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## Electronic Records Management in Australia

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### Barbara Reed

Australia, from an insider's viewpoint, is an exciting place to be in relation to electronic records management. In this country we have stopped edging warily around the periphery of the problem and have flung ourselves into the collective endeavour of coming up with ways to solve them. Much of what we have achieved has reinvigorated our profession, in the process redefining the boundaries of records management and archives. We are realising some of our strengths in this area and identifying some of our weaknesses. We have established alliances with other professional groups and started working collaboratively across information communities. The rosy picture, however, does need to be tempered with the reality. Too frequently, we confront organisational culture where recordkeeping is marginalised and the solutions proposed for electronic recordkeeping are too radical for easy incorporation into ordinary workplaces. At a strategic level, here too, we have made significant strides to alter that. If success is measured as implemented solutions, our achievements are similar to those in other countries. If success can be measured as potential outcomes, our achievements look much more positive.

### Background

Prior to the 1990s, few Australian recordkeepers had seriously addressed electronic records. The partial exception was the Australian Archives, who through force of circumstance had become the repository of vast holdings of magnetic tapes containing data relating to off-shore petroleum exploration<sup>1</sup>. However, the majority of the profession were facing the workplace which had not yet altered work practices to incorporate computers in ways which facilitated the creation and management of records. Computers were still used as facilitative tools - tools used to hasten the creation of documents but not used to store those documents as anything but a convenience. The official records were still paper. This pre-office automation world can be seen reflected in the publication of the Proceedings of a Seminar on Appraising Computer based records - *Keeping Data* - which reflected the reality as it was being faced in organisations at the time.

That seminar however also illustrates some features of the Australian scene which have had an effect on the way electronic records management issues have evolved:

Theory and practice were joint partners on the stage of the seminar<sup>2</sup>. Rather than a solid dividing wall coming down between academics, thinkers and practitioners, we have been able to achieve a professional ambience where the thinking and the implementation are done in close conjunction - a characteristic which has effected the quick uptake of different ways of approaching electronic records problems.

The participants were from that group of people who called themselves archivists/records managers: an interesting hybrid professional in the 1980s and early 1990s. Frequently escapees or outcasts from the Australian Archives fold, many of these people were modifying and applying approaches learnt from that environment into other work places. Now clearly identifiable as advocates of the 'records continuum' approach<sup>3</sup>, these people brought to the seminar and the proceedings some views characteristic of continuum thinking: a focus on recordkeeping systems as a whole, not individual records series in isolation<sup>4</sup>; a functional approach to recordkeeping tasks<sup>5</sup>; involvement in systems design to manage the whole of recordkeeping practice; and a sense of building from what we know.

The records tradition in Australia is one which has been dominated by the inheritance of registry systems from late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. As a colony we were subject to systems of bureaucratic control designed to manage at a distance. The emphases of the registry system, with its pre-action and process control implications, have served us well in the transition to electronic recordkeeping. Records management in Australia from the 1950s was not limited to minding and managing the non-current files after action was completed - the prevailing American notion of records management. When computers did hit records management, they first appeared in the mid 1980s as systems aimed at automating these registry controls. We won some victories at that time insisting that records management systems were distinct from those of libraries or other inventory style packages. By forcing the local software developers to conform to the recordkeeping processes required to manage records, we fought some battles about 'information' versus 'records', although at the time it would be unfair to say there was much intellectual rigour in the articulation. This experience with home grown automation packages, after inevitable market shake out, has left Australia with some world-class records management software<sup>6</sup> which is still evolving to meet the demands of the local and an increasingly international market.

### Reinventing Records Management

Fundamental to understanding the evolution of electronic records management in Australia is the need to place the strategies being developed within the broader scope of reinvented records management. This has taken place under the rubric of the 'records continuum', as indicated above, an idea which has been around in the Australian records community for many years. This approach redefines the basis of recordkeeping and posits the fundamental connections between archival theory and practice and current records management<sup>7</sup>. Some of the concepts include:

- the importance of records as by-products of activities;
- that records are intrinsically linked to day to day business activities and fundamental to business viability;
- that everybody has a role in recordkeeping, as a creator if not as a ;
- that the role of a recordkeeping professional is to oversee and manage the specialised processes associated with records
- the notion that archival principles, far from divorced from records practices, are fundamental to the reasons we need to maintain records of business activities as accountable evidence of transactions.

