What, If Anything, Is Records Management?
(RMAA Conference, Canberra, September 2004)

Chris Hurley

At about the same time as I was drafting this paper, Chris Colwell, in a posting to the RMAA list asked : "Is the RMAA having an identity crisis?". He was questioning why the Association promotes and endorses short courses "that appear to have little records or even document management content" while requiring a narrow focus on records management in our formal education requirements.

> **… we have a very strict process for the recognition of formal education … we don't recognise degrees or qualifications that don't have a records management focus … [but] we seem to support and endorse a whole range of information and knowledge management short courses, that appear to have minimal records or even document management content … we bill ourselves as "supporting records and information management professionals". Shouldn't we then be recognising not only the short courses but formal information and knowledge management qualifications as part of our course recognition program?**
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> Chris Colwell RMAA listserv 15 June, 2004

I waited for a full scale debate which would, in effect, have traversed the topic I want to deal with today. But it didn't occur. There was a considered response from Glenn Sanders (who must lead the table for frequent contributor points) and from Geoff Smith. The focus of their replies was more on the value to members of publicising courses than the crux of the question : what do records managers need to know?

None of the postings, I thought, raised doubts that the terms "records management", "document management", "information management", "knowledge management" could be used intelligibly in this audience. We could discuss how we as a profession related to those concepts but their actual meaning (in other words, the terms of the debate) was not contested. You and I might disagree over whether records managers should be involved in knowledge management, but we could have that discussion without troubling to confirm that we both understood (and shared an understanding) of what the terms meant.

Lest you conclude, with sinking heart, that this will be another paper about the definition of those things, I will say at once that I don't have any very clear understanding of what they mean. My observation is that, while there are plenty of people who will provide admirably clear definitions, there is not much agreement amongst them on what a mutually acceptable definition might be.

You reach an age when intellectual adventurism gives way to senile reminiscence. Being born in 1946 has had many advantages for me. I am a baby boomer but I am riding the crest of that wave, so the likelihood is that I will be dead before the worst excesses of my generation drive the rest of you into a sufficient frenzy that you turn on us and deprive us of our privileges. Most relevant to my theme is that within my own lifetime I have witnessed the entire history of the RMAA as well as a period of transformation the like of which will not be repeated any time soon - at any rate at the pace we have experienced in the last 35 years.

I should begin by explaining my title. It is one I have borrowed before from the late naturalist and essayist, Stephen Jay Gould[1]. He wrote an essay called “What, If Anything, Is a Zebra?” I used it (with acknowledgment) for an article I wrote called : “What, If Anything, Is a Function?” But the chain is longer than that, because Gould borrowed it from Albert E. Wood who wrote an article in 1957 called “What, If Anything, Is a Rabbit?". The beauty of this title is that it allows you to discuss something that may not actually exist. An allowable answer to the question may be : records management isn't anything.

Three rivers of change -

- **the technological infrastructure**
- **the way business is conducted, partly as a result**
- **the way recordkeeping is conducted**

Let me now take you on a helicopter ride over the period in which I have been involved in this industry. I am going to fly you over three great rivers of change which have a confluence (I believe) in the question I am posing :

The Technological Infrastructure

My personal odyssey began in 1970. After brief forays into teaching and librarianship I was washed up on the shores of what was then the Commonwealth Archives Office in Canberra. Let me try to take you back to that time. The archives lived in wartime quonset huts by the lake - where the High Court and Gallery are today. People still spoke of the time when the lake was not there. There was a registry and a typing pool. Things were committed to paper by pen or pencil and given in for typing. To get a new pen, you had to produce the old one and hand it in (or the stub of the pencil).

In the corner of the registry sat a tea chest full of rubber bands removed from the morning's mail. Somehow the rate of reuse never kept pace with the supply of new bands. In my time it was very close to full. Shortly thereafter, the venerable lady in charge retired and it was decided to get rid of them. Alas, below the top level they had all congealed over the decades into a huge useless pullulating ball of rubber - like some freak from a horror movie.

To get a letter typed by the pool, you had to attach your draft to a file from registry. Part of the typist's job was to make sure the file number was typed (together with her initials and yours) at the top of the letter and on all the carbon copies. Who said metadata was a new idea? There was a yellow carbon for the file, a pink for a chronological set (a linear descendant of the letter-book), and a green (I can't remember what that was for).

Ten years later I went briefly to the Department of Social Security. I got to walk about in their computer room. Huge mainframes throbbed away day and night

[1] Stephen Jay Gould, "What, If Anything, Is a Zebra?" *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes* (Penguin Books, 1990) pp. 355-365.

processing data about social welfare entitlements and recipients. Upstairs where I worked, however, in the office, the processes for doing business were virtually identical to what I had found in the Archives 10 years earlier. Corrections were now made with liquid paper and erasers. My unit was responsible for subordinate legislation and when I told the typists that the new Governor General, Zelman Cowan, insisted that the accompanying memorandum contain no corrections they were distraught. It was virtually impossible to type something without having to go back and erase at least some mistakes. So, entire documents would have to be typed in error-free (an almost impossible task) or retyped until they were.

