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The Electronic Records Strategies Task Force Report: An Australian Perspective

Paper presented at Society of American Archivists Meeting Washington, DC, 30 August 1995

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Introduction

When I was asked last year if I would give an Australian perspective on a report to be written by an SAA Task Force on Electronic Records Strategies, I think I had in sight a standard sort of committee report analysing a situation, recounting key points of committee deliberations and making a series of recommendations for action to carry the matter progressively forward. Professional associations have an inherent conservatism about them and archival and records associations throughout the world have not particularly demonstrated any exception to this generality. So when Lisa attached a copy of the Task Force report to an email and despatched it to me in early June, I was most surprised to find a three and a half page document challenging the conservatism and bureaucracy of the SAA mechanisms and calling on the Society to get itself firmly into the reinvention game before the window of opportunity to establish itself as a credible, vital and indeed THE authoritative voice on electronic records issues had, like electronic records themselves, been lost. On reflection, given the composition of the Task Force, I probably should not have been surprised - the surprise stemmed more from the fact that I could not relate this to my experiences of the Australian Society of Archivists, nor is such forthright self-criticism what I was expecting from the SAA.

To test my reactions and help gain "an Australian Perspective" I relayed the report to a small number of Australian colleagues for what we refer to (often a tad erroneously, I suspect) as a "reality check" and I am indebted to Barbara Reed, consultant and currently a member of the academic staff at Monash University and to Frank Upward and Sue McKemmish co-founders of the excellent archives and records program at Monash University for their comments ideas and support. I would also like to mention John McDonald, who as a non - US member of the Task Force was able to provide invaluable translation as well as insightful responses to a number of my queries and initial reactions and Margaret Hedstrom whose excellent paper on the report provided some helpful context and commentary for someone from afar.

Summary Comment on Report

So what does this report say to me and to my Australian reality checkers? Primarily it reveals a frustration with the profession itself and with the professional society for not being heard on electronic recordkeeping issues. It sounds a warning. *Our fundamental recommendation to SAA is that it cannot afford to cede authority over electronic records to any other profession without seriously eroding its professional legitimacy:* i.e if the SAA isn't going to be heard on such a critical issue, it will cease to be able to claim it is the professional society for archivists or at least those who are taking archival responsibility in the electronic age and there was a double-edged sword there. Quite strong words those in any version of the English language.

The report goes on to make it clear that to effectively open the "short window of opportunity to establish the authority of the profession over matters of electronic records management and archiving", the SAA needs to work differently, to de-bureaucratise itself, to innovate by being proactive, and more importantly to take risks and empower quick thinking individuals to act on its behalf. Just as a professional mindset change, a conceptual leap, is required to deal effectively with electronic records issues, so the professional society must now take a leap forward in its *modus operandi* to satisfy this report's enunciation of how to fulfil goal 3 of its Strategic Plan "to position SAA to lead the archival profession in advancing electronic records issues and represent the interests of the profession in shaping policies and accepted practices for identifying, preserving, and using electronic records": more on that phrase, "identifying, preserving, and using electronic records" later.

The report is predicated on the view that, "it is not clear how archivists will seize the leading role in the archiving of electronic records" and advises "we believe that the environment in which SAA must assert its authority is changing rapidly, contains many actors that are beyond SAA's control and indeed outside of the normal spheres in which we have experience, and requires SAA intervention in ways which are often quite novel for the organisation." It provides three, what it calls, critical success factors but which resemble more closely performance targets, dealing with attracting new members beyond the traditional market, establishing credibility beyond the traditional professional parameters and developing and promulgating best practices, policies and standards. It offers examples of ways that the SAA might utilise the opportunities presented by electronic records issues to be heard as an authoritative voice and proposes two indicators to measure its success.

Beyond specific points and issues, it appears to me that this report calls upon the SAA to review both its charter and the way it does business as an organisation and it will be interesting to see how the machinery of the Society will respond to a probe of such significance.

Commentary

So what do I really think about this report? It very neatly illustrates some of the problems which face archivists everywhere. There are a range of pertinent issues raised in and by this report and I will attempt to cover some of them, particularly as they reflect on the differences apparent in American and Australian archival traditions and cultures. Yet, at the strategic level, the issues and problems are somewhat universal. Nor are these really being faced by our professional societies or indeed by the majority of the profession itself whom these societies represent and for whose benefit they are constituted.