As it has developed, the notion of the records continuum is as important as a way of thinking, as it is a specific set of ideas. It posits different roles for recordkeeping practitioners and enables lateral thinking focussed on shared outcomes rather than on particular methods or techniques or even tools for doing things.

The records continuum concept has been instrumental in the development of the AS 4390, the Australian records management standard, devised by professionals from the archival institutions, records managers, document management and workflow specialists, educators and practitioners. The notion of establishing regimes for records, for articulating strategies for recordkeeping and identifying processes aimed at outcomes, rather than rigid procedures, embody the approach. Developed through a network of committee structures which deliberately brought together related professional groups, this was the first cooperative recordkeeping standards venture. The resulting Standard was accepted in 1995 by all of the professional bodies involved, including the records managers and the archivists.

A further initiative was undertaken by the Australian Council of Archives, a body representing the institutions which employ archivists. In late 1995, ACA convened a special meeting of 'Australia's leading practitioners in electronic recordkeeping from the public and corporate sectors and representatives of the professional associations in the areas of recordkeeping, information management and computing'. From that meeting a common position on electronic recordkeeping emerged<sup>8</sup>. The mission identified was that:

'by the year 2000 all Australian organisations will follow guidelines and standards for the management of electronic records which are based on common principles, concepts and criteria'.

Nicknamed 'the Kirribilli statement' in the usual irreverent Australian style<sup>9</sup>, this statement outlines principles and strategies for pursuing the vision under four major headings:

- 'Creating electronic records and capturing them into electronic recordkeeping systems
- Designing, building and using electronic systems that keep records
- Maintaining and managing electronic records over time
- Making electronic records accessible.'

Both of these projects fed into the newly completed Archives and Records Competency Standards<sup>10</sup>. Any industry competencies being proposed had to conform to the AS 4390 Standard and astute observers will recognise similarity of structure in the Competency Standard streams to those four major headings from the ACA statement. While other countries have preceded Australia in developing competency standards for records practitioners, we anticipate significant impact on the profession in coming years from these Standards. They articulate the competencies required for recordkeeping in the light of our Australian experience. Adopted and owned by the Records Management Association of Australia, the Australian Society of Archivists, the Australian Council of Archives, the Association for Information and Image Management, the Health and Information Management Association of Australia and the union movement, these Standards are now available for incorporation into educational and vocational curriculum, accreditation procedures and for recognition of workplace performance and prior learning.

In the words of the funding submission for that project:

"The endorsement of national competency standards for records and archives will provide the basis for achieving national consistency and high quality in vocational and continuing education and training for records and archives workers which is relevant to the needs of records management and archives administration. It will also enhance the career path options available to workers in the industry. From

the competency standards it will also be possible to develop competency assessment and recognition of prior learning models for use within institutions and industry. The development of standards that complement and enhance existing clerical and administrative competencies will provide better access to rewarding career options in the records and archives industry by establishing benchmarks for structured training. Records management and archival administration programs are being re-engineered so that they can deliver quality recordkeeping processes and systems that provide for organisations and society better quality decision making, better performance of business and social activity, greater organisational accountability, organisational compliance with legal recordkeeping requirements, infrastructures which help minimise the risk of mismanagement or corruption, and the transmission of culture and knowledge through time and space in the form of a corporate and social memory.

The re-invented role of records and archives workers places great stresses on both formal and informal training mechanisms. The implementation of competency based training processes will therefore enable the industry to respond more efficiently to these changing needs, and to the changing training requirements.<sup>11</sup>

A further recent initiative is the establishment of the Recordkeeping Educators Forum, an independent body which meets annually to discuss the impact of industry changes on the provision of education and training in recordkeeping. This body consists of academics and educators in archives and records management and includes invited representatives of the Records Management Association of Australia, the Australian Society of Archivists and the Australian Council of Archives. The Forum is exploring collaborative and cooperative research agendas for recordkeeping and has been instrumental in the development of a collaborative research grant proposal, under the guidance and enthusiasm of Associate Professor Sue McKemish, titled 'Modelling archival metadata standards for managing and accessing information resources in networked environments over time for business, social and cultural purposes'<sup>12</sup>.

