

What Employers Really Want When Recruiting Recordkeeping Practitioners: Expectations in the Western Australian State Sector

Margaret Pember

Margaret Pember is currently employed as an archives and records management lecturer at Curtin University of Technology in Perth. She is presently completing a doctorate at The University of Western Australia. Margaret comes to the field of Records and Information Management after twelve years experience as a secondary school teacher. An interest in archives motivated a return to university in the 1980s. Since then Margaret has worked in the records, archives and library environment in Australia, the UK, Singapore and Fiji. Research interests include information disaster planning and risk management, information as a corporate resource or asset, and professional development and continuing education for records and information professionals. Margaret is currently investigating the professionalism of the recordkeeping industry for her PhD. Her recent publications report on the research to date and include papers on content analysis of recordkeeping advertisements and the use of standards in recordkeeping.

This paper reports on the major findings from a survey of an employer group in Western Australia, just one phase of continuing research into the degree of professionalism of the recordkeeping industry. A number of different stakeholder groups with an interest in recordkeeping have been identified and the overall project includes a series of surveys of these different stakeholder groups, as well as a graduate survey and a content analysis of recordkeeping advertisements. This particular research exercise was conducted in the Western Australian State Public sector. Two broad trends are apparent in the responses made by the employers: one business process driven, the other a legislative imperative. The first trend identified is the move away from a narrow focus on the 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 indicated the need for a range of skilled and experienced practitioners to staff their recordkeeping programs.

The research also indicates that those employers in the Western Australian State Public Sector responding to the survey identify two distinct groups of recordkeeping practitioners: professionals and day-to-day operational or processing staff. Those regarded as 'professionals' make up less than 30% of those employed in recordkeeping positions. These professional practitioners are in great demand and employers have significant problems filling higher level positions, thus providing a dynamic career path for skilled, experienced and educated recordkeeping professionals.¹

Introduction

Part of the research being conducted includes an investigation into the core knowledge and skills required by recordkeeping practitioners in the workplace today and how these may best be acquired and updated, as well as perceptions about professionalism in the recordkeeping industry per se. A survey of recordkeeping graduates² and a content analysis of recordkeeping advertisements³ have already been completed. Data is being collected and collated from a range of stakeholder perspectives: those of employers, employees, professional bodies, regulators, educators and trainers, and recruitment consultants. This paper reports on the responses from employers of recordkeeping practitioners in the Western Australian State Public Service.

The term recordkeeping practitioner is used broadly and refers to any person who for the major component of their job description is involved in any aspect of recordkeeping from mail clerk to records indexer to archivist to knowledge manager. Although respondents may also be a recordkeeping regulator or a member of a relevant professional body such as the Records Management Association of Australasia (RMAA) or the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) they were asked to respond to the survey from the perspective of an employer, that is, from the perspective of one who has responsibility for the recordkeeping program and for the hiring and management of recordkeeping staff.

Research approach

The public service is the largest employment sector in Australia. It also provides the largest job market for recordkeeping employees. A content analysis of recordkeeping advertisements identified that 85.9% of recordkeeping positions in Western Australia in 2000 were in the public sector.⁴ As over half of these were in the state public sector, the Western Australian state public sector was chosen as the population for this research. The sampling frame consisted of stakeholders relevant to the Western Australia state public service recordkeeping environment, i.e. the recordkeeping employees (practitioners), employers, regulators, recruitment consultants, educators and trainers, and the relevant professional associations.

After an extensive investigation into the literature of professions and professionalism, the theory of recordkeeping, and the educational requirements of recordkeepers, individual questionnaires were developed for each stakeholder group. Questionnaire content varied slightly according to the stakeholder group surveyed but basically surveys were structured to provide information in three major areas: the demographics of the actual stakeholder group being surveyed, the stakeholder groups perceptions of the relevant knowledge and skills required by recordkeeping practitioners including the education and qualifications necessary for recordkeeping practitioners in the workplace today, and perceptions of the degree of professionalism of recordkeepers and the recordkeeping industry.

After piloting, and subsequent amendment from the feedback supplied, the questionnaires were distributed to all identified stakeholder groups. The questionnaires were designed to elicit information from recordkeeping employees themselves, their employers and other groups having a direct impact on the recordkeeping environment. As well as asking specific questions the questionnaire afforded the respondents many opportunities to express their opinions through the use of open-ended questions. This paper gives a brief overview of the findings from the survey of the employer group.

The questionnaires⁵ were distributed to all Chief Executive Officers in Western Australian State Public Sector agencies with in-principle support of the State Records Office of Western Australia (SROWA).⁶ The State Record Office identified 164 individual agencies with obligations for recordkeeping in the state public sector, that is, those coming under the *State Records Act 2000*⁷ and having a legislative obligation to submit recordkeeping plans to the State Record Office. Of these 164 agencies 44 agencies (26.83%)⁸ returned completed questionnaires. Questionnaires were completed anonymously and returned through the State Record Office via MailWest to preserve privacy and anonymity. There was no follow-up reminder to employer agencies about responding to the questionnaire. In hindsight it is acknowledged that a follow-up reminder about the questionnaire may have improved the response rate and with subsequent surveys to other stakeholder groups this was done.

Survey results

As noted the survey was completely anonymous. Respondents were not required to indicate name or agency. Employers responding to the survey ranged from Chief Executive Officers in

the Senior Executive Service (20.5%) down to the Manager of Corporate Services (15.9%). Three-quarters of those responding had been responsible for the recordkeeping function for more than three years. No gender difference was found in the managers completing the survey, the split being 50% male and 50% female.

