The State of Records Management

By THORNTON W. MITCHELL*

Columbus, Ohio

IN a group as articulate as records managers it is surprising that so few attempts have been made to formulate a professional philosophy or even to evaluate the status of the profession. It may be that we have been so busy working at our profession that we have not had time to think about what we are doing. But we need at least to think about our past and future because we represent a profession that is essentially without direction. The lack of professional motivation causes some to deny that records management is really a profession. There is widespread skepticism about us. Before we can determine where we are going, we must first know where we have been. We can build our strength in the future if we first look at our past and at the weaknesses we have allowed to develop around us.

The records management profession suffers from several basic weaknesses. None of them is insuperable, but they affect us and the manner in which we perform the work for which we are responsible.

The first—and perhaps the most obvious—of the weaknesses afflicting us is the fact that records management has come to be identified solely with the retention, disposal, and storage of obsolete and inactive records. Most executives believe, if they are at all familiar with the phrase, that records management means throwing away old records and storing more recent ones until they are old enough to be destroyed. This identification stems, in part, from the initial emphasis on old, noncurrent files. Large accumulations of obsolete record material that occupy valuable equipment and space present an immediate and easily visualized problem to officials concerned with such matters. This is particularly true if large purchases of file cabinets are made or if office and working space becomes crowded. Then, too, the removal of large groups of unneeded records is a relatively easy program to sell to management and the benefits resulting from it are immediately discernible. Moreover, some records managers who are responsible for success-

* The author, a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists and a member of the Council, was formerly affiliated with the National Records Management Council and Records Management Associates of San Francisco. Since September 1960 he has been a member of the staff of the Ohio Department of Mental Hygiene and Correction, where he is responsible for the department's records management program.

ful retention and storage programs may encourage this narrow identification because they do not want to "rock the boat." Regardless of the reason, many organizations that have established retention and storage control programs are convinced that they have a fully developed records management program.

We should not disparage or belittle the very real achievements of records retention and storage programs, which have returned substantial tangible and intangible benefits to business and industry as well as to government. The fact remains that the popular connotation of records management has been and still is limited to a single stage in the life cycle of records.

This preoccupation with the single area of records retention and storage and the tacit acceptance of the limited definition have effectively prevented the records management profession from establishing its jurisdiction over the entire field of paperwork and the management of records from their creation to their final disposition. We recognize that records pass through a life cycle, and yet our claim to jurisdiction over this entire cycle is, at best, an uncertain one. In many instances the records manager has been and is being excluded from programs designed to control other stages in the life cycle of records. Because we have limited ourselves to a single aspect of records management, others cannot understand our concern with and interest in the processes that result in the creation of records, and we are usually excluded when a program for their control is undertaken.

Another basic weakness that we must overcome is the lack of standards in our profession. Anyone can call himself a records manager, and there is very little agreement on what the position entails. Certainly we represent all manner of backgrounds: some of us are historians, others have been trained in business administration, others have administrative backgrounds. Regardless of background, it is true that very few people, if any, know what skills, what experience, or what training we refer to when we identify ourselves as records managers.

Another weakness is the fact that we tend to be materialistic. We have committed ourselves to delivering tangible benefits in order not only to sell our programs but also to justify their continued existence. It is not always possible to measure the results of records management techniques solely in dollars and cents. But so many records managers have become accustomed to measuring accomplishments only in monetary terms that they tend to avoid beneficial programs the results of which can be measured in terms of increased efficiency, improved management, better relations with the public,

or some other intangible benefit. It may be that we have sold ourselves too well; management expects us to deliver tangible savings and in our eagerness to please we carefully avoid activities that will not show such benefits.

We have, as another weakness, a tendency to be diverted by fads. It is too costly to be called a fad, but some of our fellows see in the electronic computer the answer to any questions arising from the creation, processing, maintenance, and disposition of records. "Put it on tape!" they cry; "then we won't have any problems." Some of us who served our apprenticeship in government can remember when microfilming or reports control or a correspondex offered the solution to all of the problems stemming from too many records of poor quality.

Part of this tendency to adopt fads undoubtedly arises from another of our weaknesses—our lack of confidence in our profession. This defensiveness stems somewhat from our youth, but we are approaching our majority and we are or should be outgrowing the awkwardness of adolescence. We lack the professional pride of the controller, the corporate secretary, the office manager, or the archivist, perhaps because we have no standards by which we, as a profession, can be measured.

We, as records managers, find that we are considered a field apart from the field of general management. This may well be because we have no identity. We, as records managers, frequently report to the office manager or to the general services department and, except in remote instances, have at best a nebulous connection with other management programs. Lest someone complain that I am inconsistent in suggesting that records management be submerged in a more generalized management program, let me hasten to say that the management of records is but one phase in a management program, and all management programs should be related to the extent that they have common goals and common direction.