## Reflections on the reinvention

So: all this activity - but where are we up to? The extraordinary level of recordkeeping activity in Australia in the past two years has been aimed at establishing frameworks. It explicitly recognises that new approaches are needed to deal with the reality of the electronic workplace and seeks to provide the room and recognition within constituent parts of the industry to explore commonalities not differences. This is in keeping with the Australian notion of the records continuum. We are forging alliances and establishing strategic directions by formalising frameworks of a re-articulated profession and defining the boundaries within which we can all work cooperatively.

These projects and initiatives are acting as a unifying influence for the recordkeeping professions. While still maintaining their separate identities, the Records Management Association of Australia and the Australian Society of Archivists now have an agenda which is a common agenda and are able to approach problems increasingly united. Over time, many of us hope that this will result in a different articulation of the relationship between archives and records management based on the depth of knowledge required to undertake each particular set of skills or tasks. <sup>13</sup>

Many of the implications of this re-invented framework are controversial. They challenge the ways recordkeeping professionals interact with each other. There are many within both the records management community and the archives community who are uneasy with these statements. The changes enabled are yet to be worked through the communities and down to the individual level. It would be inaccurate to pretend that these approaches are welcomed in every nook and cranny of the recordkeeping world. Some feel inherently threatened by such approaches. Yet others, particularly those involved with electronic recordkeeping issues, are invigorated by the potential opened up.

## Workplace Realities

The most common scenario for records management is one where the corporate records resource is managed through a records management package, usually one of the home-grown products. Such packages automate the traditional registry functions enabling decentralised management of records and incorporating traditional tools such as classification schemes based on functions and activities and disposal schedules. The paper records are usually managed within such systems. They are common in both government and private enterprise. While the packages are now offering increased capacity to manage electronic documents, the majority of organisations are wary of the solutions and have not yet integrated the electronic and paper worlds.

A description of the changes being experienced in the Australian workplace is essentially the same as is being

experienced in every other nation. We are dealing with a time of transition between the paper realities and the electronic possibilities. Technologies are being introduced to the workplace with staggering speed. Facilitative software is distributed to every desktop, email has been adopted as a communication mechanism. Organisations are interested in information dissemination and information sharing. Workgroups and small self-managed units are challenging traditional monolithic bureaucracies. Technologies to manage the electronic information within organisations are being experimented with. Electronic document management systems and workflow software are increasingly available. Intranets and extranets are being adopted as vehicles to harness the power of the world-wide information infrastructures to suit the needs of individual businesses. Electronic commerce, electronic data interchange and document interchange are transforming the mechanisms of client interaction. Information infrastructure is being addressed at government level through bodies such as the Commonwealth Government's Office of Government Information Technology.

In this volatile environment, records management is often regarded as something relevant only to the paper world. Indeed many of the sales pitches of software vendors seems to actively promote such thinking, implying that their various packages address all the information needs of organisations without the need for records management. Against such inflated and inherently dangerous claims records managers are struggling to express a coherent and concise critique. The positioning of records managers to address the electronic workplace is crucial. As in many countries, recordkeepers are fighting to have their voices heard in the current organisational climate.

Records management at the implementation level in such corporate environments is indeed tantamount to riding shotgun in the Wild West<sup>14</sup>. We are challenging stereotypes and critiquing approaches from a different angle. Many of the recordkeeping practitioners at the frontier have used the weapons provided - accountability, evidence of transactions, integration of records into business processes and corporate wide standards - to enter the fray. This is an inherently risky place to be. It requires persistence, hardiness and the capacity to keep firing the bullets. There are the inevitable sad stories of people who have been seen to be too much of a maverick or a loose gun. Professionally we need to develop much stronger support for those fighting on the frontier.

Thus at the coal face, records managers are facing conditions which are prevalent the world over. They are striving to work with the technologies being introduced, not against them, to integrate them into a suite of interrelated packages which through the design of the implementation begin to address recordkeeping requirements. This work is time consuming and unrewarding as the document management, workflow and records management packages rarely slot together but must be tailored for integration.