Reclaim Archiving of Electronic Records

This report reveals that very few American archivists are actually responsible for electronic records and that in itself should be a matter of some professional concern. It declares that it is outside of the profession that the real work of "archiving" electronic records is taking place. And despite the reclamationist aspects (I can use a word like reclamationist in America, I'd never get away with it in Oz) of using "archiving", I still have the reaction, when I hear this word used, that it is a non-archival word - much misunderstood, often dangerously so, and reflective of inadequate conceptualisation of recordkeeping requirements and consequently activity in the IT and user areas. I applaud any strategies which will result in reclamation of "archiving" to its professional derivation. Outreach education for electronic archiving will have to overcome some significant barriers in my country at least and I look forward to being able to direct IT professionals to a change in US practice in this regard.

Get a Profession

And it is at this point that I encountered something I found most revealing. What is really being said here in the report is that "archivists aren't archivists", so we need to rope in all these new people who aren't archivists but who are out there "archiving" electronic records, although they don't really know how to do it properly. By bringing the people with the archival principles together with those who are actually "archiving" electronic records, enough synergy may be generated to get the knowledge and activity of "archiving" right. This is definitely worth a concentrated strategic effort at the whole of profession level as individuals have been trying to carry this flag to the crusade for some time.

But if "archivists aren't archivists", or at least not doing something critical to the archival mission, what message is this giving the SAA - "be opportunistic" or "get a profession"? If development of effective electronic recordkeeping strategies results in the sound and safe "archiving" of electronic evidence then the primary archival responsibility, the principal duty of care to the record, has been achieved, but this is somewhat different from the concept underlying "identifying, preserving, and using electronic records" enunciated earlier. To me "identifying, preserving, and using electronic records" is a very passive, custodial, process or output-oriented statement, reflective of a particular mindset, of the established timeline division in American culture between records management and archives. It reflects the "what" rather than the "why" of the profession. It is a far from adequate companion to recordkeeping. So on one level I think that this report, like a lot of the recent writing on electronic recordkeeping, is indeed saying "get a profession" or at the least "get the archival foundation back into the profession".

Australia: A Recordkeeping Profession

It has probably been the electronic records debate more than anything which has influenced one group of the archival community in my country to emphasise and explore our origins as recordkeepers and to try to chart a course for a recordkeeping profession. Unlike in North America where the foundation of the archival profession is in collecting and the discipline of history, the archival profession in Australia can trace two distinct foundations still reflected in professional streams today - recordkeeping and librarianship. I have been interested to note the emergence of the term 'recordkeeping' (now even spelt as one word in the Australian way) in American professional literature in the last couple of years although I am aware this results more from David Bearman's ground-breaking "Archivaria" article and the research being undertaken at the University of Pittsburgh than any direct influence from my country.

The foundations of the Australian recordkeeping axis can be traced back to the philosophy of the foundation head of the national archival institution, Ian Maclean, who assisted by Keith Penny and later by Peter Scott developed a unique approach to the management of the records of the Commonwealth of Australia which we now refer to as the records continuum approach - the Australian concept of a continuum being very different from the reworked life cycle version referred to in Canadian Jay Atherton's articles. I refer anyone interested in following this further to the 1994 publication "The Records Continuum" edited by Sue McKemmish and Michael Piggott, in particular to Frank Upward's chapter, "In Search of the Continuum". Those of us in Australia who operate from the recordkeeping

philosophy and continuum management strategies believe that the records life cycle model is well past its use-by date.

My colleague, educator Sue McKemmish, in a paper for the forthcoming Conference of the Records Management Association of Australia, ***Educating Recordkeeping Professionals for the 21st Century: Issues and Challenges***, provides this useful summary: "The recordkeeping approach focuses on social and business activities and processes in their juridical context. It emphasises the logical or virtual record and postcustodial roles for recordkeeping professionals. It is continuum based, a continuum being something continuous of which no separate parts are discernible, a continuous series of elements passing into each other. It focuses on steering, is system-based and outcome-oriented. Based on a definition of records, inclusive of records of continuing value (archives), it stresses record attributes that relate to the creation in the context of social or business activity and their retention as evidence of that activity. In turn this unifying concept of records provides the foundation for the integration of the work of records managers and archivists under the recordkeeping umbrella. At the same time it allows for specialisations within the recordkeeping professions eg associated with current, regulatory and historical recordkeeping roles."