Technological Infrastructure -

- **1970 Carbon copies & roneo duplicates**
- **1980 Main frames & electric typewriters**
- **1990 PCs & RM Software**
- **2000 Information & Knowledge Management**

A year later I moved to take charge of the Public Record Office in Victoria. At that time, computerisation was regarded by the Victorian Government with suspicion - a potentially wasteful extravagance which departments had to be prevented from abusing. To buy an application of any kind you had to get the money from Treasury. But before making a budget bid you had first to get the application endorsed by an interdepartmental committee run out of the Public Service Board. Getting IDC approval didn't mean you got the money, but no request for funds would be entertained without it. In fact, you couldn't buy technology, even if you had the funds, without IDC approval.

But, technology came in anyway. First, by way of electronic typewriters - so rare and precious that initially, we had only one between two typists. And, yes, we had lift off. In other agencies mainframes were still the go, but PRO's first excursion into cyberspace came through wordprocessors - essentially digital typewriters with strange features which the technologically literate sometimes stayed back to use after hours. By the time I left the PRO in the mid 1990s, there was, for all practical purposes, a PC on every desk and there were no more typists. Communication by email was standard practice. Housekeeping systems - personnel, finance, purchasing, ordering, stock control, accommodation and property - were increasingly becoming purely automated. Office work now took place in multi-media, at the very least using paper, email, and electronic documents.

Technology will change rapidly over the next 20 years, but I doubt we will see a replacement of one way of doing business by another. Twenty years from now, most people will still be sitting at something which is recognisably a terminal, doing something which can still be justifiably called processing data - unless workflow can fulfil its early promise.

When I went to Victoria in 1981, people in my game (the archives game) were still seriously talking about technological museums to preserve digital records. Some people in the archives business haven't moved on very far and they are the ones now talking about technological artefacts. It was around about that time I realised that, to survive as a species, recordkeepers had to have the technological equivalent of opposable thumbs[2].

You have to be my age to realise just how rapid that technological change has been. My account of it has been at a very mundane level - what you might expect to see if you walked into an office. Think of it. Less than 20 years ago, you could walk into most offices and not see any PCs. Think of how you work today. Do you think there will be the same transformation in the next 20 years. Technology will change rapidly over the next 20 years, but I doubt we will see a replacement of one way of doing business by another. Twenty years from now, most people will still be sitting at something which is recognisably a terminal, doing something which can still be justifiably called processing data.

The Way Business is Conducted Has Changed, Partly as a Result

My second theme has to do with the way business is conducted. In the 1980s the PRO was very much concerned with records management. The PRO, under my predecessor Harry Nunn, was notable for having anticipated in some ways (by no means all) what is now called a continuum approach - abolishing the distinction between archives and records. In our pursuit of this goal, we used to send people down to the registry of the State Electricity Commission because we thought that was the model that every government agency should emulate.

Business -

- **1970 Registries hold the stamps**
- **1980 Tea ladies go; then registries**
- **1990 Typists gone; desk top users**
- **2000 Information & Knowledge Management**

This splendid operation - long since vanished, of course - started early. All the mail was received and opened before other officers of the SEC really got going in the morning. Mail was opened and classified by registry staff. This ensured that dealings in a transaction occurred not just on a file, but on the correct file. The classification was linked to disposal rules, so that the retention period of the documents was known throughout the transaction. Business was conducted on the file, with incoming correspondence, copies of outgoing letters, memoranda, minutes, and file notes all dutifully attached. I can't remember if this was actually SEC practice, but in a good registry they made sure that papers were properly attached to file by taking control of the stamps. No one was empowered to buy stamps except the registry. Only they could post a letter out. And this they would not do until the outgoing letter was presented with the file and the carbon file copy attached.

To do business this way, you needed three things. The first two are not to be found any more except in a few specialist areas. They are typing pools and registries. Within the paradigm of paper recordkeeping, these represented good practice. They

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[2] This is a reference to my favourite Far Side cartoon. Two cows are sitting in easy chairs watching television and the 'phone is ringing. One cow says to another : "Well, there it goes again; and here we sit without opposable thumbs".

were never ends in themselves, though. David Bearman and others have long since taught us to regard them as good, but expendable, methods, rather than ends in themselves.

Their value, at the time, was that they represented adequate (even admirable) ways of achieving the abiding recordkeeping outcomes which are our rationale as a profession. We now know that they can be abandoned and replaced by equally valuable methods in changed circumstances. It is the outcomes, rather than the methods we use to achieve them, which abide. I rather doubt, however, that we have yet replaced the old abandoned methods with suitable new ones.

What has happened is that methods for dealing with business have undergone a rapid evolution. The rapidity comes, in part, from improvements in technology - you can do today with a computer what you could not do yesterday with yesterday's computer. This changing technological capability has broken across the boundaries of professional method.

Take the most dramatic illustration of that assault on professional boundaries. In the 1970s and 1980s, most data processing was done on mainframes. Speculation about the impact on professional methods focussed on data processing. The arrival of the PC altered everything. Main frames were now used to process gigantic quantities of uniform data. The PC enabled workers to be networked. The paper chains that glued an enterprise together could be replaced by linking workers electronically to each other into a virtual workplace.

