

Educating Employers to Seek Educated Recordkeepers

By Margaret Pember, FRMA

Having been disappointed by a survey of employer expectations of the skills and knowledge of recordkeeping employees, Margaret Pember says its time the industry pushed from within to educate management to lift their qualification requirements for records and information professionals.

Western Australia's Curtin University of Technology has been educating recordkeeping professionals since 1990. Since that time the nature of the profession has changed considerably and courses have undergone a number of metamorphoses to incorporate these changes. One of the major drivers for course change should be industry need, and a content analysis of recordkeeping job advertisements in The West Australian newspaper was conducted to identify the specific knowledge and skills in demand by employers in Western Australia (Pember, 2003a). From the analysis of the positions advertised it is clear that employers expect recordkeeping professionals to possess a diverse range of domain-specific recordkeeping knowledge and experience ranging from basic entry-level hands-on processing or operational skills to high level strategic skills. The preferred recordkeeping professional will also be proficient in transferable workplace competencies such as computer literacy, communication and interpersonal skills, staff management skills, teaming skills, and have a strong customer focus. Personal attributes such as enthusiasm, motivation, and analytical and problem solving skills were also considered of great import. The survey also uncovered a disappointingly low expectation level on the part of employers in respect to recordkeeping qualifications. Only about one-third of the advertisements indicated that a tertiary qualification or progress towards a tertiary qualification was required as either an essential or a desirable criterion, and only 5.1% required membership of a relevant professional association. Since this analysis of recordkeeping position advertisements other research has shown similar requirements in the recordkeeping industry.

On the other side of the continent, the 2002 NSW records compliance audit conducted by the NSW Audit Office showed that only 12 agencies were totally compliant, and this is in a state with a relatively long history of strong and active leadership in public records management. Evans' (2003: 8) assessment of the audit report identified a serious professional skills weakness. Evans argues, 'that without a skilled and professionally qualified workforce there is little chance of total compliance with the principles audited or any other standards'. Many records staff members simply do not have the knowledge and skills necessary for the required level of recordkeeping implementation and practice. Agencies need an understanding of the skills required for 'best practice' recordkeeping, a regular skill audit of staff, an analysis of skills development needs, and the necessary resources to enable these needs to be addressed effectively through appropriate staff training and education. State Records New South Wales should be commended for the speed and thoroughness with which they addressed these concerns through their *Building Better Records Management Skills* guideline.

Appropriate Education and Training

What is appropriate education and training for recordkeeping practitioners? Answers to this question really depend on one's perspective. In Australia in the past, the majority of records managers have come up through the ranks or from other information disciplines. Evans (2002) survey of RMAA members in New South Wales indicated that 61% did not have any qualification in records management or archives. The major reason given for this lack of qualification (50.5%) was the belief that the experience they possessed was equal to formal qualifications and entitled them to be considered a *professional* despite the lack of a recognised qualification. In the case of the Curtin undergraduate degree in records management, 59% of students entered the degree with prior experience in records management and were completing the degree to enhance their career prospects, or in the words of one graduate, "to formalise my experience and be taken seriously by management" (Pember, 2003b).

Over the past two decades the recordkeeping practitioner per se has evolved from a relatively unskilled passive receiver of paper-based records (para-professional/filing clerk) to one of highly knowledgeable and skilled pro-active professional in the information/knowledge industry with ever increasing expectations from employers and regulators. From the comments made by employer agencies in the 2004 survey (Pember, 2005) it is clear that those charged with the responsibility for the recordkeeping function in agencies have in the main become far more aware of the importance of recordkeeping. Two major trends are apparent in the employer comments: one business process driven, the other a legislative imperative. The first trend is the move away from the narrow management of paper-based hardcopy records to electronic document management (EDM); the second trend a growing awareness of the need for recordkeeping in government agencies to be compliant with relevant legislation. Employers are aware that specific knowledge and training are required to support best practice recordkeeping and meet legislative requirements and over 90% of agencies responding to the survey support continuing professional development (CPD), although the availability of such training is dependent largely on competition for scarce resources. Employers commented that support was dependent on level of staff position and ranged from specific skill acquisition for lower level staff to payment of professional association membership, study assistance which included partial or full reimbursement of fees for completed units and time release, for more senior staff. Almost half the agencies surveyed (47.7%) noted a positive correlation between continuing professional development (CPD) and the annual staff performance review. To make the most of these opportunities recordkeeping practitioners need to regularly reassess and deliberately plan and manage their own education and training needs. As noted, some development will probably be available through the employer, but some will need to be self-funded. A true professional in any discipline will take responsibility for their own professional development regardless of the level of support made available by employers.