By and large, however, Australian recordkeepers, while increasingly vocal and well represented in the professional literature, remain a minority as the recent annual conference of the Australian Society of Archivists clearly demonstrated. The majority of the profession in Australia today are very firmly in the archivist/keeper mould as they also appear to be in this country with the most difficult electronic records problem that they have faced - what format or medium to keep an electronic information system in (and I use that word "information" deliberately in this context). The machinery of our professional Society is currently intent on catering to the majority of its members but professional leadership issues such as the development of Standards and Position Statements on critical professional responsibilities are now being taken up by the Australian Council of Archives, a body comprising a full range of the country's archival institutions as represented by their heads.

America: Will the Life Cycle Survive?

But how will American archivists who have been bred in a professional environment which has traditionally separated records and archives deal with the re-invention of professional roles which must inevitably follow the adoption of the principles underpinning electronic recordkeeping? With an attitude perhaps akin to this criticism of the then Commonwealth Archives Office operations in the early 1970s by an eminent Australian University Archivist. "More prying than ministers of the Crown were at a royal births, archivists are on the scene from the very point of conception of records." In fact the comment is slightly in error as Commonwealth archivists at that time (and I speak from personal experience here) were not just voyeurs but were also known to be on the scene at the pre-nuptial or family planning stages - advising Royal Commission or parliamentary committee secretariats, sometimes before the commission or committee was legally constituted, on the establishment of recordkeeping systems and appropriate strategies for evidence to be ensured.

So where does this leave the SAA and its primary constituency of middle American historical archivists? When I touched on this point with the chair of the Task Force I was advised that the report was to the SAA as an organisation not to members per se. This point is well taken particularly when combined with the criteria to "provide leadership" to both members and the community at large. The two Societies, the SAA and the ASA operate in vastly different ways which is a product of the size of constituency and the concomitant official machinery afforded by their respective financial positions. However, I find there is still an interesting cultural difference as the ASA is currently striving to operate more in the common denominator or consensus mode rather than a leadership mode, and as a professional Society perhaps has something to learn of the opportunities deriving from the latter role.

Educating for Empowerment

The report advises that per capita of need, SAA members are well served by the education initiatives of the Society. On one level, I agree - the CART Report and associated articles and the curriculum initiative are indeed significant. We have no equivalent and indeed there is an Australian project included in the case studies currently in preparation. As a long time member of the ASA Education Committee, I can report that our action has mainly been in the area of Society Accreditation of postgraduate University courses in Archives and Records with the Society on the whole providing encouragement and occasional sponsorship for continuing education workshops or seminars provided by the Universities which teach in the professional field, such workshops usually centring around a visiting overseas archival VIP.

On the other hand, unlike in Australia, the majority of American archivists have not received a specific education in archives and records. Noting Richard Cox's comments in the ***Second Progress Report of the University of Pittsburgh's Recordkeeping Functional Requirements Project*** that the further research of this project has only served to underscore his earlier concern that "the only effective means by which to educate electronic records

archivists would be to have students first complete a comprehensive archival education program (comparable to the Masters in Archival Studies degree currently offered in several schools in Canada and recently endorsed in principle by the Society of American Archivists) and then take an additional year for study in electronic information technology, record-keeping, and information systems" begged the question where are these quick thinking and acting individuals sufficiently informed on electronic recordkeeping issues and empowered to act on behalf of the SAA to be drawn from? Clearly all the members of the Task Force qualify and there may well be others but how available are they and for how long? Leaderships change, enthusiasm wanes, people burn out of voluntary service roles - perhaps more so in my country as there are so few of us. Where will the supply of empowered individuals come from?

Barbara Reed postulated that this opportunity might be used to enthuse new students - by developing a mechanism for compiling issues to be resolved and establishing a rotating or competitive process individually or collaboratively to solve them. Barbara further suggested another project like 2020 Vision to imagine archival or recordkeeping jobs in the future and write them up for debate and discussion. Frank Upward suggested the critical success factor missing from the Task Force report: development of a body of archival knowledge that has its foundation in the recordkeeping view and the provision of contact with realisable recordkeeping practices. Achieving success would enable the shape of the professional group to be changed to meet present and emerging needs not only by bringing in new players but also by opening up perspectives on the profession's past, sharing views and traditions and enhancing the body of knowledge that comprises archival science. While individuals are tackling bits of this now an impetus is needed, a defined program evolved and facilities provided to accelerate and share the progress. He asks the compelling question, "Without such a body of knowledge how can it be determined what is best practice and how will we know it when we fall over it?"