This has been done very badly. Some progress had been made in automating business processes and in automating workflow, but they amount to little more, in my view, than automated widget making. However sophisticated the content, there has to be a routine, repetitive process before most of what is covered by business analysis can successfully function. The automation of what is sometimes called unstructured work remains abysmal and far behind what many of us predicted would be the state of office systems now as a result of workflow. Why this prediction failed to eventuate is an interesting question, with (I think) an even more interesting answer, but that will have to be for another day

Nevertheless, the appurtenances of automated work have been introduced. Centralised workflow via registries and typing pools has disappeared and management has seized upon the promised opportunities to downsize and restructure by divesting responsibility for business processes from centralised specialist units to the desk top "users". The "user" is an IT term for the worker at a PC in a network. They used to be called "employees" and they were bound, in numerous ways, to carry out corporate requirements for the management of business and compelled to conform to corporate requirements for the management of the associated documentation.

When employees became users, their individual ability to carry out work in ways which suited them individually, unconstrained by any limits save the technical limits of the systems the corporation provided them with became boundless. Apart from widget making, IT professionals gloried in making systems as user friendly as possible - pushing onto "users" more and more functionality to do corporate work in the ways that best suited them instead of the corporation. Pleasing the desk-top user has a high priority in the world of IT.

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In this period the distinction between user requirements and corporate requirements became very blurred. Because records management had come to be taken for granted, managers had (I suspect) lost sight of the need for it to be upheld. It was forgotten that the way records were managed determined their utility. The methods of the past (which clearly had to change) were nevertheless necessary if you wanted evidence of business activity. The methods changed as new systems were introduced but too little attention was paid to the re-engineering of the recordkeeping requirements necessary to achieve, by new means, the same corporate outcomes that were achieved by the outmoded paper-based systems which were being discarded.

The systems which replaced those outdated methods were technical and managers (often ignorant of IT and frightened by their own ignorance) accepted technology as a substitute for the business rules which had previously underlay both the conduct of business itself and the effective documentation of business.

IT provided opportunities : file structures, classification, object models, taxonomy, metadata - but neither IT nor RM provided satisfactory new methods to use these tools in any very sophisticated way to re-establish in cyberspace the fundamental requirements for recordkeeping. Having said that, I must, I suppose, make some attempt to define what I mean by the fundamental requirements. My definition is simply this : a record is documentation linked to some circumstance or event in a meaningful way. The fundamental requirement of recordkeeping, therefore, is that the documentation of business must be linked in some meaningful way to the circumstances or events that make up the business.

The Way Recordkeeping is Conducted Has Changed

The purpose of these helicopter rides is not to show how different things are, but to provide a backdrop to what has not changed. It is undoubtedly true that automation has led to a loss of corporate control. Often this is seen as liberating (abolishing old-fashioned notions of discipline which inhibited creativity and, more importantly perhaps, required several more levels of middle management than we need today) and revolutionary (empowering the individual “user” thereby relieving the corporation of the need, and expense, of maintaining office systems). As corporation structures have become “flatter”, work groups (not necessarily corresponding to organisational structures) have taken on more autonomy in deciding how to achieve agreed goals.

Recordkeeping -

- **1970 Business "makes"; RM "keeps"**
- **1980 IT squeezes in between**
- **1990 Desk top users make the rules**
- **2000 Information & Knowledge Management**

A concern for or interest in mundane things like corporate procedures and business rules is often seen as “old hat”, restrictive, costly, even unnecessary. There has been an emphasis given to what was once called management by objective. If corporate management specifies (or purchases) outcomes or outputs, business units can be left to devise the best way of achieving them. Corporate management need not concern itself with business processes, procedures, or anything as nasty as business rules.

This management ideology has developed hand-in-hand with a technological revolution which would have invalidated and made obsolete many of the business rules and procedures developed to serve the paper-based world I described at the outset. The result has been that, at the very time when technology was destabilising business forms and procedures which had developed, in many cases, over decades and even centuries to serve corporate needs in the world of paper, management’s will to find alternative forms and procedures (or to direct that they be found) was very weak.

Recordkeepers are sometimes portrayed as anal retentive obsessives, who believe in rules and procedures for their own sake. Business rules exist, however, not to keep recordkeepers happy, but to achieve business purposes. This need is perennial. What waxes and wanes is the business perception of the value of business rules and what changes is the implementation strategies. Records, regardless of their form, are essentially evidence. The word “evidence” here should not be taken in its narrow legalistic meaning - though it means that too. Evidence is used here to denote a looser concept to do with remembering - anything from the terms of a formal contract to what information was communicated to whom in relation to some transaction, or just a note or log that something happened.

Recordkeeping is necessary to the conduct of any business - individual or corporate. In the case of an individual, records will document dealings with others (e.g. correspondence, contracts, invoices, receipts) or things which shouldn’t be forgotten (e.g. accounts, ledgers, minutes, memoranda, diaries). Similar needs exist for a corporation, with the added complication that corporations need to be aware of and to document business transacted within the corporation (between business units acting as sub-corporations in their own right).

Forty years ago, corporations did not have to think very deeply about business rules and the procedures based on them. The way business was conducted changed very slowly and office procedures were so routine that they just happened without anyone thinking too much about them. This encompassed everything from the way in which a letter was laid out, for example, through to filing and communication systems.