From the employer responses to the survey it is clear that the nature of recordkeeping program activities in Western Australian state public sector agencies focus largely on providing a recordkeeping service to support current business operations. All agencies indicated that they had an identifiable recordkeeping program although this was not necessarily staffed with dedicated recordkeeping practitioners. Broad functional categories indicated that 93.2% of agencies recognised records management as an agency function and staffed the program with dedicated personnel. Over three quarters of agencies (77.3%) had a distinct retention and disposal/archiving function and in due course the records of permanent value were consigned to the State Records Office (SROWA) rather than being managed in an in-house archives facility. Over two-thirds of agencies (70.5%) had a document management function in place although four agencies indicated that this was an information systems function, rather than a recordkeeping function or responsibility. See Table 1 for details of broad recordkeeping program activities.

Table 1. Broad categories of recordkeeping program activities across Western Australian State Public Sector agencies.

Recordkeeping program activities	Practising agencies	
Records management	41	93.2%
Archiving (retention and disposal activities)	34	77.3%
Document management	31	70.5%
Information management	29	65.9%
Freedom of Information	18	40.9%
Librarianship	12	27.3%
Knowledge management	9	20.5%
Other	2	4.5%
Total	44	

Agencies were asked to indicate the number and respective levels of their recordkeeping staff. It was noted that 4.5% of agencies had no dedicated staff for the recordkeeping function and it was simply part of the normal activity of all staff members. Overall responses indicated that 70.5% of all staff employed in the recordkeeping function operate at the level 1 or level 2 Public Service grade in the agencies responding to the survey. Of the remaining recordkeeping staff 22.1% were at levels 3 to level 5, and 7.4% at level 6 or above. See Table 2 for full details. Salary indications are based on scales commencing February 2004 (the survey was conducted in June 2004).

From the comments made by employers it appears that recordkeeping is not considered a highly skilled area by employers but rather ‘a mechanical routine hands-on activity to be carried out by lower level staff’.

Table 2. Numbers of recordkeeping staff at the various levels in the Western Australian State Public Sector (salary scales as at February 2004).

Public Service Level and indicative salary	No. of agencies with staff at particular level	Percent of agencies with staff at particular level	Aggregate number of staff across agencies at particular level	Percent across all agencies at particular level
No dedicated staff	2	4.5%	0	0%
1 <\$37,318	28	63.6%	154.6	49.1%
2 \$37,318 – \$39,285	27	61.4%	67.3	21.4%
3 \$41,464 – \$44,189	21	47.7%	36.9	11.7%
4 48,413 – \$51,166	14	31.8%	24	7.7%
5 \$53,856 – \$59,521	9	20.5%	8.5	2.7%
6 \$62,672 – \$69,400	6	13.6%	6.2	2%
7 \$73,030 – \$78,274	6	15.9%	10.1	3.2%
More than 7 >\$ 82,715	2	4.5%	7	2.2%
Total	44	100%	314.6	100%

The State Records Authority of New South Wales 2004 records management survey⁹ asked a similar question about skill levels of recordkeeping staff: ‘Do you have skilled records management staff to undertake records management in your organisation?’¹⁰ It is not possible to draw valid comparisons as the question did not indicate levels of employment, but rather a perception of the term ‘skilled’. However, it is interesting to note that in the 2004 NSW survey:

73% of public offices reported that they have skilled records management staff, 18% of public offices do not have skilled records management staff, but have access to records management skills externally, and 9% of public offices have neither.

Those that have neither include Government agencies (11% of those surveyed), local councils (9% of those surveyed), and State owned corporations (7% of those surveyed). The university sector has good access to skilled staff both internally and externally. The lack of skilled staff is most apparent in regional centres and rural locations.¹¹

Skills required by recordkeeping practitioners¹²

A list of essential criteria for recordkeepers extracted largely from the literature (eg Mayer competencies,¹³ Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST¹⁴ requirements), job advertisements in *The West Australian*, duty statements from Western Australian Public Service position descriptions, and the recordkeeping competency standards¹⁵ includes:

- Skills, knowledge and experience in all aspects of recordkeeping as required to implement the recordkeeping standards *AS4390* and *ISO 15489*¹⁶ in a variety of organisational and industry environments.
- High competence levels as outlined in the *Recordkeeping competency standards*.
- Good understanding of and technical competence with information management software and systems and general Microsoft Office products and the Internet.
- General management and staff/interpersonal management skills.
- Ability to perform well as a member of a team, and team and project management skills and experience.
- Strong written and oral communication skills.
- Well-developed analytical and problem solving skills.
- Creativity and flexibility.
- Professional image and manner.
- Pleasant outgoing personality and confident manner.
- Commitment to customer service.

Three classes of knowledge and skills were identified from these essential criteria (domain-specific knowledge and skills, i.e. recordkeeping, transferable workplace competencies, and personal attributes) and a series of questions was developed to elicit specific information about each from employers.

Domain-specific core knowledge and skills for recordkeeping practitioners

Domain-specific core knowledge and skills are specific to the particular industry in which an officer works, in this case recordkeeping. The domain-specific recordkeeping knowledge and skills identified were listed in alphabetical order rather than any specific priority, and ranged from archiving to email management. One agency identified an additional requirement, this being the ability to provide advice on recordkeeping to general staff through the mechanism of a helpdesk facility. Skills were rated on a scale from totally unimportant (0) to absolutely essential (10). Employers rated all domain-specific core knowledge and skills identified on average at 5 or more (out of 10), indicating that they are rated somewhere between necessary and absolutely essential for recordkeeping staff. Some employers responding to the survey did not individually rate all these criteria at 5 or above, for example, one employer rated the importance of recordkeeping compliance at 3. For full details of employer agency rating of domain-specific core knowledge and skills see Table 3 below.

Table 3. Domain-specific core knowledge and skills required by recordkeeping practitioners in the Western Australian State Government Sector (as assessed by employer agencies).