Recordkeeping as Empowerment

How does a professional society empower individuals without handing over the power to individuals? Without a shared view of archivists as recordkeeping professionals this will be even more difficult and probably divisive. The traditional American distinctions between records management and archival administration crumble with the electronic recordkeeping perspective and this will have to be brought out and squarely faced by the professional association. From the outside looking in there appears to be little evidence of this occurring to date. The SAA has a great opportunity here to show leadership and act as a change agent. It needs to utilise every opportunity to foster a better understanding of records and recordkeeping if it is to be regarded as and to actually be a serious, effective and critical player in the electronic records arena.

Examples of Programs and Activities

The report gives a few examples of the types of activities and programs in which the SAA could engage to advance the strategies it has suggested and I'd like to comment on and add my support to them.

A News Flash campaign, (or what we refer to as press releases) is clearly a good idea and a very effective outreach and credibility building activity if it can be achieved. A concerted effort will be needed and I expect it will probably be necessary to pay for advertisements to start with. The ACA made a start towards the development of such a program a couple of years ago but on a more general level to try to raise the profile of Australian archival institutions and had a series of mock responses to imagined situations that organisations or individuals could have ready to post at an available opportunity. Although there has not been much evidence of its success, I like it as a tactic and it is one which would have flow through benefits to other culturally connected countries such as Australia. I have watched a colleague, who is an monetary economist, build a reputation and a consultancy business beyond academia from a concentrated effort within such a tactic, although his field might be somewhat more newsworthy at least by Australian standards.

Liaison with software manufacturers and compliance measurement. This looks promising and would also have an impact beyond the US to countries like my own. The scene is changing here but needs to change more. In 1990 at the first organised collective professional foray in Australia into electronic records issues, the "Keeping Data" conference, despite concentrated effort by the organisers Barbara Reed and David Roberts and extensive advertising, only two IT type people attended. One of them bravely stood up at the end and suggested we should talk to their professional gatherings and I remember the collective exasperation that we were trying but had not been able to elicit adequate response. The situation has not really changed in the five years in between, despite a number of initiatives on the archival side. Just recently Monash University and then the University of NSW held workshops to bring together professional recordkeeping and software industry stakeholders capitalising, *inter alia*, on the release of the Draft Australian Standard on Records Management (IT/21). This attempted to engage the software industry people in recordkeeping requirements and compliance issues. It was received with a very mixed response from clearly identified stakeholders in the software industry. It is an area which needs to be pursued and one in which the machinery of the SAA could make a significant impact.

Drawing from other professionals and educating them in archival best practice. There is clearly much to be gained across all professional groups from the sort of activity the Task Force recommended here. I have one small illustration. At Monash University this year, as part of the Masters program, the current issues subject explored with a range of guest professionals the concept of Recordkeeping Audit. Recordkeeping compliance features in the concerns of a wide range of professions even if they do not recognise it for what it is or have any knowledge of archival science from which it derives. There are some quite extraordinary views out there in the world of auditors and quality managers about the nature of recordkeeping and appropriate regimes to adopt and a vast territory on which we need to have an influence. A developed program in this area can only pay dividends and enhance our professional reputation. I look forward to the day when the initiative need not come from only within our own professional ranks.

Conclusion

I would now like to finish my comments by offering three performance indicators of my own which would measure the success of the SAA in dealing with this report and with electronic records strategies.