In the area of recordkeeping, the rules were based very often on the interpretation of courts about documentary evidence, although nine people out of ten applying those rules would not have realised that and would be unfamiliar with the legal doctrine they were applying. There were (indeed, still are) legal rules, for example, about the sending and receipt of letters. Obviously, a court will need to be able to establish, when one party to an action claims to have sent a letter, whether it can reasonably be assumed that the other party received it and when. Exactly the same issue arises with email and courts have had to re-invent (or re-apply) the rules developed for letters to deal with the different characteristics of electronic delivery.

During the first decades of automating public and private business, we digitised already existing processes. The next stage has involved re-engineering the automated business processes. The advantages it is said this brings include better use of resources and more effective and more relevant delivery. The history of re-engineering has been a mixed one and it would probably be overstating the case to say that it comes off more often than it fails. The test of success in a re-engineering project is different from the test for success in an automation project. An automation project succeeds when you digitise your procedures. A re-engineering project succeeds when you use automation to change your procedures altogether.

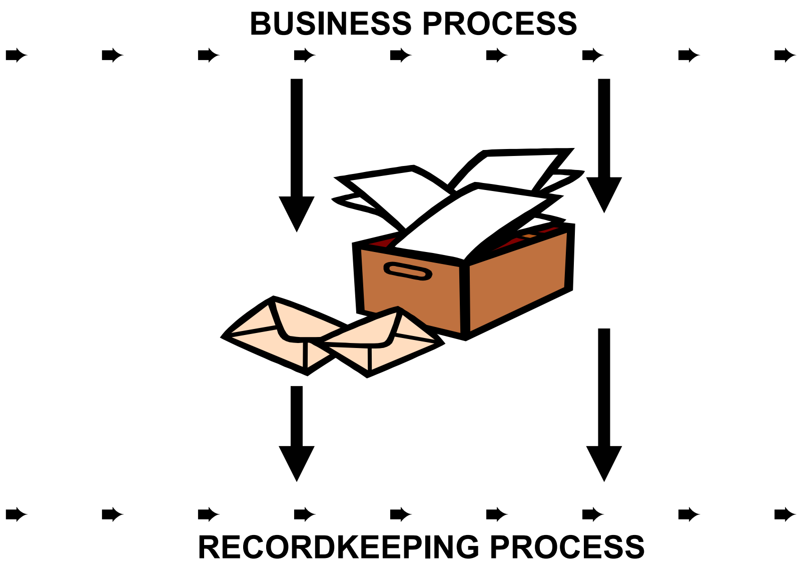
Just as business processes are being re-engineered, so too there is a need to re-engineer documentation processes. In creating documents which ensure creation and preservation of corporate evidence, the two processes are seen as interdependent. Documents created in a business context are evidence of action, but they must be organised and managed if they are to remain available as and useful in supporting business needs.

In the paper world, information systems were basically of two kinds. Library-type systems gathered up disseminated information (often published) from other sources (often external). This was available mainly as knowledge input into the business process and occasionally as means of disseminating knowledge about the business (e.g. annual reports). Recordkeeping systems, on the other hand, managed information (usually generated internally or transmitted privately) which documented activities, events, or circumstances undertaken by the business (or in which the business was involved). This was available as a memory (and therefore evidence) of what had occurred. In their different ways, information systems of both kinds supported the business.

The impact of automation on these systems has been profound, since information technology (IT) is self-evidently the application of radically different technology to information management - of which library and recordkeeping systems are instances. The alteration in the means by which information systems operate has indeed been striking, but it is doubtful that we have gone far enough in re-engineering the methods which those means support. In other words, re-engineering of business systems has not been matched by appropriate re-engineering of the recordkeeping systems which support it.

In order to manage electronic documents to ensure organisational accountability you need to make sure that they are linked to the knowledge which will be needed to interpret them as evidence of action or circumstance. All the work that is currently being done to identify the functional requirements for recordkeeping and the implementation strategies needed to make and keep records in a way which satisfies those requirements boils down to methods for meeting that need.

Email, as we know, is still often managed personally by the user. As we also know, it can get the organisation into trouble (or be of benefit to them). As with many other IT applications, however, organisations have been slow to recognise the need and advantages of separating out the roles of individuals users and those of corporate control. Responsiveness to user needs brings flexibility, but makes it hard to achieve corporate control. Corporate governance requirements restrict flexibility and cost more.



In the textbooks around when I entered this business, the recordkeeping process was definitely portrayed as being separate from the business process. Chapter 1 was about filing, or classifying, or indexing - just possibly about storage. To do any of these things, there first had to be *something* to do them to. Making that *something* occurred before we became involved. I once described this as the "cabbage patch" approach to recordkeeping. "Please, mummy, where do records come from? Well, dear, every morning we go out into the cabbage patch and look under the leaves." To do our work, we did not need to know how records were made, only how they were kept.

Not only is this approach expensive and dysfunctional to implement in cyberspace, it is counter-effective when you consider how systems are developing. Stand alone RM software has already given way to integrated proprietary products offering portals into a suite of I&KM tools. Now, that approach is itself giving way to the customisation of information products to support business processes. What we are now seeing, in other words, is recordkeeping functionality being embedded into business systems (sometimes without any explicit understanding of its pedigree - hence with much rediscovery of the wheel[3]).

[3] Mankind is a recordkeeping mammal (see below). Recordkeeping functionality (doing what you have to do so as to have evidence of what you are doing) is a natural business instinct. It does not require specialist recordkeeping professionals to point this out or even to make it happen. We professionals can only help people who want records to do what they would otherwise do clumsily. The trouble is that with the technological and managerial revolutions of the last forty years, many businesses no longer understand that records are what they want. They keep looking for an IT solution to what is an IM (specifically an RM) problem.