What Do Employers Want?

From the content analysis of recordkeeping job advertisements in *The West Australian* (Pember, 2005), it is clear that employers expect recordkeeping professionals to possess a diverse range of domain-specific recordkeeping knowledge and experience ranging from basic entry-level hands-on processing skills to higher level strategic skills relevant to the level of the position. Often, positions require knowledge and experience in more than one area of information management - for example, recordkeeping and freedom of information (FOI). The preferred recordkeeping professional will also be proficient in transferable workplace competencies and exhibit a high level of personal attributes such as motivation and problem solving skills.

Only about one-third of the advertisements indicated that a tertiary qualification or progress towards a tertiary qualification was required as either an essential or a desirable criterion. The type of qualification required varied from recordkeeping or a related discipline. This is in stark contrast to the United States and Canada. Cunningham's salary survey (1998) showed that 68.2% of records and information managers had at least a four-year degree, and this was considered the minimum educational requirement, with the best jobs requiring a masters degree. Cunningham also noted that, "with the current paradigm shift in the information environment those with the older MLS (Master of Library Science) degree are being passed up for those with the newer MIS (Master of Information Science) degree".

A disappointingly small number (4 out of 79) of the positions advertised in the WA survey required eligibility for professional membership of the RMAA. When one surveys professional library advertisements the picture is quite different as the vast majority of such advertisements do mention eligibility for professional membership of ALIA as an essential criterion.

Current research in Western Australia (Pember, 2005) shows that over 70% of those employed as recordkeeping staff in the State Public Service in Western Australia are employed at State Public Service Levels 1 and 2. Employers noted that low-level staff is easy to recruit as in the view of some, they "do not require any pre-requisite training or expertise". Employers mentioned that there seemed to be "a huge gap between low-level and high-level recordkeeping staff" with a "corresponding gap between the qualified and experienced and the rest". The "higher levels of recordkeeping staff were very difficult to find as quite often those applying for higher level positions had reasonable technical skills but lacked higher-order skills". Another problem identified by agencies was the "limited number applying for positions – simply not enough of them!" There was "considerable difficulty attracting professional experienced staff, few good applicants, and when we interview they do not possess ... skills we are seeking".

Pushing from Within

The initial survey results (newspaper advertisements) are now close to five years old, but are supported by continuing anecdotal evidence from employers and consultants (Murphy, 2003) and formal research such as that of Evans (2003) and Pember (2005). All indicators suggest a lack of qualified professionals in the field of recordkeeping.

Over a third of the respondents in research conducted in 2004 (Pember, 2005) mentioned this lack of experienced and qualified staff as a major recruitment problem. According to employers there is an "under-supply [of experienced and qualified recordkeeping practitioners] in Perth", a "serious lack". One respondent noted that for a Level 4 position there were only three applicants and only two of these were suitable. Another noted that there were ten applications for a position advertised, of "which two were quite outstanding, a third could have done the job and after that there was a big gap".

How best to address this issue is one of concern for the industry as a whole. As well as the traditional TAFE and University approaches to education it may be appropriate to investigate other options. The research of Gonczi (2001) indicates that closer ties between universities, vocational colleges and professional practice may alleviate the perennial problem of the 'theory-practice gap'. Gonczi sees apprenticeship models for undergraduate education at one end of a continuum, and postgraduate work-based learning degrees at the other. Degrees based on this model include an active partnership between professionals in the workplace, the learner/student and the university. Is this a model that should be applied to recordkeeping education in Australia?

If perceptions of professionalism and levels of remuneration are to increase to keep pace with increasing recordkeeping responsibilities, employers will have to be 'educated' to expect their recordkeeping staff to possess higher level training and qualifications. To achieve this outcome pressure will have to be brought from within the industry. And that means by YOU. How can we expect others outside the profession to take us seriously as professionals if we don't take 'professionalism' seriously ourselves?

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