Although these weaknesses are basic, they do not detract from the fact that records management as a profession has made a substantial contribution in a relatively short period of time. We are a young profession, but our achievements are many. They can—and should be—a source of pride to us. The first of these achievements is perhaps the most significant, because we have introduced and have obtained general acceptance of the proposition that records can be and must be controlled. These new management techniques originated in government, but they have been developed for and applied to industry and business by the profession itself. Undoubtedly they would have spread from government to business in due course,

but it is questionable whether they would have made this transition so rapidly or in so orderly a manner without our help. We have, in addition, adapted this management approach to the needs of business. As a result we have in effect created our own profession.

Quantitatively, our achievements have been significant. Within the past ten years records managers have scheduled thousands of records series in hundreds of American industrial and business firms alone. Other thousands of series have been scheduled in government jurisdictions. Millions of pieces of paper have been destroyed. Untold square feet of space and innumerable filing drawers have been made available for reuse. The traditional basement or attic storage areas, coated with the dust of ages and infested with miscellaneous vermin, are a thing of the past. The concepts that the records manager introduced have been so generally accepted that they are being used by many who are ignorant of their origin. Many who use records management techniques do not consider themselves members of the profession, some are "part-time" records managers, others have adopted the techniques without recognizing them for what they are, and still others have used them without knowing—or caring—that the profession exists.

In measuring our achievements, it is only incidental that these startling quantitative results have come, principally, in but a single area of the total field. As records managers we have performed our best and most significant work in the area of records retention and storage and it is from this area that our impressive results have come. We have performed significant work in other areas within the broad field of records management, but the results have not been so startling as the results of our work in the narrow area of records retention and storage.

It also is a considerable achievement that we have developed a body of records management literature. Fifteen years ago a bibliography of the field would have consisted of a few isolated articles, but five years ago a selected reading list in records management contained the titles of some 450 papers and other publications. The development of a body of literature was to be expected; it is unfortunate that it is so scattered and regrettable that so much of it is promotional in nature. There is too much emphasis on real or anticipated results and too little discussion of principles and techniques. Remarkable as this achievement has been, there is need for a literature of the records management profession in which its principles, methods, and techniques are set forth.

Another of our achievements—related to the rapidity of our growth—is our adaptability, our willingness to modify or change

our approach as the professional field develops. The records management profession is singularly lacking in sacred cows that have stifled other professions and caused them to become inbred. New technological developments have not been resisted; records management has recognized, for example, that electronic data processing presents new problems that require new solutions. It has recognized the effect of tabulating machinery on making and keeping records and does not yearn for the good old days of the quill pen and ink pot. In several instances these new monsters have been accepted to the extent of using them to assist in the analysis of forms and reports—the prerequisite for a control program.

As necessary, records management has reevaluated and reappraised accepted techniques and principles and has modified or revised them in the light of subsequent developments and practices. As recently as 15 years ago, microphotography was the most commonly accepted method of achieving the reduction of space devoted to records. But when new techniques were advanced—specifically, the application of modern warehousing and inventory methods to the storage of records—the use of microfilming for this purpose was reexamined and reevaluated and was substantially modified.

It is perhaps of even greater significance that new methods and techniques have been adopted and old ones changed with a minimum of acrimony. Professional disputes on matters of principle, which have marked and still mark other professions, are singularly lacking in records management.

Another major achievement of records management is that its practitioners have organized themselves into groups to meet and discuss their common problems. Recognition of a community of interests and a banding together because of it constitute a significant basic step toward a sound profession. True, there is great disparity in the membership of these groups, and there is little agreement about the content of the records management field. But the fact that we have organized ourselves into groups with a common interest, even though we may not always be able to define that interest, is significant. To that extent we show the makings of a profession.

It is a real achievement that records management has made training available to persons interested in its field. Admittedly, some of this training is the result of the interest of individuals rather than of groups and some of it is oriented toward highly specialized spheres of interest. But the fact that training is available in such institutions as U.C.L.A., New York University, Wayne University, Northwestern University, American University, and Radcliffe College (to name a few) represents a substantial achievement. As a

further step in our educational growth, specialized conferences relating to records management have been held by the National Records Management Council, the Association of Records Executives and Administrators (AREA), and the American Records Management Association (ARMA). The educational achievements in our field are impressive.

Our achievements show remarkable strength, but we have equally remarkable weaknesses. The records management profession can stay where it is, or it can look to the future with the firm conviction that its achievements during the next 15 years will be as spectacular as have been those of the past 15. If the profession continues to grow, it must develop professional motivation and a philosophy that will give it direction. To grow, then, what must the profession do?