Domain-specific core knowledge and skills	No. of agencies responding	Range 0–10	Average across agencies
Indexing and classification	43	4–10	8.16
Retention and disposal	43	3–10	8.04
Recordkeeping standards	43	4–10	8.02
Vital records management	43	3–10	7.98
Records system administration	43	5–10	7.86
Compliance issues	43	3–10	7.77
File and folio management (hardcopy)	43	4–10	7.77
Procedures development	43	3–10	7.62
Controlled vocabulary	43	2–10	7.26
Databases	43	0–10	6.98
Email management	43	3–10	6.98
Information disaster planning	43	3–10	6.98
Broad information management	43	3–10	6.95
Competency standards	43	0–10	6.95
Document management/workflow	43	2–10	6.90
Archiving	43	3–10	6.51
Planning and policy development	43	1–10	6.5
Freedom of Information	43	0–10	6.21
Forms management	43	1–10	5.91
Network administration	43	0–10	5.42
Webpage management	43	0–10	5.33
Other: (help-desk advice)	1	9	9
Total	43*	0–10	10

*One employer noted that he/she was unaware of the core skills for recordkeepers and so did not complete this particular question.

The domain-specific core knowledge and skills rating the highest (apart from the single instance of ‘helpdesk advice’), were classification and indexing at 8.16, and retention and

disposal at 8.04. The lowest rating were network administration at 5.42, and webpage management 5.33. These figures indicate that traditional recordkeeping skills still rate very highly with employers, while those relating more to information systems rate lower.

Respondents were also asked if agency recordkeeping staff as a team possessed collectively all the relevant recordkeeping skills to ensure that the agency operated effectively and met recordkeeping compliance issues, and if not, how they planned to address the issue. Over half the agencies (52.3%) admitted that current staff did not possess the required level of skills. Almost one-third of agencies (29.55%) felt that the most appropriate solution to the problem was to up-skill current staff to required levels through additional training, and commented that more resources would be allocated to develop and introduce training programs.

Transferable workplace competencies for recordkeeping practitioners

Transferable workplace competencies or skills are those general, non-domain-specific competencies required by any proficient officer in the workplace, regardless of the area in which the officer is engaged. As indicated by the name, workplace competencies or skills are applicable in any workplace situation and are transferable across employment situations.

The transferable workplace competencies identified as important for recordkeeping practitioners were listed in the questionnaire and ranged from competencies relating to computer literacy and communication to proposal and report writing. Again, competencies were rated on a scale from totally unimportant (0) to absolutely essential (10). For full details of employer agency rating of transferable workplace competencies see Table 4 below.

Table 4. Transferable workplace competencies required by recordkeeping practitioners in the Western Australian State Government Sector (as assessed by employers).

Transferable workplace competencies	No. of agencies responding	Range 0–10	Average across agencies
Well-developed teaming skills	43	5–10	7.93
Well-developed customer focus	43	2–10	7.93
Well-developed communication skills	43	4–10	7.88
High level of computer literacy	43	4–10	7.63
Change management skills	43	2–10	7.16
Continuous improvement skills	43	2–10	7.10
Staff supervision skills	43	1–10	7.04
Training skills	43	2–10	7.00
Management skills	43	1–10	6.70
Proposal and report writing skills	43	2–10	6.67
Policy and planning skills	43	1–10	6.49
Business process analysis skills	43	2–10	6.44

Project management skills	43	2–10	6.28
Budgeting/financial skills	43	1–10	5.53
Other (Please specify)	0	N/A	N/A
Total	43*	0–10	10

*One employer noted that he/she was unaware of any transferable workplace skills required and so did not complete this particular question.

Well-developed teaming skills and customer focus rated the highest (both 7.93), closely followed by well-developed communication skills (7.88) and a high level of computer literacy (7.63). The possession of budgeting and financial skills rated lowest at 5.53. As noted by one respondent, the level and type of required transferable workplace competencies varies with the level and type of position, and the higher the staff member rose in the Public Service the more important these competencies became.

Personal attributes for recordkeeping practitioners

Personal attributes are those more specific to the personality of the individual. They are generally inherent rather than learned but can be developed to some extent by appropriate training and application.

The personal attributes identified as important for recordkeeping practitioners were listed in the questionnaire and ranged from personal motivation and enthusiasm, to professional image and attitude. Again all responding agencies rated the attributes on a scale from totally unimportant (0) to absolutely essential (10). Only one agency added an additional personal attribute and this was the ‘ability to progress different tasks simultaneously’. The agency rated this attribute quite highly at 8. All the listed personal attributes were rated between 5.91 and 8.6 (out of 10). Personal integrity rated highest at 8.6, followed by the ability to work unsupervised at 8.28. A well-presented appearance came well down the employer rating scale at 5.91. For full details of employer agency rating of personal attributes see Table 5 below.

Table 5. Personal attributes required by recordkeeping practitioners in the Western Australian State Government Sector (as assessed by employers).

Personal attributes	No. of agencies responding	Range 0–10	Average across agencies
Integrity	44	5–10	8.60
Ability to work unsupervised	44	5–10	8.28
High level of motivation/enthusiasm	44	5–10	7.91
Organisational skills	44	5–10	7.90
Analytical and problem solving skills	44	6–10	7.89
Ability to learn quickly	44	5–10	7.40
Professional image and attitude	44	2–10	7.32

Decision-making skills	44	2–10	7.25
Confident manner	44	1–10	7.16
Leadership skills	44	2–10	6.43
Well presented appearance	44	0–10	5.91
Other (ability to progress different tasks simultaneously)	1	8	8
Total	44	0–10	10

Only four employers made any additional comment about personal attributes of recordkeeping staff. Two noted that ‘personal attributes were important to all staff not just recordkeeping staff’ and another that the degree required ‘depends on position and level’. Another noted that these personal attributes were ‘a must if RM [records management] in any organisation needs promoting’.

Education, qualifications and professionalism

Employers were asked a series of questions about their perceptions of the importance of education, qualifications, and relevant experience for recordkeeping staff. They were also asked about their perceptions of professionalism in the recordkeeping industry and in recordkeeping staff. Responses are tabulated in Table 6.