The implications of this are significant - both in theory and in practice. We are accustomed to speak of business processes and recordkeeping processes as separate but interdependent things. We have allowed ourselves to believe that recordkeeping processes are about organising stuff to meet the identification, location, and discovery of information resources to meet user needs. But the RM component of IM is not primarily about that, and it never was. Recordkeeping used to be seen as trying to organise the detritus of a business process into an order or sequence (a series) that replicated the interconnections between events or circumstances within the business process of which they were once a part[4]. In reality, these series (although this was not correctly understood at the time) were only a poor attempt to mimmick the business process itself. It was the business process (not the recordkeeping process) which gave evidential structure and context to the materials. If we had been able (in the paper-based world) to better integrate recordkeeping with business we should have done so, though it is possible that our theoretical understanding (until the methods based on that theory were invalidated by the IT revolution) would not have sustained such an approach.

Now, technology enables us to design and maintain business processes that incorporate recordkeeping functionality as one aspect of conducting business. A separate recordkeeping process to organise the left-overs is no longer needed and (as has been demonstrated many times) no longer really works. Our job now is to help in the design and maintenance of systems that integrate recordkeeping functionality into business processes. We bring to the task the same skills and competencies we developed in another paradigm, but we must abandon the methods we have hitherto used to deploy those skills. Quite simply, the time has come to move on from recordkeeping systems to business systems that keep records.

I am not going to spend time here this morning going over the cost-benefit arguments for recordkeeping. Instead I will assume that I am talking to people who want to manage their electronic documents in a way which supports organisational accountability. Their question to me is : how do I get it and how can I minimise costs and maximise flexibility?

The fact is that the conflict between user flexibility and corporate control is largely illusory and the costs of achieving corporate control are wildly exaggerated. There is actually no reason why a system designed to give corporate control should cost any more than any other system Indeed, it should end up saving you money. A system in which corporate documents are clearly distinguished from personal documents should save you a bundle when it comes to migrating your data into a new system. All the system administrator has to do is ensure that all corporate documents are migrated and no time has to be wasted auditing data to decide what should and should not be brought along. If storage space is an issue for you, you will, of course, have an effective disposal regime in place which purges (or downgrades) data once it

[4] Even in then paper world, we attempted (with varying degrees of success) to integrate recordkeeping with business processes. The North American practice of post-action filing represents the farthest abdication of this ideal. In Australia, greater progress was made - e.g. the "ideal" registry described above involving pre-action classification and filing, movement control, and ownership of the stamps. These paper-based systems, however, never achieved the integration with business processes that IT now makes possible, and imperative.

is no longer required but some of you may feel that storage space is so cheap nowadays that you can do without that[5].

Recordkeeping functionality can be seamlessly integrated into other systems. The user need not even be aware of its operation. Recordkeeping need not be an application option on the user's menu. He could log onto email, or spreadsheets, or some other corporately supported application and a work-flow application could enable him to access the tools he needs to undertake corporate tasks. If you do have a disposal regime in place, it too will be based on work-flow analysis and a corporate evaluation of the which processes and activities need to be recorded and how long such records need to be kept.

So far as the user is concerned, the decision to make a record of the work he does is invisible. It happens automatically based on system design decisions of which he need not even be aware., The organisation has decided that whenever an actor occupying this specified position, carries out that kind of task, using a known authority or permission, by reference to a nominated guideline or procedure, a record must be made and the system id designed to ensure that it does.

The tools to achieve such an implementation strategy are largely speaking already available. More work is still needed on the knowledge management systems that will provide, digitally, the contextual knowledge to ensure that electronic records are meaningful. There are basically two reasons why we haven't yet developed what is possible into what is available :

- management, aware it has a problem, isn't able to identify RM as the solution
- business analysts haven't got far beyond widget making in building workflows.

The Professional Boundaries Have Changed

In early 1971, I made my way across the foreshores of Lake Burley Griffin from a job in the National Library to what is now called the National Archives. It was there that I learned the fundamentals of recordkeeping. Under the guidance of the ideas of Ian Maclean and Peter Scott, I learned the basics of what we would now call the continuum of recordkeeping. In that paperbound world, however, the temporal divisions of life cycle prevailed.

Records management was very much what went on in departmental registries and in our own Repository Management Branch. It involved classification, filing, indexing, registering, storage, loans, microfilming, boxing, shelving, everything, in short, to do with the physical handling of physical materials, their storage, preservation, and retrieval.

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[5] In the paper world, the economic driver for deletion was the cost of storage space. In cyberspace, the driver is more likely to be the cost of migration. The real reason for disposition, though, is efficiency not cost. Purging redundant data keeps systems efficient and you need appraisal to mitigate the risk of deleting data you still need.

The Archives, though it was at that time, I imagine, the single largest secondary storage operation in the country, took old, noncurrent records. Current records remained in departments (along with a lot on untransferred non-current records as well - but that is a different story). The part of the Archives in which I worked was sometimes said to handle intellectual control. It was unusual only because, under Peter Scott's guidance, our systems documented the whole of Government business, not just that part relating to transferred records.