The first and most obvious need to strengthen the profession is to give it an identity. When we talk about records management, we must know what we are talking about and we must all be talking about the same thing. One of the first requirements to establish professional identity is to decide on the scope of records management. We must define our profession in terms that can be accepted by all its practitioners. We have two alternatives. The first of these is that we can accept our encirclement and agree that records management means only the retention and storage of inactive and obsolete records. We would, as the result, relinquish any claim to the other areas that involve working in and controlling the life cycle of records. The second alternative is that we assert and defend our claim to the right to control the entire cycle from creation to final disposition. If we are to make this claim, we do not need to invent a new name by which to identify our profession, but it is obvious that we must be prepared to perform acceptable work in the additional areas that we embrace. It is not enough to make the claim and to extend the commonly accepted definition of records management; we must be prepared to perform and to deliver.

The second alternative is preferable, for several valid reasons.

Work in a single phase of a total field of endeavor does not offer a sound basis for developing a profession when the object of that total field has a life cycle consisting of several phases. It is true that some professional men have achieved honors for work dealing with a single phase of a total subject. But a distinction must be made between a professional body and specialists within a profession. Some doctors, for example, are pediatricians; they are pediatricians because they have chosen to specialize within a broad profession

and they would resist vigorously any assertion that pediatrics is a profession separate and distinct from medicine. There is, obviously, a place within our profession for specialties; but let us not specialize to the degree that the specialty becomes identified as the total profession.

Our profession needs to be broadly defined for another reason: because narrow definition can threaten its continued existence. In all honesty, we must admit that some of the work within the specialty of records retention and storage does not require a high degree of professional competence. Much of it is sheer drudgery and, after a sound retention and storage program has been established, its continued successful administration can become essentially a clerical job. We must recognize also that records retention neither reduces the quantity of records created nor improves their quality; it does nothing more than prevent the accumulation of large quantities of obsolete papers. The executive who accepts a retention and storage program as the solution to all his paperwork problems finds just as many reports, forms, and memoranda on his desk as before. In order to maintain a high professional level, we must be responsible for performing professional tasks that require professional competence. Records management must be aggressive and dynamic; moreover, it must actually perform what it claims it can perform.

As a part of the process of establishing its identity, records management must resolve any differences that have developed with any related professions that regard it with skepticism and distrust. These differences must be resolved on the basis of mutual understanding of and agreement on respective spheres of influence and activities; they cannot be resolved by the unconditional surrender of one profession to the other. Archivists and records managers, for example, must recognize that they have mutual interests in a common field. The interests of the records manager are somewhat broader than those of the archivist, but since we exert an influence upon the permanent documentation in which the archivist is interested we must concern ourselves with that type of material when we develop and establish our various programs. Archivists, for their part, must accept the fact that records management will determine to a considerable extent the type of material to constitute the permanent documentation with which the archival profession is concerned and should work closely with records managers to protect that documentation.

Management frequently finds records management filling a vacuum it itself is unwilling or unable to fill. Management, however, finds it difficult to understand why a person concerned with records

becomes involved in space surveys, office layout plans, and similar management problems. Both must realize that paperwork is of concern because it represents such a large percentage of clerical costs. The goals of the records manager and the management specialist are virtually identical; the approach is different and techniques vary. Here again there are mutual interests in a common field.

Our next need is to establish professional standards, but we must determine the scope and the sphere of our activities before we can establish standards to insure their successful performance. Personnel standards must be realistic to the extent that they provide for the proper accomplishment of our responsibilities. They should, obviously, set forth clearly and without equivocation what a records manager is and what he is expected to perform. Because there probably will never be academic training devoted solely to developing trained records managers, our source of personnel will be the inservice training that we, as a profession, ourselves conduct. We can expect that schools and colleges will recognize the profession to the extent of including indoctrination in records management in general management courses, and it is to be hoped that the specialized courses already given in records management will not only continue but be extended. It is evident that we ourselves will be the main source of technicians and analysts. To this end, the lower graded and lower salaried positions in the profession must be training jobs for the more responsible and higher paid positions.

This inservice training, which will provide our records managers of the future, must be broadly conceived and must be concerned with more than a single specialized area. For example, it will not be sufficient to train a young man merely in the proper techniques of conducting a records inventory or of assembling a functional forms file. Records management cannot be so highly specialized, and we ourselves must be equipped to give a broad and expanded training.

As we establish our identity and our personnel standards, we shall to a considerable degree formulate performance standards for our profession. There will be room for differences of opinion on the best performance techniques—whether, for example, forms should be analyzed from the point of view of their function, their subject, or the procedure that creates them. Regardless of the technique, however, the goal must be the same—the reduction of the number of pieces of paper created and processed without affecting adversely the operations with which they are concerned.

To strengthen our profession we need to develop a body of serious literature relating to the principles, techniques, and methods of

records management. Most of our literature is published in promotional magazines—we are still trying to "sell" an idea. The public