technologies on the creation and management of records and the threats to their long-term retention and use. The study's intent was to lay a foundation for the development of policies to guide electronic records management practices in government agencies.

The work was based on extensive research in current literature as well as on interviews with Dutch Government staff. A research team conducted site visits in Canada, the U.S., Germany, and Sweden to evaluate strategies being developed in those coun-