

Recordkeeping Cultures

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Recordkeeping Cultures

Second edition

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Published by Facet Publishing
7 Ridgmount Street, London WC1E 7AE
www.facetpublishing.co.uk

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-78330-399-1 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-78330-400-4 (hardback)

ISBN 978-1-78330-401-1 (e-book)

First published 2020

Text printed on FSC accredited material.



Typeset from authors' files in 10/14 pt Palatino Linotype and Frutiger by Flagholme Publishing Services.

Printed and made in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY.

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Introduction to the second edition

The twofold purpose of the first edition of this book, *Records Management and Information Culture: Tackling the people problem*, holds true for this second edition. Firstly, the motivation to do something about the messy and difficult issues which are inevitable when we attempt to manage records in organisations and communities. Why are they inevitable? Because organisations are made up of people, who have different backgrounds, goals and expectations, and whose primary purpose as employees is to perform work as set out in their position descriptions. Each individual will have some responsibilities related to the creation and management of records and information, but in the majority of cases, such responsibilities will not be itemised in their job descriptions. The magnitude of this people problem has been frequently described anecdotally but now there is empirical evidence available in the outcomes of the University of Northumbria's research project into electronic records management issues. The headline findings from this global project included the following:

Participants identified people issues as part of all three facets investigated [i.e. people, processes and technology]. They are predominant, fundamental and challenging because they concern culture, philosophical attitudes, awareness of records management and ERM [electronic records management] issues, preferences, knowledge and skills.

(McLeod et al., 2011, 73–4)

A further finding from the same project was particularly striking, as it points to some critical features in the way that we work that may in fact prove to be detrimental to achieving our goals:

Records professionals were open enough to recognise they may be part of the problem as well as part of the solution. On the positive side, records professionals take a holistic view and have the principles and tools to manage records; however their demands may be unrealistic or too constraining. Respondents identified a range of attitudes of records managers and their approaches to ERM that should be avoided ...

(McLeod et al., 2011, 79–80)

These findings have been echoed in subsequent studies, for example in Sir Alex Allan's review of electronic recordkeeping in British government departments. Summary findings included the following comments:

Existing systems which require individual users to identify documents that should constitute official records, and then to save them into an EDRMS [electronic document and records management system] or corporate file plan, have not worked well. The processes have been burdensome and compliance poor. As a result, almost all departments have a mass of digital data stored on shared drives that is poorly organised and indexed.

and

Even with improved systems, there will be a need to ensure the appropriate culture is embedded in departments and that changes are backed up by a high level push to make sure new procedures are followed in practice.

(Allan, 2014)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-records-and-archives-review-by-sir-alex-allan>

Secondly, the specific objective of this book is to demonstrate a way in which progress can be made towards addressing the issues identified above. This second edition extends the discussion of information culture presented in the first edition, modifying the Information Culture Framework (ICF) to facilitate its application to recordkeeping environments, so as to assist in developing sound recordkeeping cultures.

The research that we undertook in our subsequent academic roles is summarised in Chapter 1, as these findings are directly relevant to the approach taken to information culture assessment throughout the book. The second edition is informed by the outcomes of further case studies conducted between 2015 and 2017, together with feedback from workshops and

presentations conducted around the world. We are especially grateful to the International Council on Archives (ICA) for supporting much of this work, which has resulted in the development of a toolkit to assess information cultures, and an online community of practice.

This book consolidates ideas relating to what the concept of information culture involves, why it is important, and how it can be applied to actual recordkeeping situations, including both how to carry out analysis of a given organisation and what to do with your findings.

The audience for this book is primarily practitioners, but also individuals working in academic contexts. Practitioners will include all those with responsibilities for creating and maintaining processes to ensure that authentic, reliable, usable records with integrity are captured into organisational systems. The core of this group will undoubtedly be records managers and archivists, but it is to be hoped that other individuals rapidly becoming involved with the challenges of managing information as evidence for accountability purposes (such as information technology (IT) specialists), will also be able to draw on this book as a resource.

The academic audience will include those both teaching and researching in the areas of records management and archives, but also in related fields, such as information systems, knowledge management and information management. It is envisaged that this book will provide material for the development of education and training programmes focusing on how to implement recordkeeping systems in organisations, how to communicate recordkeeping goals and how to understand the environment you are working in. We also hope it will stimulate further ideas for research into information culture, which, we are convinced, has very real value for the successful management of information not only in organisations but also at a national or societal level.