The traditional records management packages have responded to the electronic challenges by following the models of document management packages. Various techniques for managing electronic documents have been adopted by these packages, from 'freezing' documents as unalterable images, managing the location of the documents within native software applications or transferring the documents into a specialised records store, all then accessible under the common user interface. Various strategies for enabling records creators to integrate their documents into these packages exist, but at present, these interfaces are crude and intrusive. We can and do mount significant criticisms of the software approaches being offered in these records management packages, but in truth recordkeepers cannot sustain an argument which places them in a situation aloof from the proposals. Until coherent requirements for electronic recordkeeping can be expressed and communicated to organisations, software vendors cannot be blamed for not responding to workplace requirements. If workplaces request solutions which ignore or inadequately address records issues, it is the recordkeeping professions who should be held accountable.

Here again, a variety of strategic approaches are being utilised. A number of state governments and the Commonwealth Government have initiated requests for 'whole-of-government' packages for a variety of functions common to all government agencies. Records management has been included in such projects in South Australia, New South Wales and the Commonwealth. In the most far reaching specification issued to date, the Office of Government Information Technology has issued a specification for records management software which draws on the requirements outlined in AS 4390. Exhibiting the influence of Australian Archives on the development of these specifications, the resulting document requires a different type of functionality for records management, integrating electronic records with paper records, venturing into multi-media issues and managing the process of recordkeeping from creation<sup>15</sup>.

## Archives and Electronic Records

Government archives around Australia have accepted a role in the strategic direction of electronic recordkeeping of their constituent agencies in a variety of ways. The most proactive are Australian Archives at the Federal or Commonwealth level and the Archives Office of New South Wales through its Records Management Office at the State level. Both of these bodies have issued a variety of standards for regulating electronic recordkeeping<sup>16</sup>.

Australian Archives has been active in the electronic records area for a number of years, evidenced by publications such as *Managing Electronic Records*<sup>17</sup> and the involvement of the Archives in the Information Exchange Steering Committee. The IESC was an inter-department initiative within the Commonwealth Government which produced one of the first publications to deal with electronic documents in the Australian government sphere

<sup>18</sup>. More recently Australian Archives has been an active participant in the Office of Government Information Technology's Information Management Steering Committee which has recently reported on 'Architecture for Access to Government Information'. This report explores making government information visible on the Internet, access to government information using technical strategies incorporating appropriate metadata tags to identify, protect and disseminate government information<sup>19</sup>.

Australian archival institutions have been much quoted and misquoted on the issue of custody of electronic records. Both of the leading institutions, cited above, have adopted a policy of distributed custody for electronic records<sup>20</sup>. In the words of David Roberts: 'This involves the organisation which created the electronic records maintaining them in their computing environment, migrating them to new hardware and software platforms as that environment changes'<sup>21</sup> where 'the archives institution exercises its responsibilities towards the records by setting standards and monitoring their implementation. It functions as the hub in a network of systems for maintaining and providing access to electronic records. <sup>22</sup>'

Australian Archives can cite considerable experience with custodial management of electronic records prior to adopting this strategy<sup>23</sup>. It has, however, exposed the archival institutions to allegations of abrogation of responsibility for records in electronic form<sup>24</sup>. An exploration of this issue by Steve Stuckey, now the Assistant Director General of Australian Archives states:

'The electronic records environment enables today's archivists to have a profound influence on not only how records are created, but indeed *what* archival records are created. The developments in meta-data theory and practice allow archivists to establish a greater level of intellectual control than has ever been possible before, and do it as the records are being created... The advances in electronic storage capabilities and ease of copying address many of the preservation issues that have been of concern to archivists. The information super highway allows delivery of the records to the users in a way archivists of old could never have dreamed of. And all these things, the true tasks of archivists, can be done - and may be done even better - if the records themselves are never in the hands of an archivist.'<sup>25</sup>

In March 1995 the Australian Archives formally adopted a distributed custody approach in their policy document *Managing Electronic Records: A Shared Responsibility*<sup>26</sup> and in September 1995 in *Keeping Electronic Records: Policy for Electronic Recordkeeping in the Commonwealth Government*<sup>27</sup>. Explaining the nature of the Australian Archives policy Steve Stuckey writes:

'The point to make perfectly clear is that the Australian Archives' policy is not non-custodial, it proposes a distributed custody model. We have the technological infrastructure in place to take limited quantities of electronic records, where they are sufficiently valuable and there is no other alternative.'

