

Good Recordkeeping Staff are Hard to Find Down Under!

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There is a serious lack of qualified recordkeeping professionals in Australia. Despite advertising and readvertising, RM positions are sometimes difficult to fill and remain vacant for long periods. What are the solutions?

Good recordkeeping staff are difficult to recruit and keep in Western Australia. They are in very short supply. In a 2004 survey of recordkeeping in the State Public Sector 52.3% of employers admitted that current records management sections did not possess the necessary skills to implement the requirements of the *State Records Act 2000*. Research by Evans (2002, 2003)¹ indicates that this problem is not limited to Western Australia.

Recordkeeping positions are often vacant for significant periods of time, and sometimes appointments are made that are less than satisfactory. Employers who do not value and nurture staff will find the best will be enticed into better paid, more satisfying positions in other organisations. The career prospect for competent professional recordkeeping staff is vibrant indeed.

Introduction

After a long and difficult campaign with many ups and downs, the Western Australian public sector has a recordkeeping framework of which to be proud. The State Records Office and the professional bodies (the Records Management Association of Australasia and the Australian Society of Archivists) are to be congratulated for their achievements in this regard. In theory, recordkeeping has indeed come out of the dark ages (or the basement), and become an important facet of corporate management, a valued resource or asset that should be leveraged to the fullest extent. The framework established will provide a solid foundation on which to build over the next decade. Continuing progress is evidenced by the new standards being developed by the Western Australian State Records Office/State Records Commission.² The major problem associated with implementation of the framework is a lack of qualified and experienced staff.

The need for ‘best practice’ recordkeeping

The quality of corporate decision-making and hence corporate success is closely allied to the timely availability of authentic, reliable, high quality (‘rich’³), current and relevant information, so the ability to retrieve the right information at the right time, regardless of format or location, should be a basic requirement in the management of records and information in any organisation. Not only does ‘best practice’ records and information management actually make the day-to-day tasks of corporate administration easier and more effective it provides the foundation or cornerstone of corporate accountability through the evidential record. And this of course is closely linked to corporate risk management. Organisations need to ask some basic questions: How well does the organisation manage its records and information? Is the organisation managing *all* its records or perhaps just those in the central administrative files? Is the organisation unintentionally being exposed to unnecessary risks of litigation through ignorance of its recordkeeping responsibilities and obligations? If so, can this be considered negligence and who would be liable? How much impact would a major information loss ‘incident’ have on the organisation? Is ‘best practice’ records management a basic component of the risk management strategy in the organisation? At best, it might focus on computer back-ups! But, as well as protecting against information loss, compliance with the various legislative or regulatory requirements of recordkeeping

needs to be recognised as an integral component of corporate risk management. For example, when information is routinely disposed of as 'part of the normal course of business' in a timely manner, according to an 'authorised' or 'approved' disposal schedule and a documented procedure, the risks inherent in potential litigation are reduced enormously. 'Best practice' recordkeeping should be considered a bastion or first line of defence in the pursuit of good corporate governance practices, accountability and risk management.

On the flip-side of the metaphorical recordkeeping coin we need a focus on ensuring the retention of the historical record into the future. One could say that an approved retention and disposal schedule will meet this need and permanent value records will automatically be retained when the schedule is applied. However, most schedules are very narrow in this regard and usually focus on retention to meet minimum compliance requirements, rather than the historical perspective. Strict adherence to such schedules may result in serious black-holes in the historical record. What is needed is a balance between the business requirements and the historical. Unless those responsible for the current record have a sensitivity and understanding of the broader social context of records beyond the strictly operational and compliance issues, then the historical record will suffer. Many of the rich records available to researchers today would never have survived had rigid schedules been applied to them. Benign neglect has been a boon for the survival of the historical record in the paper world.

The challenge today

Most recordkeeping professionals will be able to identify major changes in the way they work today when compared with a decade ago. If one goes back two decades the degree of change is even greater! Most of us are wallowing in information.⁴ Some sources predict that by the year 2012 information will double millions of times per second! The fastest growing type of information is digital and overall, only 10% of this information is available in structured databases. Over half the information currently being created is stored on individual or stand-alone PC hard-drives, rather than on a corporate server! What a risk to the corporate memory!