The book is divided into seven parts. The first of these consists of a single chapter, which provides the background for what follows. This preliminary chapter establishes the overall context, with a literature review of information culture, reporting on research to date. It explains the relevance of information culture to the 21st-century workplace, and spells out why recordkeeping cultures in particular deserve special attention within the current information landscape. The chapter also introduces the Information Culture Framework (ICF) – a three-level pyramid where the factors that influence attitudes and values towards information in organisations are identified and ranked according to their susceptibility to change – which has been further developed in this second edition.

Parts 2, 3, 4 and 5 each address aspects of the framework, beginning in Part

2 with level one, Fundamental influences. This part considers those factors which may appear difficult if not impossible to change – but which are essential to identify and to be taken into account if appropriate interventions are to be developed. Each of the three chapters included in this part considers one set of influences, namely the value accorded to records, information preferences, and language and national (or regional) technological infrastructure. Although the factors considered at this level are hard to change, knowing what they are is invaluable in terms of guiding records management programme development. What comes first? How can uptake be promoted? What types of leadership are required? All these questions and more are answered.

Part 3 (comprising Chapters 5 and 6) considers the knowledge, skills and expertise of staff members relating to records, from the perspectives of recordkeeping and digital literacy; and also their awareness of relevant legislative, legal and other mandatory requirements. These cultural influences belong to the second level of the ICF, that is, an intermediate level comprising factors that organisational actors can improve by taking specific measures. Thus, Part 3 provides guidance on identifying training needs, and on developing appropriate training programmes. Suggestions for developing context-appropriate training (when it is best to use online resources, group versus one-to-one sessions, etc.) are provided.

Part 4 consists of a single chapter (Chapter 7), and addresses the topmost level of the ICF, the characteristics that are unique to a particular organisation and thus probably the most amenable to change. This layer level has been modified in this edition for a more specific focus on recordkeeping environments. The first characteristic is corporate information governance, including information technology architecture. The second relates to recordkeeping systems and tools, for example, EDRMS, classification systems, retention plans. This final layer level can be the most productive area for action, and the discussion focuses on techniques for working collaboratively with IT colleagues as well as how to adopt a critically reflective perspective on current records management systems, policies and processes.

Part 5 of the book (consisting of Chapter 8) considers influences on all three levels of the ICF pyramid. These metalevels refer to two broad factors, namely trust in recordkeeping systems and records professionals, and language and communication. Both trust and language were included within the pyramid as outlined in the first edition, and assigned to specific levels (trust at level three and language at level one). Our experience leading up to this second edition has indicated that these factors are more diffuse, hence their new positioning as metalevels.

Part 6 (Chapter 9) introduces totally new content, namely the diagnostic factors identified in the course of developing a toolkit for the ICA. The factors are genres, workarounds and infrastructure, and we provide a number of examples from practice.

Part 7 brings everything together, starting with discussion of education in Chapter 10: how to teach information culture concepts and methods in archives and records programmes and training courses. Chapter 10 concludes by presenting an overall view of the assessment of information culture and subsequent actions.

References

- Allan, Sir Alex (2014). Government Digital Records and Archives Review., <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-records-and-archives-review-by-sir-alex-allan>
- McLeod, J., Childs, S. and Hardiman, R. (2011). Accelerating Positive Change in Electronic Records Management – Headline Findings from a Major Research Project, *Archives and Manuscripts*, **39** (2), 66–94.

CHAPTER 1

Background and context

Every organisation, society, or community, has an information culture, or even multiple information cultures. Being able to analyse and understand these cultures is instrumental in developing records management programmes and systems that take people – the employees of the organisation, the members of the society or community – into account. The purpose of this initial chapter is to provide the background detail which describes and explains the foundations of the assessment framework discussed in the subsequent chapters.

This chapter begins by tracking the origins of the concept of information culture, and explaining why recordkeeping cultures deserve special attention, despite the current ‘convergence’ trends that tend to prioritise the notion of information over data and records (Yeo, 2018). Reporting on efforts to date studying information culture from societal, national and organisational perspectives, the latter perspective is emphasised because of its key relevance to records management in the 21st-century workplace. At this organisational level, two incompatible (alternative) points of view can be identified: one that regards an information culture as being conducive to good information management, and the other that takes the view that all organisations have an information culture, no matter how effective the latter may be perceived to be.

This then leads into the specific theoretical orientation influencing our approach to information culture, which is the records continuum. We explain how information culture is an integral part of a new conceptualisation of records management: recordkeeping informatics. This chapter then provides an overall introduction to the Information Culture Framework (ICF), briefly explaining the different levels, of the Framework and the relationships between them.

Finally, the ICF is clearly differentiated by considering it in the context of other evaluation methodologies and tools, such as information audits,

information maturity, DIRKS (State Records New South Wales' Design and Implementation of Recordkeeping Systems), the Impact Calculator, and ARMA (Association of Records Managers and Administrators) International's Generally Accepted Recordkeeping Principles (GARP).