Like this Task Force I, too, believe that there is but a brief window of opportunity for the archival profession to become a stakeholder in the world of electronic records. It is incumbent upon us professionally to seize this opportunity and to do so in a collective, informed and strategic way. Our primary duty of care to the records is not satisfied by "identifying, preserving and using". This focuses on the "what" rather than the "why". It does not encompass recordkeeping and all its implications. It most certainly does not accommodate the notion of "archiving". As I have been much quoted in this continent and my own as stating in my 1992 article "Managing the Record rather than the Relic", "The pivot of archival science is evidence not information.A change in the traditionally perceived mindset is needed here to manage the records and their continuum, not the relics at the end stage in the record life cycle. If the continuum management is right the rest can follow with confidence.It is a matter of developing intellectual control strategies rather than physical control procedures.....While archivists have a duty of care to the records in their custody there also exists a duty of care to ensure that adequate records exist and are properly maintained and managed." Thus my first performance indicator revolves around the phrase "identifying, preserving and using" or the variations of this phrase that appear in both SAA literature and the Strategic Plan. When the Strategic Plan and a range of SAA literature reflect a recordkeeping rather than a physical control approach my indicator will have been satisfied.

My second performance indicator is a test of leadership and divergence and one which will have a flow through benefit to other culturally akin countries like Australia. It is linked to the third area of program and activity examples given in the report: *Drawing from other professionals and educating them in archival best practice*. It relates to the activity of "archiving" electronic records and its reclamation mentioned earlier. When I was doing the **Glossary** for the second edition of **Keeping Archives** I was minded, by my personal experiences and frustrations with IT people which I knew were shared by several colleagues, to include the term "archiving", with this definition: *A computing term which has little to do with archival concepts and practices. It refers to the procedure for transferring unappraised non-current information or data from the active system usually by dumping it onto a computer tape.* My second performance indicator is satisfied when the term "archiving" is used universally by IT people, administrators, lawyers etc. and archivists with a common understanding, backed with best practice regimes predicated on archival science.

The third performance indicator is perhaps more fanciful, but I believe it serves to illustrate the very core of the situation. I have for many years been a low key fan of the futuristic television series **Star Trek**. When I remember, I video the episodes and periodically watch a few as an exercise in minimal effort escapism. Several episodes of the offshoot series **Deep Space Nine** screened in Australia this year have had a recordkeeping thread. In more than one episode the predatory, ruthless and powerful Cardassians are portrayed as meticulous recordkeepers and experts in setting up and interrogating computer record systems. By contrast the peace loving, spiritual Bajorans, who have been recently liberated from Cardassian occupation, are portrayed as inadequate recordkeepers without much ability in the field of harnessing electronic records. Another variation on the information is power theme. In one episode, in response to a Bajoran challenge that no records are available of adoption transactions during the time of the Cardassian occupation, a visiting Cardassian asserts with some indignation, "Cardassians are quite meticulous recordkeepers and taught this world amongst others how to keep records". Strangely, however, after easily restoring to working order an obsolete computer thus gaining access to the adoption "record system", the Cardassian discovers no trace of the vital record. What action does he take from a skills base reportedly expert in recordkeeping - he immediately traces the administrator of the program to obtain her oral evidence of the adoption in question. Miraculously, from semi retirement and several years after the event, she can instantly recall the details sought. So much for a real understanding of recordkeeping!

In **Star Trek** itself, loss of the integrity of the evidential or archival source has been a feature but one which seems accepted as part of life for the characters. The profession of archivist has not rated a mention in **Star Trek** but in

one episode a "records clerk" featured as a suitable and innocuous disguise for a character of political significance on the run. While there were some interesting side observations on the importance of recordkeeping, one is left with the impression that the occupation of records clerk was chosen to reflect an anonymous back room person for whom someone could quite easily substitute unnoticed, with the added bonus that the imposter then had the facility to alter the record to reflect his new identity.

In the future world of **Star Trek** and **Deep Space Nine**, neither the SAA nor the archival profession has had the desired impact: the concept of corporate or national memory exists but its integrity is questionable. Characters who have developed new codes of behaviour at a variety of organisational and social levels accept the loss of evidentiality and accountability through recordkeeping as commonplace, although intuition and oral recall are frequently called into play in their stead.

- So my third performance indicator is this - by the year 2000 an episode of the **Star Trek** family will portray a sound and compelling message about the criticality of evidentiality and accountability in and through recordkeeping, with recordkeepers being shown as members of a vital profession, with commander status, in the Federation: AND the name of the SAA or of an individual empowered to act as a spokesperson on its behalf will appear in the credits.

And I urge the SAA and the archival profession in every country to take up the challenge to explore the new worlds opened up by electronic records and boldly go where no recordkeeper has gone before!

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