Table 6. Employer perceptions of the overall importance of formal qualifications, relevant experience and recordkeeping staff as professionals.

Employer perceptions	Yes	
Requirement for relevant experience	39	88.6%
Requirement for formal educational qualification	35	79.6%
Perception of recordkeeping staff as professionals	29	65.9%
Total	44	

In general, employers rated formal qualifications for recordkeeping staff quite highly given that the survey found that 70.5% of recordkeeping staff in the Western Australian Public Sector were in level 1 and 2 positions. Overall 79.6% of employers felt that formal qualifications were necessary for recordkeeping staff. Comments ranged from qualifications being ‘highly desirable/essential for senior staff’, and ‘all senior positions should be filled by qualified staff’, to ‘hire for attitude, train for skills’, as ‘formal education does not necessarily make a good employee’. As one respondent noted, much ‘depends on the type of work they will be involved in and how much supervision is required’. Recordkeeping staff ‘need to be aware of the basics before applying the theory’ and that formal qualifications are ‘not required for day-to-day operational business’ activities in recordkeeping, ‘at level 1 and level 2 experience [is] more important’.

From the open-ended comments there appears to be a realisation that higher-order skill sets and knowledge and formal qualifications are ‘becoming more of a requirement as expectations and skills increase’. One respondent noted that qualifications were necessary for a better salary and

position. Much is dependent on the level of the position. In higher level positions which involve ‘higher level skills such as decision-making, legislative compliance and systems management formal qualifications are more important’.

Of the employer agencies responding to the survey 88.6% rated relevant experience for recordkeeping staff between 5–10, that is, from necessary to absolutely essential. From the comments made, it appears that like formal qualifications, the need for relevant experience ‘depends on the type of work’, and the ‘role and level’, but a ‘general records background is desirable’.

When asked if they considered recordkeeping staff to be professionals; 65.9% of employers responding to the survey agreed that they did. A quarter of the respondents did not respond to the question or indicated that they had no dedicated recordkeeping staff. Most of those responding made qualifying comments, such as, it depended largely on the ‘level and type’ of the position. Comments ranged from ‘absolutely’ and ‘all my staff are seen as professionals regardless of qualifications’ to ‘those having the necessary attributes’ or who ‘operate at the senior levels’ will be considered professional. Six respondents commented that recordkeeping staff are ‘specialists in their own right’, had a ‘dedicated body of knowledge’ and ‘have expertise in a specific and complex discipline, and their contribution is essential to good administrative practice’. One commented that ‘those staff with high levels of knowledge and competency are considered professionals in the organisation’ as being considered a professional ‘requires both professional qualifications and good experience’. One thought that the ‘ability to apply professional theory in practice is probably the key determinant’ of perceptions of professionalism. It is interesting to compare this general overall support for senior recordkeeping staff as professionals with the limited number of recordkeeping staff at the higher levels (refer Table 1).

Four responses (9.1%) indicated that employers did not consider recordkeeping a profession or their staff professionals. Comments from these particular employers revolved around recordkeeping being an ‘occupation or industry not a profession’. One employer commented that records staff were simply there to ‘ensure the records management plan is adhered to and assist management in fulfilling its role’. The ‘processing tasks of recordkeeping are seen as very low level – not valued by the organisation and often carried out by people ‘off the street’’. See Table 7 for full details of employer perceptions of professionalism of recordkeeping staff.

Table 7. Employer perceptions of recordkeeping staff as professionals.

Employer perception	Frequency	
Yes	29	65.9%
No	4	9.1%
No dedicated recordkeeping staff	6	13.6%
No response	5	11.4%
Total	44	

Four respondents also commented on the problem of the ‘poor image’ of recordkeeping and that ‘old perceptions of poor service, poor performers working in [the] registry is hard to overcome’. Three noted the problem of ‘dumping’. For example, ‘in the past [records has been]

seen as a ‘dumping’ ground for non performers ... not yet seen as professionals ... the image of recordkeeping staff tends to be dragged down by the large number of entry-level staff’.

Employers were asked to rate the overall importance of recordkeeping knowledge and skills, experience, qualifications, transferable workplace competencies, personal attributes, and importance of professionalism for recordkeeping practitioners (0 totally unimportant to 10 absolutely essential). Recordkeeping experience rated highest at 8.09, followed by domain-specific knowledge and skills at 7.79, and a high degree of professionalism at 7.66. Personal attributes rated next followed by transferable workplace competencies. The need for formal qualifications rated lowest. For a tabulation of responses see Table 8.

Table 8. Comparative importance of staff attributes as assessed by employers in the Western Australian State Government Sector.

Overall importance	No. of agencies responding	Percent of agencies	Range 0–10 (unimportant to absolutely essential)	Mean
Recordkeeping experience	44	100	5–10	8.09
Recordkeeping knowledge, skills	43	97.7	3–10	7.79
High degree of professionalism	44	100	3–10	7.66
Personal attributes	44	100	2–10	7.36
Transferable workplace competencies	43	97.7	5–10	7.30
Formal qualifications	44	100	0–10	5.80
Total	44			

Continuing professional development (CPD)

Agencies were also asked if and how they supported continuing professional development (CPD) of recordkeeping staff. Three agencies (6.8%) noted that the particular question was not applicable to them as they had no dedicated recordkeeping staff. Only one agency (2.3%) did not respond to the question despite the fact that the particular agency had a number of recordkeeping staff (see Table 9 for full details).

Table 9. Active employer support for continuing professional development (CPD).