The concepts of information culture and recordkeeping culture

Information culture has been studied from two main perspectives: societal (including national) and organisational. The main focus of this book is on organisational information culture, a concept that we redefine more appropriately as recordkeeping culture; but societal- and national-level considerations have to be acknowledged, as these different approaches are not by any means mutually exclusive. Anyone concerned with organisational information culture or recordkeeping culture cannot fail to be concerned with discussions occurring at the other levels, as these will influence and provide insight into what happens in workplaces and communities. So, before introducing the ideas specifically relating to organisational information culture we will briefly sketch out some of the thinking around societal- and national-level views.

Societal information culture

Analysing information culture from a societal level necessitates a much broader and more philosophical view of the changes inherent in our information environment than at the organisational level, that which is the main focus of this book. Societal information culture can be understood as encompassing the influences on, and interactions between, human cultural expression and information systems of all types, including both technological and legal systems. Looking at information culture in this big-picture way considers the rapidly changing and expanding power of information considered in the context of new and emerging technologies that enable developments in our everyday lives, such as social media and mobile banking. Taking this societal perspective may provide a predictive, explanatory frame of reference to help us start to grapple with the complexities of the digital age.

But what is 'information'? And how can the pervasive nature of information be studied in a meaningful way? Luke Tredinnick, for example, takes a holistic view in attempting to describe our current information environment as a digital information culture (Tredinnick, 2008). The focus of his work is the influence of new information technologies on our everyday life,

from the perspective that these new technologies have a transformational effect. He approaches digital information culture by singling out the following issues for discussion: textuality, authenticity, knowledge, power, identity and memory. He places his work in the context of ongoing attempts to make sense of the changing nature of communication and role of information technologies, such as Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (1964) and Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* (1970). In so doing, Tredinnick emphasises throughout the ongoing nature of such change, concluding with the words: 'The last chapter of socio-cultural change always remains unwritten' (p. 168).

However, by taking such a holistic approach, we might however lose sight of the specific meanings and practices that disciplines like archival studies and records management have developed over the centuries to make sure that records, as 'the foundation of social life and activity' (Yeo, 2018, 151), are created and managed properly. This is one of the main arguments put forward by Geoffrey Yeo in his latest book (2018), where the role of records as persistent evidence and reliable memory of our actions is discussed. We all live in an 'information society' and collaboration among experts in the various information-related fields is absolutely necessary. Nevertheless, Yeo reminds us that 'perspectives of the different disciplines should be treated with appropriate respect' (p. 193).

Memory and forgetting

The concept of memory in any information culture perspective is an important one – even more so within a recordkeeping context. As records managers we are concerned with organisational memory, which will be influenced by technological developments in society. Viktor Mayer-Schönberger (2009) focuses on one particular aspect of memory that is changing rapidly. That is, the power to forget, and the danger of losing that ability to forget in a time when information is stored in vast virtual warehouses, and commercial interest drivers provide motivators for continued 'remembering' even when existing norms would seem to dictate the opposite. Mayer-Schönberger explores remembering and forgetting through history, charting the development of tools to assist in remembering, from pictures through the development of script to print, all striving towards an ideal of perfect recall.

The author paints a rich picture of the usages of technology enabling the creation of a perfect digital memory. Usages of technology range from our active participation in constructing virtual lives in social networking sites such as Facebook, to our unwitting involvement in surveillance activities, such as Google and Microsoft collecting data showing our online presence,

reflecting our interests, thoughts and dreams. This perfect memory may be more comprehensive than we ever thought possible, but forgetting, an essential component of memory, has shifted from being the default position to not being there unless it is consciously specified.

Mayer-Schönberger emphasises that although technology provides the power to construct this 'perfect' and comprehensive digital memory, it rests with humans to change the situation. Possible solutions proposed and trialled include the following. Firstly, digital abstinence, in other words individuals taking responsibility for their digital footprint, and increased awareness so that people will exercise more judgement in what information they share publicly. This is a topic that is further discussed in Chapter 5. Another set of strategies rests on information privacy legislation and regulation, and the construction of an infrastructure for digital privacy rights. The author also proposes a further suggestion, that is, to assign an expiration date to information, and presents this as a novel answer to a new situation. A combination of these approaches is undoubtedly required, but the suggestion of an expiration date should particularly resonate with records managers. For anyone well versed in the principles of records management this is of course very familiar and well-known territory – assigning retention periods to information, instituting systematic review and destruction or transferring to archival custody are the very essence of recordkeeping practice.