1975 : I can remember being told, without consternation, that the RMAA was not for the likes of me. The Repository Management staff would be welcome, but I would be better off in the ASA. I accepted this without demur …

At that time, most other archivists belonged to the Library Association of Australia. We were discouraged from doing so because the Archives believed that archivists are not librarians. This is a prejudice which I still cultivate. In the next five years, I played my part in establishing a separate Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) which came into being in 1975. The RMAA had been formed a few years earlier. I think I am correct in my recollection that the ASA and the A.C.T. Branch of the RMAA came into being within 12 months of each other.

At the time, I can remember being told, without consternation, that the RMAA was not for the likes of me. The Repository Management staff would be welcome, but I would be better off in the ASA. I accepted this without demur until I took up duty at the PRO. My predecessor, Harry Nunn, had been aggressively involved in the formation of RMAA and the PRO was strongly and consistently represented. The whole culture of the PRO made it unthinkable that I should not now belong to both bodies. And this I happily did without perhaps reflecting on what it all meant. To this day, I remain a member of both bodies. I even wish from time to time that they would amalgamate or at least develop a common membership structure.

Over the years, I have attended many conferences of both bodies. There are significant differences - and always have been. You will be aware that there have been some elements of hostility between the two bodies. I say elements because the majority of members, I think, are well disposed to each other. There is a large pool of common membership (like myself) who simply won't be tagged as exclusively one or the other - hence our use of the term "recordkeeping" to encompass both. This cross fertilisation is greater in some regions than in others. The peak bodies of both have taken considerable pains to bring the two associations closer together. We even had a joint conference once - not a complete success, perhaps.

I often attend sessions at one conference which I might expect to hear at another. I don't think I am alone, however, in noticing that there are a large number of sessions at ASA that I would never expect to hear at RMAA and vice versa. Moreover, I often find myself discussing with like minded colleagues the differences between the two. It is hard to put your finger on what that difference is, but it is undeniably there. And then there is the most noticeable difference between the two conferences - the Trade Show.

Some years I feel the Trade Show is better than the Conference itself. And what a change there has been in all the years I've been coming. Initially, the floor was occupied almost entirely by shelving systems, filing systems, barcoding systems, microfilming systems, and, more recently, imaging systems. Index cards, file jackets, notch-cards, cabinets, and even materials handling tools were all on display.

Then, gradually, automated products began to creep in and quickly became a dominant feature of the Display. The value lay in being able to track rapidly changing technology relevant to our profession year by year in one place. It never ceases to fascinate.

There have been many trends, let me trace just one of them. Initially, automation appeared on the Trade Show floor as an adjunct to microfilming or as tools for automating the management of paper records. The latter applications focussed on automating the registration, indexing, and movement of (essentially) paper and cardboard files). Chronologically, the next innovation was, I think, imaging systems. The paper was digitally imaged and managed electronically. Then came document management systems - systems for managing documentation that was born digital.

At this point the terminology unravelled. There was a big battle (which seemed to lead nowhere) between electronic document management and information management. At the very core of this debate was a convergence, apparent on the Trade Show floor, between records management software and document management software. The media became irrelevant as systems merged and developed the capability to manage both paper records and electronic documents. It wasn't too much of a leap to talk about the management of both paper and digital records.

Because early records management systems had been focussed on the management of paper and early document management systems had been focussed on digital, the new hybrid systems had a much more robust base for dealing with digital materials in document management mode than in records management mode. The former were used to dealing with digital stuff. The latter were used to dealing with paper stuff. Naturally, it was document management methods that won out in the development of automated recordkeeping systems. Document management takes a worm's eye view of content, fitting each item into a pre-ordered structure concerned with discovery. Recordkeeping takes a contextual view, organising content into representations of business processes. In the merger between them, during the 1990's, RM software lost out to IM functionality that was ahead of it in dealing with electronic content. RM remained, until recently, something you did to stuff after it was created.

To cut a long story short …

What I think we have seen is a triple whammy assault on recordkeeping methods. In the old world, they were centralised and idiosyncratic (in the non-pejorative sense). Records managers handled information differently and their methods were based on centralised corporate controls over the way business was conducted and documented. Neither of these things outlasted the processes of change that I have described. Now, the centralised infrastructure has gone, the understanding of centralised control over recordkeeping has been largely lost, and what methods there are owe more to information management (a lineal descendant of, inter alia, library-based methods for discovery) than to traditional records management methods.

I have to qualify all that, of course. We have sustained an understanding of records management and we have been instrumental, many of us, in grafting records management insights and requirements back into the systems, Records managers and archivists (those whom I call recordkeepers) have been heavily involved in various attempts to re-engineer recordkeeping in cyberspace. Major research projects have been undertaken to understand what the requirements for recordkeeping are. Three of these are well known : the SPIRT Project (Monash University), The Pitt Project (University of Pittsburgh), and the InterPARES project (University of British Colombia). We have also been (I think we can claim) world leaders in developing the standards based path which was one of a suite of methods recommended to us by David Bearman. Australian records management software, before it began to be subordinated into portals, was also world-leading.

When I speak of wins and losses, of refocussing, of re-engineering and of "our" requirements, however, I am begging the question. Everything I have said so far confirms that there no longer exists a homogeneous and recognisably separate role for a records manager or recordkeeper in may enterprises. What corporations require is a comprehensive approach to the management of information.