Active CPD support	No. of Agencies	
Yes	40	90.9%
N/A no dedicated recordkeeping staff	3	6.8%
No response	1	2.3%
Total	44	

The majority of employers (90.9%) support continuing professional development (CPD) for recordkeeping staff. This high response rate is not surprising as the Western Australian Department of Premier and Cabinet encourages public sector agencies to become actively involved with the training and development of staff. Many publications and programs are available to staff and management interested in up-skilling public sector employees. These range from guidelines such as the *Training and Development Good Practice Guide: A Guide for Western Australian Public Sector Organisations* and *Constant Learning: the Way to Go – a Strategic Training Scenario for the WA Public Sector, 1998–2005*,¹⁷ to actual programs. One example of an initiative available to staff is the *Workforce Development 2004/5* program.¹⁸ Such programs are open to employees from all Western Australian government departments, statutory authorities and government enterprises.

Those employers indicating CPD support for recordkeeping staff listed on-the-job training, funding staff attendance at short skills training courses, seminars, workshops and conferences, the provision of professional literature, and time release for formal study, as the major mechanisms employed for CPD. Thirty-nine of the agencies responding (86.6%) indicated that the major support provided to staff was on-the-job training or funding of attendance at short skills workshops. Two employers commented that support was dependent on level of staff position and ranged from specific skill acquisition or enhancement courses to payment of professional association membership (those mentioned specifically were the Institute of Information Management, and the Records Management Association of Australasia). Two agencies (4.5%) mentioned that study assistance or academic support packages which included partial or full reimbursement of fees and time release, were available for staff who wished to enrol in formal recordkeeping courses. An additional two (4.5%) noted that they [the agencies] were also very supportive of higher education with 'time off, fees paid, etc.' One commented that 'how far they wanted to pursue it was up to individual staff as not everyone wants to pursue a masters or a degree in RM'. One employer noted that 'senior staff were also encouraged to broaden skills by exposing [them] to other relevant training such as broader information management seminars' as appropriate and another agency mentioned the importance of making available training for general 'management skills'.

Three agencies (6.8%) noted the existence of a 'skills development plan/program' in the agency and this was utilised for the professional development of recordkeeping staff. Only five agencies noted a specific budget allocation for continuing professional development but given the level of support for CPD it is likely that most have a specific training budget, and staff development occurs when 'training courses [are] offered or when funds allow'. One respondent noted that ongoing training was 'accomplished with great difficulty – continuing staff turnover' was a recurring problem.

Almost half of the agencies responding to the survey (47.7%) noted a positive correlation between continuing professional development (CPD) and the annual staff performance review of recordkeeping staff. These agencies noted that it was an important component of the 'career development' process for recordkeeping staff. Of those agencies making the link, eleven respondents (53.4%), noted that 'goals and training are discussed and agreed on at [the] annual staff review'. Another noted that the 'review process looks at the organisational needs, and staff skills and matches these with desired career paths as appropriate'. Three agencies noted that although the processes were linked there were 'limited opportunities' or the process was not properly utilised, and another that opportunities offered were 'not always taken up by staff'. Five agencies noted that although the intent was there the impact on the budget was such that the training did not always occur, even when provision for training was included in the budget process.

Additional recordkeeping issues identified as important by employers

Employers were asked to comment freely on any additional issues that they thought relevant to recordkeeping and the employment of recordkeeping staff in the public sector. Although no specific question was asked about the types or intensity of change in the recordkeeping industry it is clear from an analysis of the open-ended comments made by the employer agencies that many of those charged with the responsibility for the recordkeeping function in Western Australian State Government agencies have become aware of change in the recordkeeping environment. Two broad trends are apparent in these comments: one business process driven, the other a legislative imperative. The first trend identified is the move away from a narrow focus on the 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. Specific examples of these trends are shown in Table 10.

Table 10. Additional recordkeeping issues identified as important by respondent employers in Western Australian State Public Sector agencies.

Additional recordkeeping issues identified as important	No. of agencies	
Move to EDM/paperless environment	31	70.5%
Requirement for increasingly close connection between recordkeeping and information technology staff/systems	25	56.8%
Importance of training across agencies, especially in regard to EDM and compliance issues	12	27.3%
Need to be compliant with legislation	12	27.3%
Understanding that better business practice (decision-making, governance, transparency, etc) requires better recordkeeping	7	15.9%
Improved status of recordkeeping in agencies, higher level positions	6	13.6%
Need for inclusion of recordkeeping in top level agency strategic planning	5	11.4%
Need to employ new staff with relevant skills or a consultant	3	6.8%
Total	44	

Some agencies (15.9%) listed better business practice and the associated benefits as a reason to improve the standard of recordkeeping in the agency. One respondent noted how much the recordkeeping role had changed in the agency with an increasing emphasis on electronic data capture and management evident. Figures from the survey indicate that 70.5% of State Government agencies are already practising EDM to some degree, although not necessarily based on best practice recordkeeping standards or the relevant compliance issues. This trend has led to a realisation in some agencies that the individual components of information management such as traditional records management, electronic document management, knowledge management, information technology, etc should not operate in isolation from one another but form part of an inclusive and integrated holistic approach to the management of

information across the agency, whether it be a source, system or service. Exponents of this approach such as Burk and Horton (1986, 1988),¹⁹ have been espousing this message since the 1980s. A significant number of agencies (56.8%) mentioned the requirement for an increasingly close connection and cooperation between the information technology and recordkeeping functions and staff, and in some agencies this was already in place as the two were managed through a common directorate or department (31.8%). One agency noted that the

‘records manager role changed from 11 June 2004 to information manager... [with an] increasingly close link between records management and IT... IT is seen as a servant of the records/information/knowledge management needs of the agency. These needs drive IT, not the other way around.’

This particular agency had two dedicated recordkeeping staff: one level 1, and one level 6, and it was noted that within two years the agency processes would be almost totally electronic. The goal for many agencies was to go digital and become largely paperless and many of those not already doing so would be making the move to managing electronic records in the very near future. Over a quarter of employer agencies responding indicated a desire to move to a totally paperless record environment (27.3%). One employer noted that the management of information by subject, either hardcopy or electronic, was seen as knowledge management in her particular agency and particular success had been achieved by implementing a number of separate small projects (rather than one large project) and incorporating a major emphasis on change management.