As mentioned earlier, it is important to recognise that recordkeeping has its specific place within the broader information field. However, this should not suggest that records experts have to clearly demarcate their areas of responsibility (this is a record, this isn't ...), although some of them may be tempted to do so as a way to cope with what can seem an impossible workload. By circumscribing their domain and operating selectively rather than inclusively, records managers and archivists will become more and more marginalised and risk appearing increasingly irrelevant. It is their specialised knowledge that should guide their actions, not the 'inherent' qualities of the materials under their purview. Their expertise with the nuances of forgetting, the robust policies and procedures that they have developed to ensure short-term and long-term memories, their awareness of the need to strike a balance between the right to know and the protection of privacy, have the potential to contribute greatly to the debate about perfect digital memories which is now occurring at the societal level. The complex set of strategies identified by Mayer-Schönberger to make sure forgetting is a component in our societal digital memory should inspire records managers to extend the reach of their procedures and be open to suggestions coming from other disciplinary areas.

Social media, truth and fake news

Concerns about social media have been discussed for a number of years now, culminating in reports of the use of social media channels to influence the outcome of democratic processes. One of the first high-profile commentaries was Andrew Keen's *The Cult of the Amateur* (2007), highlighting the downside of new, enabling technologies. His view of the effect that information technology (IT), in the form of the internet, is having on our minds, on our very ability to think and reason, is a very negative one. The subtitle of this book is *How today's internet is killing our culture and assaulting our economy*, which sends a very clear signal about the author's view of digital technologies. He equates today's technology-enabled world with T. H. Huxley's infinite monkey theory: if an infinite number of monkeys are provided with an infinite number of typewriters, the chances are that some monkey will produce a masterpiece (Keen, 2007, 2). He then proceeds to extend the analogy, first to blogs:

At the heart of the infinite monkey experiment in self publishing is the Internet diary, the ubiquitous blog. Blogging has become such a mania that a new blog is being created every second of every minute of every hour of every day. We are blogging with monkeylike shamelessness about our private lives, our sex lives, our dream lives, our lack of lives, our Second Lives.

(Keen, 2007, 3)

and then to YouTube videos:

YouTube eclipses even the blogs in the inanity and absurdity of its content. Nothing seems too prosaic or narcissistic for these videographer monkeys. The site is an infinite gallery of amateur movies showing poor fools dancing, singing, eating, washing, shopping, driving, cleaning, sleeping, or just staring into their computers.

(Keen, 2007, 5)

These are provocative views, which some will find deeply disturbing, but which will strike a harmonious chord in others. Regardless of readers' reactions, what does become clear is the need for change. The sheer scale and variety of types of information, coupled with the changing roles of authorship and publication, need vastly different sets of skills on the part of both information creators and consumers in order to make sense of this new world of technology-enhanced information. Chapter 5 will further explore the dimensions of digital literacy.

The relevance of the web world of social media, including tweets, blogs and YouTube videos, to recordkeepers cannot be understated. We are concerned with authenticity, with information that is characterised by integrity and reliability. An age where ‘fake news’ is used as a rallying cry provides an opportunity for engagement, to demonstrate professional knowledge and competencies, more than ever before. On a more practical level, as more and more organisations and communities in both the private and public sectors use social media as communications tools, records managers need to develop the appropriate strategies to manage this information as evidence for accountability purposes. To be effective, these strategies have to fit with the culture of the organisation and to seamlessly integrate with the way that people work, rather than hinder or obstruct workflows. Diagnosing the organisation’s information and recordkeeping cultures is the essential first step to achieving these objectives, and this is only possible if we have a good understanding of these societal perspectives.

The work of Tredinnick, Mayer-Schönberger and Keen is cited here to give examples of the emergence of concerns about society’s information culture. Subsequent events such as the Brexit referendum and the US election in 2016 show that the issues and challenges that our information age poses are increasing in complexity, and societal information culture will continue to attract attention from researchers and commentators. This is the overall context in which we work at organisational level; all is part of the discourse that frames and influences our attempts at records management.

Discussion of societal information culture is usually presented as being universally applicable, although some may dispute this on the basis that the environment under scrutiny is primarily that of the Western, developed world. Tredinnick’s discussion of the development of written language and printing, for instance, is Eurocentric (2008, 59–76); Mayer-Schönberger does not take indigenous views into account when considering attitudes towards sharing of information and knowledge (2009, 131–4); Keen equates widespread access to broadband in the USA as an indicator of a fully connected, networked society (2007, 15). Despite this, it is possible to distinguish considerations of information culture that clearly have a more explicit focus on particular countries.

Focusing on a specific country

Various researchers have applied the information culture lens to specific national settings, for example China (Zheng, 2005), the Maldives (Riyaz and Smith, 2012) and Hungary (Szecskö, 1986). In addition, there are of course