In the same statement, Stuckey writes:

'We would all be well served, given the enormous task before us, if we looked to the development of a common position for managing electronic records, rather than debating what I believe in the long run to be a side issue. If records are not appropriately created, captured into recordkeeping systems and kept accessible then no one will be able to have custody of them.'<sup>28</sup>

The Archives Authority of NSW have adopted a similar approach in their *Documenting the Future* policy statement, with the difference that while taking responsibility for electronic records of defunct NSW government bodies, they may seek alternatives to physical custody such as seeking to 'commission another agency with a similar computing environment to maintain and migrate the defunct agency's records along with its own.'<sup>29</sup>

A different strategic approach is being taken by the Public Record Office of Victoria, which commissioned a research report on the options available for long term electronic storage of archival records. Currently the PROV is investigating standard representation formats for multi-media archives.

The issue of custody is still seen by many to be the overwhelming issue confronting archival institutions. In Australia, pragmatic decisions have been taken which suit the current volatile technological climate. There is no

sense in which these decisions are irrevocable. They constitute an experiment, and a much needed experiment, in alternative options to approaching electronic records. The archival institutions are also addressing issues of immediate concern related to ensuring that electronic records are created, captured and managed appropriately. In keeping with the Australian records continuum theories, these approaches place a continuing responsibility upon the creators of records to maintain business and social accountabilities over time and space.

## Conclusion

Australia's approach to electronic records in the 1990s has been characterised by strategies which seek to put in place frameworks for recordkeeping in which there is room for collaboration and experimentation. We have recognised that the existing paper paradigms relating to records need to be reconceptualised in order to define different ways of achieving our goals of reliable and authentic evidence of business activity. At a strategic level, we are making progress on these issues. How this will fully translate into the implementation level is as yet unclear. The difficulties and challenges for those addressing electronic recordkeeping issues in the workplace should not be understated. We have a long way to go before we can feel assured that our strategies are adequate and successful. Professionally we should applaud and support those individuals striving to implement changes to recordkeeping mindsets and to implement electronic records solutions within indifferent corporate environments. These challenges are both local and global. Collective endeavour and cooperative action are proving the most successful strategy for addressing the compelling issue of electronic recordkeeping.

11 Steve Stuckey: 'The Good Oil for Australia: Petroleum Data' in *Keeping Data* Papers from a workshop on Appraising Computer-based Records. ed B. Reed and D. Roberts. Australian Council of Archives and Australian Society of Archivists Incorporated, Sydney, 1991  
 Stephen Yorke: 'Management of Petroleum Data Records in the Custody of Australian Archives' *Archives and Manuscripts* Vol 25, No 1 May 1997

2 See for example, Glenda Acland and Mike Saclier, both practitioners discussing theory, and Sue McKemmish, a theorist discussing practice.

3 For the importance and influence of the Australian Archives on the development of the proto-continuum approaches see Frank Upward: 'In Search of the Continuum: Ian Maclean's 'Australian Experience' Essays on Recordkeeping' in *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives first fifty years*, ed Sue McKemmish and Michael Piggott, Ancora Press in association with Australian Archives, 1994

4 See Anne Picot: 'The Computer System in its Context' *Keeping Data* op cit

5 See Lindy Saul for a functional approach to organisational analysis and Sue McKemmish for a functional approach to disposal scheduling in *Keeping Data* op cit

6 Three established market leaders are TRIM by Tower Software; RECFIND by GMB and CARMS by Ortex, although a variety of other packages could be mentioned.