The move to an electronic environment was not necessarily easy and was sometimes fraught with problems. One respondent mentioned that despite a number of attempts at moving towards EDM there is still a problem with IT and recordkeeping, and indeed other areas, still holding fast to their ‘silo mentalities’. Another respondent noted that the hype of ‘document management’ could be successfully used as a vehicle to improve all information-related processes and programs across an enterprise, but it was important to base the project on sound records and information management principles and standards. Another challenge is the depth of understanding by some levels of management, for example, one manager noted that the move to go digital would enable the agency ‘to cease it [records management] altogether ... we will practice document management’.

The second broad trend identified in the survey is the increased emphasis on best practice and compliance issues. All State Government agencies have a requirement to meet certain compliance targets under the *State Records Act 2000*, and by implication best practice recordkeeping standards. Not only does best practice recordkeeping promote better quality decision-making through improved access to agency information and knowledge, it facilitates compliance. Over a quarter of respondent agencies (27.3%) noted the increased importance of compliance issues under the *State Records Act 2000*. Mention was also made of the fact that specific knowledge and training are required to support best practice recordkeeping and meet the legislative requirements (27.3%). It was noted that it was particularly difficult for small agencies with no dedicated recordkeeping staff as they still had to be compliant but ‘no one considers the little offices and their needs’. To do so they usually had to employ consultants and this was a problem, as well as an additional expense. Three agencies (6.8%) noted that they would need to hire new staff or employ consultants to provide the expertise in these areas as it was not possessed by current staff or the agency was too small to have any dedicated recordkeeping staff. The problem of staff turnover was also raised as an issue as ‘new staff usually have little knowledge and experience in the area’. Some employers (13.6%) felt that a positive outcome of the additional education and training required to implement compliance required under the *State Records Act* was improving the status of recordkeeping as others in the

agency became more aware of the ramifications of the Act and the extent of the requirements for compliance. It was noted that in the main records management and recordkeeping staff did not have very high status in agencies but other staff were gradually becoming more aware of recordkeeping as part of the total information management function of the organisation. Recordkeeping or records management positions had a low image compared to positions using buzzwords such as knowledge management (KM) in their titles, but this was perceived to be slowly improving.

Also of interest is the number of agencies (11.4%) who emphasised the importance of inclusion in the formal strategic planning of the agency for acceptance and success. One agency noted that inclusion in the agency’s strategic development plan had ensured the allocation of the necessary funding and support for EDM/recordkeeping program development.

Recruitment of recordkeeping staff was also a big issue with employers although five agencies (11.4%) had not recruited recordkeeping staff in years or did not do so because they had no dedicated recordkeeping positions. Of those agencies employing recordkeeping staff, recruitment was mainly through newspaper advertisements and Public Service notices. Over 50% of agencies used these methods for the recruitment of recordkeeping staff (see Table 11).

Table 11. Methods used by Western Australian State Public Sector agencies when recruiting recordkeeping staff.

Recruitment method	No. of agencies	
Public Service notice	25	56.8%
Newspaper advertisement	23	52.3%
Employment agency	14	31.8%
Listserv advertisement	4	9.1%
Personal networking	3	6.8%
Headhunting	3	6.8%
Professional association	0	0%
Other	1	2.3%
No recruitment	5	11.4%
Total	44	

Employer comments about staff recruitment indicate that the employment of recordkeeping staff in the State Public Service in Western Australia is somewhat challenging. Problems noted are of two types: those relating to employment in the public sector per se and those of attracting appropriately experienced and qualified recordkeeping staff for the positions available. Two respondents (4.5%) noted that the whole employment/recruitment system was ‘time-consuming and tedious’ as one had to ‘go through redeployment, had to interview obviously unsuitable staff (re-deployees), and choice was limited’. Another respondent noted that ‘obtaining approval to employ permanent staff is difficult so we rely on contractors or consultants ... or engage trainees’. Another problem cited by two agencies was the loss of skilled staff to other agencies on long-term secondment. Big staff turnover was also identified as a problem, especially at the lower levels.

The survey identified significant problems in the recruitment of qualified and experienced recordkeeping staff at the senior level, with over a third (36.4%) of respondents indicating a problem. A similar number of respondents (38.6%) indicated that they did not recruit senior recordkeeping staff, so the particular survey question was not relevant to them. Only 18.2% of respondents indicated they had no recruitment problems (see Table 12). This problem is even more significant when considered in the context of the overall number of agencies actually recruiting senior staff. According to the employer comments there is an ‘under-supply [of experienced and qualified recordkeeping practitioners] in Perth’. One employer noted that it was ‘very difficult to obtain services of qualified recordkeeping professionals – contact with the WA chapter of their professional body was of very little help’.

Table 12. Challenges in the recruitment of senior recordkeeping staff in Western Australian State Public Sector agencies.

Recruitment of senior recordkeeping staff	No. of agencies	
N/A do not employ senior recordkeeping staff	17	38.6%
No problem recruiting	8	18.2%
Problems recruiting	16	36.4%
Missing	3	6.8%
Total	44	

As noted, 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 (Table 1) and these low-level staff are ‘reasonably easy to recruit’ as in the view of some, they ‘do not require any pre-requisite training or expertise’. Three employers mentioned ‘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’. Those skills identified as lacking include a ‘knowledge of business and management skills, a strategic view of records management’, and/or an ability ‘to see the big picture’. Another problem identified by agencies was the ‘limited number applying for positions – 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’. ‘Historically recordkeeping has not been regarded as highly as other skill sets’ and often a recordkeeping position in an agency is regarded as very lowly and at best as a stepping stone to ‘something better’.