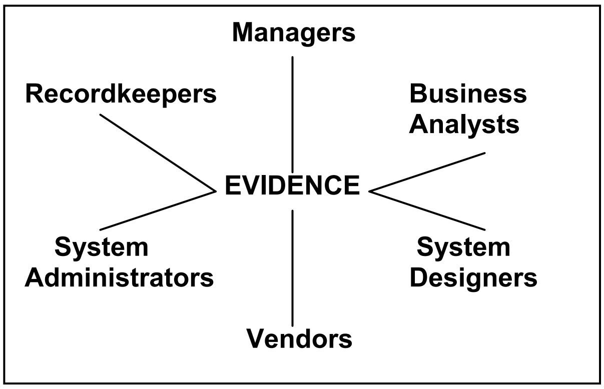
Despite all the talk, the management of information in most large corporations is still disaggregated, poorly integrated, and seldom managed in a coherent and uniform way across the enterprise. Articulation of corporate requirements is usually poor.

They seldom get this by the way. Despite all the talk, the management of information in many large corporations is still disaggregated , poorly integrated, and seldom managed in a coherent and uniform way across the enterprise. Nevertheless, we work in an environment in which it is assumed that information should be managed like that and organisational structures and the distribution of responsibility (to say nothing of the distribution of resources and remuneration) often proceeds on the basis that such integration is the reality. Even when we know it isn't.

I think that in facing up to the reality of the changes I have described, records managers have been more flexible and have adapted better than my archives colleagues. Generally speaking and always allowing for individual exceptions. In comparing the archival mind and records management mind, I would say (and expect to be challenged) that archivists are much more stuck in a paper paradigm than records managers. On the other hand, and clearly as a result of this, I think archivists have remained more focussed than the records managers - hence my interest in Chris Colwell's question to the list in June.

Records Managers, as the abortive email thread I referred to suggest, work in an environment in which the boundaries between "pure" records management, IT, information and knowledge management, and business analysis are all rubbing shoulders and carrying out similar assigned roles. Archivists do too, but many of them shut themselves off into a collection management paradigm.

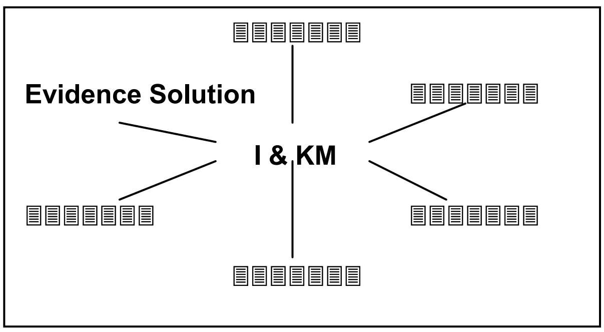
Many years ago, before I left the PRO, we had a project (not alas carried forward) to think through the implications of electronic recordkeeping. I developed a model to try to put together the converging roles which we then saw as making up the recordkeeping paradigm of the future. I unearthed this the other day and I am glad to say that I think it has held up very well.



Obviously, roles and functions have changed a little in the last ten years, but I am pleased that this vision conforms so closely to my current thinking about the multi-disciplinary approach (eschewing a reliance solely on systems, methods, standards, or requirements). This is evidence either of profound thought then or ossified senility now.

The advantage of this model is that it allows you to do two things simultaneously. It affirms a body of ideas and a set of methods which is uniquely about the management of records as a distinct area within the larger picture of Information. It also emphasises that records management cannot stand as a thing apart; records management must necessarily be part of a team approach which blends a variety of skills, disciplines, and methods.

But is this only playing with words? Why stop at a convergence into a multi-disciplinary environment for the management of evidence? Why not go the next step and say that the discipline itself is merging into a common set of generic skills in an environment in which all information can and should be managed in the same way using the same methods?



It is along this dividing line that I wish to place my question : "what, if anything, is records management?" Records management is the handmaiden to evidence solutions. On a larger canvass, evidence solutions are themselves a sub-set of I&KM. There are other handmaidens as indicated here. What are they? Well, that is the answer to another question ("what, if anything, is I & KM?") at perhaps another conference.

You may think I am demeaning RM by subordinating it in this way, but these are not job descriptions. In these diagrams, RM refers to a set of skills and knowledge. The first slide suggests the alignment of our skills and knowledge with other skill sets needed to achieve an evidence solution. Perhaps it suggests those allied skill sets that our educators should be looking at when thinking about broadening our own. This would identify, within the total skill set relevant to I&KM, those with which our development should be most closely aligned.

But I am not suggesting that records managers should spend their professional lives within the recordkeeping strand. Quite the contrary. I am saying that we can no longer expect to be able to establish and maintain recordkeeping except in collaboration with others. Individually, we may expect to move out beyond recordkeeping and there is no reason why we should not occupy positions requiring a broader skill set.

What I am saying is this : beware of those who use this self-evident feature of our landscape to argue that the separataration of the disciplines is now irrelevant, who try to persuade us that it all just merges into a grey, generic sludge called "information management" or "content management" or the like. "It's all information, isn't it?" they twitter chirpily. Be warned, these people don't know much. If they were smarter, they'd be scared of us because we do. But they're dumb and they don't know enough to be scared. They're just dangerous.