7 For an exploration of the records continuum see Frank Upward's 'Structuring the Records Continuum' Parts 1 and 2, *Archives and Manuscripts* Vol 24, No 2, 1996 and Vol 25 No 1, 1997

8 Australian Council of Archives: *Corporate Memory in the Electronic Age. Statement of a Common Position on Electronic Recordkeeping* May 1996. Also available at [http://www.aa.gov.au/AA\\_WWW/ProAssn/ACA/Corpmenw.htm](http://www.aa.gov.au/AA_WWW/ProAssn/ACA/Corpmenw.htm). This publication was awarded the Mander Jones Award of the Australian Society of Archivists for 1996 and is discussed amongst other initiatives by David Roberts, 'The Recordkeeping Standards Work of the Australian Council of Archives' in *Archives at the Centre Proceedings of the 1996 Conference*, Australian Society of Archivists Inc, Canberra, 1997

9 The meeting was held at the training facilities of the Reserve Bank of Australia in the Sydney suburb of Kirribilli, the same suburb that houses the official residence of the Prime Minister of Australia, hence the joking solemnity conveyed by the nickname.

10 yet to be published, the National Records and Archives Competency Standards have been endorsed by the Australian National Training Authority in August 1997

11 National Records Competency Standards Steering Committee: Submission for Funding for National Archives and Records Competency Project, drafted March 1995, approved March 1996.

12 The success or otherwise of this research proposal is yet to be announced.

13 Michael Piggott: 'Educating for Recordkeeping and Information Management' *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol 23, No 1, May 1995

14 This analogy is derived from John MacDonald: 'Managing Records in the Modern Office. The Experience of the National Archives of Canada' in S. Yorke (ed) *Playing For Keeps* The Proceedings of an Electronic Records Management Conference hosted by the Australian Archives, 1994. Available online at [http://www.aa.gov.au/AA\\_WWW/AA\\_Publications/P4K/Contents.htm](http://www.aa.gov.au/AA_WWW/AA_Publications/P4K/Contents.htm)

15 These specifications and the product recommendations can be accessed at 'http://www.ogit.gov.au' under activities.

16 Available on web sites, the Australian Archives standards and policies are available at <http://www.aa.gov.au> and the Records Management Office standards and policies are available at <http://www.records.nsw.gov.au>

17 Managing Electronic Records Papers from a workshop on Managing Electronic Records of Archival Value ed D. Parer and R. Terry, Australian Council of Archives and Australian Society of Archivists, 1993

18 Information Exchange Steering Committee: *Implementing Effective Procedures for the Management of Electronic Documents in the Australian Public Service* 1994

19 Report of the Information Management Steering Committee - Technical Group: *Architecture For Access to Government Information*, 1996. Available at <http://www.adfa.oz.au/DOD/imsctgla.htm>

20 For an alternative view see Luciana Duranti: 'Archives as Place' *Archives and Manuscripts* Vol 24 No2, Nov. 1996

21 David Roberts: *Documenting the Future: Policy and Strategies for Electronic Recordkeeping in the New South Wales Public Sector*, Archives Authority of NSW, Sydney, July 1995 p.50

22 Ibid p50-51

23 Stephen Yorke *Archives and Manuscripts* op.cit.

24 expressed most recently in a listserv posting by Tom Adami which sparked considerable debate (July-August 1996) and is available through the archives of the Aus-Archivists listserv at <http://www.asap.unimelb.edu.au/asa/aus-archivists/maillist.html>

25 Steve Stuckey: 'Keepers of the Fame? The Custodial Role of Australian Archives - Its History and its Future' in *The Records*

*Continuum*, op cit. p46-47

26 *Managing Electronic Records: A Shared Responsibility*, revised 1997 available at

[http://www.aa.gov.au/AA\\_WWW/AA\\_Issues/ManagingER.html](http://www.aa.gov.au/AA_WWW/AA_Issues/ManagingER.html)

27 *Keeping Electronic Records: Policy for Electronic Recordkeeping in the Commonwealth Government* available at

[http://www.aa.gov.au/AA\\_WWW/AA\\_Issues/KeepingER.html](http://www.aa.gov.au/AA_WWW/AA_Issues/KeepingER.html)

28 Steve Stuckey: aus-archivists listserv 11.7.1996

29 David Roberts: *Documenting The Future* op cit p.51

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