In this time of information abundance or glut it is not surprising that many suffer 'analysis paralysis', 'information anxiety', 'Information Fatigue Syndrome'⁵ (or what ever else you like to call it!), a basic inability to cope effectively with the avalanche of information flooding across the corporate desktop, the possible consequences of which may be impaired or flawed decision-making with possible adverse consequences for the organisation. In a research study and subsequent report (*Dying for Information*) of 1300 managers in Australia, the UK, Singapore and Hong Kong, two-thirds acknowledged that they needed 'very high levels' of information to perform their role effectively. Almost half admitted some level of problem associated with information overload, and over one-third felt they wasted substantial time trying to locate the right information, often 1-2 hours per day. 94% did not believe the situation would improve.

Despite the hype about the 'paperless office' over the last 30 years⁶ most of us still handle vast amounts of paper⁷. The convergence of computer and communications technology has actually exacerbated the proliferation of paper! Paper companies predicted to go out of business with the advent of the paperless office actually report a quadrupling of sales.⁸ For most organisations the concept of the 'paperless office' is still as far away as ever, and although much information never appears as hard copy, the reality for most is a combination of media types and still a considerable amount of paper! As a simple example, remember the 'old days' when a single memo was circulated around the office with a cover sheet attached and everyone signed off after reading it? Today the same memo is emailed to all and chances are most people will print-off a copy to keep just in case! This in turn encourages the proliferation of 'feral' filing systems, personal systems that exist outside the official corporate

filing system, the bane of the records manager and a contributing factor to the level of corporate risk.

Good recordkeeping staff might be part of the solution to these challenges. Information creation and technological change will not abate and the social and juridical contexts in which organisations operate will continue to change. Organisations need to continually evolve to meet these challenges. Recordkeeping has become far more complex; it no longer revolves around the task of filing! Indeed, the very concept of 'filing' has changed in many organisations. Recordkeeping professionals today have a far broader mandate than ever before when one considers the operational day-to-day requirements of 'best practice' recordkeeping and the accountability, compliance and risk management aspects of their role. Furthermore, in some organisations, skilled and experienced recordkeeping staff have gone beyond the narrow confines of 'records management' and provide a much broader 'information broker' role. Given the growing complexity of records and information management one needs experienced staff with a broad range of high-level knowledge and skills if organisations are going to meet the challenges of the future.

The role of the recordkeeping professional

Research conducted in the Western Australian state public sector in 2004 indicates that recordkeeping practice has developed from a relatively low-level, largely non-professional, administrative activity into a highly regulated corporate necessity in an environment of rapid technological evolution and constantly changing corporate structures, management styles, and juridical contexts. In an effort to cope with the demands of these changes recordkeeping theory has evolved from the divisive legacy of the life cycle to the inclusive continuum approach. Recordkeeping professionals realise that both archivists and records managers are responsible for *the record*, and management must be co-ordinated across time and space to maximise operational efficiency and corporate decision-making, minimise corporate risk, and ensure the survival of long-term value records for posterity. Corporate 'misconduct' and a lack of rigour in recordkeeping can cost an organisation dearly. I have a colleague in an organisation here in Perth with a line item of \$400,000 for risks associated with information. I simply cannot convince her that spending \$50,000 or \$60,000 per annum on a professional records manager will save her big dollars over time! Another colleague in Canberra saved her agency over a million dollars in damages by her persistence in locating a critical record when required. And of course we have all seen numerous cases of serious governance deficiencies, such as the HIH fiasco, the Heiner Affair, One.Tel, and Enron and Anderson, reported in the media. In such cases records or the lack of records play a major role in determining blame. ASIC (Australian Securities & Investments Commission) investigates cases of alleged misconduct and fraud and between 2000 and 2003 were responsible for jailing 69 white-collar criminals⁹.

Better-educated, more highly skilled practitioners are required to meet the demands of recordkeeping practice at the higher levels. At the same time, the need remains for low level processing staff. Little has actually changed for the majority of base-level recordkeeping practitioners. The study indicated that over 70% of recordkeeping practitioners in the state public sector in Western Australia still operate at this day-to-day processing level. All stakeholders surveyed saw a clear division between two levels of recordkeeping practice, and it is only at the higher level that there is any recognition of recordkeeping as a professional activity and a concept of recordkeeping as a career rather than simply a job.