Information Enterprises Australia²⁰ also notes that in Western Australia over 80% of on-hired staff supplied by them are for the lower level records clerk and technician positions and positions are not easy to fill, especially at the more senior levels.

One employer commented that the ‘area [of records management] is not recognised for its importance and potential, resulting in a dearth of funds’ and ‘getting officers to work in records continues to be a difficulty’ as ‘at lower levels [recordkeeping] is mundane and boring’. Some comments were more positive:

In recent years with information, knowledge and records management gaining more prominence in organisations, and changes and improvements to legislation, many

records areas have undergone restructures. To reflect this job roles have been redefined and retitled and with that given more responsibilities and higher classifications. Records managers are now also knowledge, information and technology administrators, along with being FOI [Freedom of Information] coordinators and decision-makers. There is still a way to go, but records management is certainly gaining more prominence in the corporate world.

Conclusion

This research provides a snapshot of one sector of the recordkeeping workplace in time and place, the State Public Service of Western Australia in 2004. It provides an overview of the desirable traits or attributes of recordkeeping practitioners from the perspective of one employer group. It also highlights the problems these employers face recruiting suitably qualified and experienced recordkeeping staff. Given that an earlier research project established that 85.9% of advertised recordkeeping positions in Western Australia were in some sector of the public service, it should provide a useful guide to understanding the reality of this particular workplace environment, especially the state sector.

From the survey responses it is clear that many of those charged with the responsibility for the recordkeeping function in individual Western Australian State Government agencies have become aware of recordkeeping responsibilities in the Western Australian state public sector. This is evident in both the answers made to specific questions asked and the open-ended responses. As noted, two broad trends were apparent in the survey responses: one business process driven, the other a legislative imperative. The first trend identified being the move away from a narrow focus on the management of paper-based hardcopy records to electronic document management (EDM) as a desirable business process (70.5% of agencies). The second trend being a greater awareness of the need for recordkeeping in government agencies to be compliant with relevant legislation.²¹ The importance of compliance issues across all agencies rated at 7.77 (out of 10), and over a quarter of respondent agencies (27.3%) made additional comments about the impact of compliance requirements under the *State Records Act 2000* in the open-ended section of the survey.

Analysis of the survey responses also indicates two distinct groupings or levels of recordkeeping practitioners, which some employers identified as professional staff and non-professional or day-to-day operational processing staff, with a 'wide gap' between the two in terms of numbers and ability. The larger grouping (70.5%) consists of low-level day-to-day operational or processing staff (Public Service Level 1 and 2), who in the view of many employing them needed base-level skills only and very little experience. This level of staff was fairly readily available if one was willing to employ untrained staff. Anecdotal evidence such as that supplied by Information Enterprises Australia²² revealed a similar position with over 80% of on-hired recordkeeping staff vacancies at records clerk or technician level. The much smaller 'professional' group operated at a more managerial and strategic level and required more advanced and additional skill sets. Over one-third of employers (38.6%) reported significant problems in the recruitment of senior staff, highlighting a dynamic and vibrant career opportunity for astute skilled and experienced recordkeeping practitioners. Other research, such as that of Jenny Evans (2002, 2003),²³ indicated that this lack of qualified recordkeeping practitioners was not limited to Western Australia.

Employers recognised that although higher skill sets and appropriate experience were required by senior recordkeeping professionals to implement the challenges of the new recordkeeping regime, at the same time they continued to need lower level day-to-day operational staff. Thus employers expected recordkeeping staff to possess a diverse range of domain-specific recordkeeping skills, appropriate transferable workplace competencies, well-developed personal attributes, and relevant experience appropriate to the level of their positions. Over half

the employers responding to the survey (52.3%) indicated that current recordkeeping staff did not currently possess the collective skills required to implement the requirements of the *State Records Act 2000*. The most common solution suggested to redress the problem was to up-skill current staff (29.55%).

When employers were asked to rate the comparative importance of recordkeeping knowledge and skills, experience, qualifications, transferable workplace competencies, personal attributes, and professionalism for recordkeeping practitioners, experience narrowly beat domain-specific knowledge and skills at the top of employee requirements. Formal qualifications, although acknowledged as important, were at the bottom of the employer wish list when recruiting staff. This was tempered by the level and type of position offered with employers more likely to require formal qualifications for higher level positions. Employers tended to link the degree of professionalism of recordkeeping staff with the level of the position they occupied.

This research into employer requirements and expectations is supported by the content analysis of recordkeeping positions advertised in the *West Australian* newspaper in 2000.²⁴ Again it was clear that employers expected recordkeeping professionals to possess a diverse range of recordkeeping knowledge and experience, ranging from basic entry-level domain specific hands-on processing skills to higher level strategic planning skills relevant to the level of the position. The preferred recordkeeping professional was also proficient in transferable employment competencies or skills such as a high level of computer literacy, well-developed communication and interpersonal or people skills, staff management skills and experience, well developed teaming skills, and a strong customer focus. Little has changed in employer requirements in the intervening years between the content analysis of recordkeeping advertisements (2000) and the employer survey (2004). Recruitment consultants such as Information Enterprises Australia also indicate that these skills continue to be in great demand by employers.²⁵

The perceived divide between the two perceived levels of recordkeeping practice ignited spirited debate at the Archives and Records Education Stakeholders (ARES) Forum (2003)²⁶ when the question was posed about an appropriate professional distinction between professionals and para-professionals. There were opposing views on the issue but in later discussion it was agreed that this was not a suitable approach for the professional bodies to take. However, the results of this survey indicate that employers in the Western Australian state public sector perceive a clear distinction between two levels of practice. They do perceive a difference between ‘professional’ and ‘operational or processing’ staff. The challenge for the profession per se is the shortage of higher level staff with the skills necessary to take recordkeeping to the required strategic level in this rapidly changing environment. What we need is a much larger pool of highly skilled and experienced recordkeeping professionals able to cope successfully with the demands of an industry rife with change. Such skilled and experienced professionals would also contribute to the enhancement of the image of recordkeeping as a profession. How best to develop this pool of skilled and experienced professionals is the challenge for the industry.