My own view is that documentary evidence of fact or circumstance requires special skills, different methods, and the implementation of non-generic requirements. It matters little what the job title is. An information manager who is competent to deploy recordkeeping skills and ensure the satisfaction of recordkeeping requirements is carrying out records management. An information manager who lacks those skills and is ignorant of those requirements is not.

You will notice that I have been inconsistent in my use of the term "records manager" and "recordkeeper". The school of thought to which I belong holds that you can't be an archivist or a records manager any more. You have to be a recordkeeper, and that comprehends what used to be archives and records management.

Unlike some colleagues, I hope that we do not lose our separate identity as recordkeepers while the pee is merging into the pool of Information/ Knowledge Management. I think that, at least for the moment, a strong interdisciplinary team approach to I&KM is needed - while retaining the distinctions between disciplines.

I read somewhere that, before evaluating the suitability of anyone for a position in her Government, Margaret Thatcher would ask : "Is he/she one of us?" If we can still seriously debate whether or not RMAA is having an identity crisis, it would seem that we can still distinguish between "us" and "them". I hope I have said enough to indicate where I stand (for now) on the us/them divide. I am for "us" having a separate identity, focus and skill set, but I am also clear that we should be deploying our skills into a multi-disciplinary environment.

In my personal experience, I have seen much good recordkeeping being led or contributed to by people from the I&KM world (people who could not be described as "one of us"). Generally, they acknowledge the need for a multi-disciplinary approach and do not despise records management. But I have also seen some very bad recordkeeping work being led or contributed to by people from I&KM. Generally, these people do not acknowledge (or even understand) the place of records management in I&KM.

I believe, as I have said, that the future of recordkeeping is to be a specialist strand in I&KM. Eventually, our speciality may even disappear as a discrete skill set within I&KM but those who proceed on the assumption that this has already happened are, in my view, mistaken. I&KM projects are still failing, in my view, to establish fully robust recordkeeping solutions in the digital environment.

For a long while they were getting better at delivering what might be called pre-packaged applications dedicated to RM solutions - old style TRIM, RecFind, Objective, and the like. That phase ended when RM applications became integrated into all-embracing "portal" solutions and lost profile. Concomitantly, we have returned to an environment where more reliance is placed on in-house implementation of proprietary products. Where this leaves very small enterprises (like the corner shop) and very large enterprises (like an entire government) I'm not sure at the moment - but a shift of responsibility from government archives authorities back to departments seems to be one implication. For everyone from a public sector entity to a unitary enterprise, a satisfactory recordkeeping solution needs a multi-disciplinary team.

Our value add lies partly (of course) in the contribution we can make based on our specialist skill set to the work of each multi-disciplinary team being led by someone who understands the need for records management to be part of the mix. But our real value add, I reckon, is to be a kind of professional leaven inside the emerging world of I&KM. For every good "one of them" who understands the place of RM in this world, there is a shonky "one of them" who doesn't. Until the dust settles, we continue to sustain an abiding knowledge of what RM is and why it is needed. Through us, the possibility exists of keeping the chain of skill and knowledge between the past and the future unbroken.

Unless we preserve that and succeed in cementing it within the emerging world of I&KM, it will be lost - and then it will have to be rediscovered all over again. I have no doubt that, if the worst happens and it is lost, that it will be rediscovered all over again. As I have I have stated elsewhere, a satisfactory working definition of mankind is : "a recordkeeping mammal". In the last resort, records will be kept, with or without us. They always have been, and they always will be.

It is not any narrow application of RM methods of the past that we need to preserve and pass on, however. It is not so much a knowledge of "how" but of "why". It is, in David Bearman's words, an appreciation of new methods to meet abiding requirements. This is hard, because it means we are still re-engineering our own specialist knowledge even as we try to pass it on to others.

This is very hard. Some of us give up. I don't mean that anyone here would be so silly as to deny the digital revolution. That kind of nonsense stopped long ago. But there are other ways of giving up. One kind involves becoming "one of them" - denying that separate RM knowledge and skills exist at all, bleating that it's "all information, isn't it?" and supposing that technical skill, content management, and discovery encompass all that matters. The other way of giving up is to settle for what we have succeeded in re-engineering already and just stopping at that - supposing that the functional requirements we have managed to articulate and implement so far are all we need, that there is no more re-engineering to do and it should now be treated as a canon of (new) unchanging specialist knowledge that we ladle out to people like soup.

What, if anything, is records management?

- ◆ **knowing what records are**
- ◆ **understanding what they are used for**
- ◆ **knowing how to make and keep them**
- ◆ **knowing that we still need to get better at it in cyberspace**
- ◆ **getting all this embedded in I&KM**

Both of these ways of giving up are just a new kind of denial. What, if anything, is records management? First, it is the knowledge that records aren't exactly the same as other kinds of information - they exist in an information environment but they have unique characteristics as well. Second, it is the understanding that records have a unique value and purpose - in addition to the value and purpose they have as information. Third, it is the understanding (still developing in respect of digital records) of how to ensure they are made and kept so that their unique value and purpose as records is preserved. Lastly, and this is probably more pragmatic than philosophical, it is the requirement to get our fellow workers in the I&KM vineyard to understand this and then to form an alliance with those who do to exterminate (professionally speaking) those who don't.