Implementation of the new recordkeeping framework in state government agencies has highlighted to employers and regulators, the importance of skilled and knowledgeable recordkeeping practitioners, especially at the higher staffing levels. Over half the employer

agencies responding to the survey noted that recordkeeping staff did not collectively possess the required skills to implement the requirements of the *State Records Act 2000*. Over one-quarter of respondent agencies (29.5%) felt that the most appropriate solution to the problem was to up-skill staff to required levels through additional training, and noted that they would be allocating more resources to the development and implementation of various training programs. Others employed new staff or consultants to guide them through the requirements of the new legislative framework. This however, was a problem for many because of limited resources.

The job market for recordkeeping professionals

A survey of recordkeeping job advertisements in *The Western Australian* newspaper shows an increase of 600% over a decade. Not only has the number of jobs advertised increased enormously, so too has the complexity of employer expectations, which are far more clearly defined than in the past. Salaries have also increased accordingly at the higher levels. Ten years ago it was relatively rare for recordkeeping positions to be advertised above \$35,000. Today the majority of positions advertised are above the \$50,000 level.

Analysis of the job advertisements indicates that employers require competencies in two distinct areas: professional recordkeeping and the 'common business skills', which are those skills identified by the Business Services ITAB as required in virtually all bureaucratic type jobs. These include a high degree of computer literacy, well developed interpersonal and communication skills, a customer services ethos, well developed teaming skills, self and time management skills, and analytical and problem solving abilities.

Recordkeeping positions advertised ranged from low level jobs involving records transaction processing, such as mail management, to higher level positions at the strategy, policy development, project management and consultant level. Salaries offered ranged from below \$20,000 to over \$60,000. Overall 87% of jobs advertised were in the public sector.

It is interesting to note that not all positions are advertised in the newspaper. In a 2001 survey of Curtin University graduates, it was found that 46.9% gained the first recordkeeping position after graduation through networking contacts and only 26.5% from advertisement.¹⁰ However, newspaper advertisements are still a significant source of employment. A 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics report indicated that 85% of unemployed job seekers and 39% of employed job seekers still relied on newspaper advertisements.¹¹

The problem of staffing recordkeeping programs with high quality staff

Despite advertising (and often re-advertising), recordkeeping positions are sometimes difficult to fill and often remain vacant for long periods of time. Consultants such as Information Enterprises¹² note that some projects have delayed start dates due to problems recruiting suitable staff. Curtin staff receive many phone calls and emails about the availability of graduates and students for recordkeeping positions. A significant amount of 'headhunting' goes on too. So, the market for experienced recordkeeping professionals is very vibrant in Western Australia.

Research such as that of Evans¹³ and Murphy¹⁴ also indicates a serious lack of qualified practitioners in Australia. Research in the United Kingdom indicates that this dearth of suitable staff is not a uniquely Australian problem. Jago¹⁵ noted that despite job losses due to company streamlining, the so called 'leaner meaner' approach, good staff were extremely difficult to find. She also noted that most job seekers in the field were already in work and wanted to change for positive reasons. To be tempting, the job offered had to satisfy some identified professional need, such as offering broader experience or additional skills. Job

satisfaction and personal development were more important than higher salaries as prime motivators. This type of applicant was generally 'prepared to wait until the right job came along'. Those applicants seeking job changes for negative reasons were more likely to accept positions offered as an escape mechanism from their current employment.

Recruiting and retaining quality recordkeeping staff

So how can employers get the proactive, experienced and skilled staff they need? If you don't have these quality practitioners already in place you basically have two options: you can develop or grow them in-house or buy them in. Either way there will be costs involved and these will have to be offset against the value they will add to the organisation. The value and costs have to be quantified and built into a business case like any other proposed change or project in the organisation.

Reality check for employers

- Competent, experienced and qualified recordkeeping professionals add value to the organisation by improving operational efficiency, decision-making, and accountability, and minimise the corporate risk associated with recordkeeping, through the development and implementation of best practice and compliant recordkeeping programs.
- Competent, experienced and qualified staff will only be available to those employers offering realistic levels of remuneration and good working conditions. The number of high level positions on offer exceeds the availability of competent, experienced and qualified staff.
- Job descriptions should reflect properly the scope of positions and remuneration levels should be commensurate with the responsibilities. You get what you pay for.
- Employers need to decide on the level where resources currently expended on short-term consultancy and contracting staff would be better spent on recruiting long-term qualified recordkeeping employees.
- Staff will not remain with an organisation if the career path in the organisation is limited or non-existent. Such staff have career goals and move to other organisations in order to progress their careers. Staff turnover is expensive and disruptive.
- Additional incentives such as salary sacrifice options, regular continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities and flexi-time will influence staff making employment choices.