Endnotes

¹ This paper is necessarily condensed for publication. A full version with additional data and tables is available on request. As noted the research is part of a larger PhD research project into the degree of professionalism of the recordkeeping industry and implications for education. Additional papers published on the research to date are indicated in the paper and listed in the reference section.

² Margaret Pember, ‘A decade of recordkeeping education at Curtin University of Technology: Flux and flexibility’, *The Australian Library Journal*, vol. 52, no. 1, April 2003, pp. 65-79.

³ Margaret Pember, 'Content analysis of recordkeeping job advertisements: Knowledge and skills required by employers', *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, vol. 34, no. 3, August 2003, pp. 194-210.

⁴ *ibid.* p. 197.

⁵ A copy of the questionnaire has not been appended to this paper as it is twelve pages in length. The author is happy to provide a copy on request. <m.pember@curtin.edu.au>.

⁶ Government of Western Australian, State Records Office (SROWA). <<http://www.sro.wa.gov.au>>.

⁷ Government of Western Australian, State Law Publisher, *State Records Act 2000*, and the companion *State Records (Consequential Provisions) Act 2000*. Available online: <<http://www.slp.wa.gov.au/index.html>>.

⁸ Acceptable response rate percentages are extremely difficult to locate. There appears to be no uniform accepted standard, but obviously the higher the response rate the better. Yu & Cooper (1983) indicate that a response rate of less than 20% is considered undesirable. Much depends on the type of research. Some indicate that the response rate should be considerably higher. For example, Babbie (1973) recommends a 50% response rate, however, he notes that this is a rough guide without a statistical basis. All efforts should be made to increase response rates by providing prize draw incentives for response and follow-up phone calls as appropriate.

⁹ State Records Authority of New South Wales, *2004 Records management survey report*. Sydney, NSW: SRONSW, 2005, retrieved 7 June 2005, 22 pages. <<http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/publicsector/rk/Survey%20Reports/2004RMSurveyReport/2004RMSurveyreport.htm#Executive%20Summary>>.

¹⁰ *ibid.* Question 17.

¹¹ *ibid.* Page 14.

¹² The professional bodies (RMAA and ASA) as an outcome of the Archives and Records Educators Forum (June 2003) have also identified those skills considered core knowledge for recordkeepers (Joint Education Steering Committee).

<<http://www.rmaa.com.au/docs/branches/nat/pub/forcomment/DraftProfessional%20KnowledgeRequired.pdf>>.

¹³ The Mayer Competencies: *The key competencies*, Australian Education Council, Mayer Committee, Canberra, Australian Education Council and Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment and Training, 1991. The competencies identified by the Mayer Committee were: collecting, analysing and organising information; communicating ideas and information; planning and organising activities; working with others and in teams; using mathematical ideas and techniques; solving problems; and using technology.

¹⁴ Department of Education, Science and Training, 'Employability skills for the future', Canberra: DEST, 2002, pp. 35-47.

¹⁵ Business Services Training Australia Ltd, 'Recordkeeping competency standards draft 3', October 2000: Training package. ANTA; and original version 'Archives and records competency standards', November 1997. For the development of the competency standards see Anne Picot, 'The story of the Australian recordkeeping competency standards', *The Records Management Journal*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2001, pp. 16-24.

¹⁶ International Standards Organization, 'ISO 15489 Information and documentation — Records management', (Parts 1 and 2), Geneva: ISO, 2001.

¹⁷ Government of Western Australian, Public Sector Management, 'Training and Development Good Practice Guide: A Guide for Western Australian Public Sector Organisations' Retrieved 20 January 2005. <<http://www.dpc.wa.gov.au/psmd/pubs/exec/train/training.html>> and 'Constant Learning: the Way to Go – a Strategic Training Scenario for the WA Public Sector, 1998–2005'. Retrieved 20 January 2005 <<http://www.dpc.wa.gov.au/psmd/pubs/exec/learning/learnhttoc.html>>.

¹⁸ Government of Western Australian, Public Sector Management, 'Workplace Development 2004/5, retrieved 20 January 2005. <<http://www.dpc.wa.gov.au/psmd/pubs/pubs.html#training>>.

¹⁹ For example CF Burk, and W. Horton, W, 'Information resource management: A complete guide to discovering corporate information resources', Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall, 1988, pp. 4-5.

²⁰ Gail Murphy, 'Where have all the records practitioners gone: A view from the West Coast', paper presented at the ARES Forum, Melbourne, 12-13 June 2003. Accessed 12 February 2005. <<http://www.archivists.org.au/events/ARES2003/index.html>>.

²¹ This is not surprising given the requirement under the *State Records Act 2000* for all state government agencies to submit a recordkeeping plan to the State Records Office.

²² op.cit. Murphy, 2003.

²³ Jenny Evans, 'Serious lack of skilled and qualified records professionals in NSW', *Informaa Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2002, pp. 16-20; and Jenny Evans, 'Records profession skills weakness exposed by NSW records compliance audit', *Informaa Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2003, pp. 8-11.

²⁴ Margaret Pember, 'Content analysis of recordkeeping job advertisements: Knowledge and skills required by employers', *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, vol. 34, no. 3, August 2003, pp. 194-210.

²⁵ Gail Murphy 'Where Have All the Records Practitioners Gone: A View From the West Coast' ARES Forum, Melbourne, 12-13 June 2003 <<http://www.archivists.org.au/events/ARES2003/index.html>>.

²⁶ Archives and Records Education Stakeholders (ARES) Forum, 'Facilitator's report', Melbourne: Australian Society of Archives and Records Management Association of Australasia, 2003. <<http://www.archivists.org.au/events/ARES2003/facilitatorssummary.html>>. Accessed 7 June 2005.