Reality check for practitioners

- Higher level positions require high level skills and relevant experience.
- Practitioners with a professional career goal continually improve skills and seek wider experience.
- Recognised qualifications are more in demand by employers than in the past. At the higher levels experience is no longer considered enough.
- Qualifications are not enough on their own and do not guarantee a good job at the higher levels! Qualifications should be supported by relevant experience in the field. There is nothing like the 'hands-on' for putting theory into practice. Experience at the coalface also adds credibility!

Conclusion

Recordkeeping practitioners in the state public sector operate at two distinct levels. Those qualified and experienced recordkeeping practitioners at the higher levels are experiencing an unprecedented demand for their services. If employers hope to recruit and retain good recordkeeping staff at these levels they will need to be competitive.

¹ Evans, J. (2002). Serious lack of skilled and qualified records professionals in NSW. *Informaa Quarterly*, 18(4): 16-20; Evans, J. (2003). Records profession skills weakness exposed by NSW records compliance audit. *Informaa Quarterly*, 19(1): 8-11.

² SRC Standards 7 (Storage), and 8 (Electronic Recordkeeping).

³ Daft and Lengel define information 'richness' as the 'potential information carrying capacity of data'. Daft and Lengel identify a continuum of information richness: when data provides little understanding for the decision process it would be considered low in richness and conversely if it is high in good quality information for the particular decision in question it is information rich. Daft, R.L. & Lengel, R.H. (1984). Organizational information requirements, media richness and structured design. *Management Science*, 32(5): 554-571.

⁴ There is much on the web about these issues, much comes from vendors, but a good academic source is the Berkeley School of Information Management and Systems research site entitled *How much information?*

<http://www2.sims.berkeley.edu/research/projects/how-much-info-2003/>

⁵ Symptoms include reduced analytical ability, increased anxiety, self-doubt, and a tendency to blame others. See Reuters Business Information survey and report, David Lewis (Ed.), *Dying for information: An investigation into the effects of information overload in the UK and worldwide*. (1996). Widely reported in the media, brief report available <http://www.heaventree.com/light/overload/index3.html> Reuters themselves produce 27,000 pages of information per second!

⁶ The earliest article I have located about the paperless office is from 1975: V.E. Giuliano, & G.E. Pake, quoted in Executive Briefing: The office of the future. *Business Week*, 2387, 30 June 1975: p. 48-70. I would appreciate information on any earlier articles.

⁷ Infoeconomy. (2003). *Paperless office postponed*. Information Age Report.

⁸ International Paper, one of the world's largest paper manufacturers and distributors reported more than \$20 billion sales in 1997, a quadrupling of sales from mid-1980s to mid-1990s.

⁹ Knott, D. (2002). *Corporate governance: Principles, promotion and practice*. Inaugural Lecture: Monash Governance Research Unit. Monash: Monash University.

¹⁰ Pember, M. (2001). Do you really need a degree? Preliminary report into a decade of recordkeeping education at Curtin University. *Proceedings: Convergence, Joint ASA & RMAA Annual Conference, Hobart, September 2001*. pp. 229-241.

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6202.0> Retrieved 24 June 2006.

¹² Murphy, G. (2006). *The employment market*. Presentation to Curtin University students. June, 2006.

¹³ Evans, J. (2002). Serious lack of skilled and qualified records professionals in NSW. *Informaa Quarterly*, 18(4): 16-20; Evans, J. (2003). Records profession skills weakness exposed by NSW records compliance audit. *Informaa Quarterly*, 19(1): 8-11.

¹⁴ Murphy, G. (2003). *Where have all the records practitioners gone: A view from the west coast*. ARES Forum, Melbourne, June 2003. Retrieved 14 April 2004.

<http://www.archivists.org.au/events/ARES2003/index.html>

¹⁵ Jago, A. (1993). Join the team! Recruiting for information professionals. *Library Management*, 14(1): 31-34.