

Trends in County Records Management

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TODAY I would like to talk about trends. My subject is ambiguous for a reason. I was allowed to choose any subject I desired so long as it would interest county officers. With such unusual freedom of choice, how could I do other than select a subject that would provide ample room for maneuvering, allow me to be generally philosophical, and at the same time permit me to say "I told you so" no matter what the future may bring? A topic such as trends seems to fulfill these requirements.

We should consider trends that are now becoming apparent—those that portend rapid and radical changes in our concepts of administration, our recordkeeping attitudes, and our most ingrained habits of operation. We should also examine some of the past trends with which we are all familiar. We must look at the present in the light of the past so that we can properly place ourselves in the scheme of the future.

During the next few minutes let us consider some of the primary forces that are affecting our long-cherished ideas of recordkeeping and how these forces will alter our concepts of systems design. Let us look at the techniques we must use if we are to meet successfully the challenges of those forces. Let us examine also our present habits and attitudes in the face of future recordkeeping requirements. County government is both personal and basic in our democratic system. It naturally follows that county records reflect these personal and basic qualities. Among county records may be found much information that protects the rights and interests of the citizen and his government. The keystone position of county records in the national record structure is unquestioned.

The importance of county records is not accidental; it has evolved through a process determined by the citizens themselves. Depend-

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ence on local government has been a compelling force in shaping county government organization and the supporting records structure. Isolation, lack of communication, dislike of large and centralized government, and local pride have all contributed to this dependence. However, the relationship between people and local government has been changing. Almost imperceptible at first, this change has gained momentum in recent years. The old dependence motivation is being replaced by a critical, impersonal attitude that seeks justification for every action of government. This changing of basic motivation brings other forces into play—lesser forces, perhaps, but important to us in records management. When viewed in proper perspective, in the light of cold reality, future records systems cannot be left to chance. Nor can there be too much delay in laying plans for the future.

Before we examine some of the trends that are influencing, or will influence, our traditional concepts, let us consider a practical example of present thinking concerning the future and records.

A speaker recently said that we are the last generation that will have direct contact with the past. What did he mean? He was not suggesting that we are arbitrarily cutting our ties with the past, but rather he was predicting that our future needs will automatically reduce or eliminate our dependence upon the sacred cows of custom and habit. He was no doubt thinking of the mountains of detailed information we have collected over many years, the difficulties of sorting out the useful information, and its problematical value when finally obtained. He was questioning our recording systems and habits in the light of our rapidly changing needs.

Let's look at what's ahead. In the years to come, county records management will be strongly affected by three factors: (1) the mass of people, (2) the needs and desires of these people in terms of services, and (3) money to pay for these services, particularly those requiring extensive records.

Population mass is a dynamic force. As the mass increases, the force also increases. We have all heard the term "population explosion." This is not a very accurate term. Our population has been exploding ever since Adam and Eve. It will continue to explode in one way or another. What we actually mean by "population explosion" is that the *force* of its mass is really beginning to be felt. It has now reached an intensity that influences many of our decisions and actions. This influence is particularly felt in our records work, since in our records we report the many needs and desires of the individuals making up this same population mass. Just before the

First World War we were a nation of less than 100 million people. Today our population has grown to 180 million. Thus, in the last 50 years our recordkeeping potential, in terms of people, has doubled. Twenty years from now, the population could reach 270 million. The 20-year increase could equal that of the past 50. Today ten counties have more than a million people each. How many such counties will there be in 1980? How many counties will, in effect, be little countries in themselves? How many counties will be able in their recordkeeping to meet this surge of population?

The needs and desires of people result in requests for services by county government. There is no indication that the requests for these services will lessen in the future. Rather, everything points to an expansion of both the volume and the variety of services. Even without considering the expanding population, the forecast is for more records to support expanding services. The constantly increasing tempo of modern living demands that services be performed more rapidly and efficiently. This cannot be done if recordkeeping support bogs down. Thus, records systems, while increasing in size, must become more effective. Can the present records systems of county government meet this requirement?

We are all aware that money is hard to obtain for even the most essential government functions. When government activities are reviewed with cost cutting in mind, records and recordkeeping activities too frequently become a prime target for economies. Here is a paradox. A double standard is applied to records: they are "very important" or "relatively unimportant," depending upon how you look at them. There is no reason to believe that the future will change this ambivalence. Our problems are broadening with our horizons, our records are growing in mass and complexity, but it is difficult to find the dollars to keep up with the changes. How can the counties solve this dilemma?

The impact of the three primary factors just discussed can have a disastrous effect on county government through its records unless definite steps are taken to absorb this impact.

Fortunately, trends are developing that provide us with a mental image of a future records system. Thus, we are not without broad guidelines within which to work out our salvation.

Such a system must be *streamlined*. All unneeded information must be excluded. The included data must be pertinent, must be timely, and must meet operating needs.

The system must be *feasible*. It should readily adjust to rapidly changing situations.

It must be *economical*. Its operating cost must be commensurate

with the value of the data processed or the government service supported.

It must be *rapid*. Data must be available when needed.

It must be *compact*. In the coming "capsule age" it will be increasingly difficult to justify the continued existence of "prehistoric" monsters.

It must provide *protection*. Essential data must be protected against any conceivable manner of loss. Such protection must be built into the system, not added as an afterthought.

In designing the future system, government officials must give more consideration to data needs and uses. The choice of recording media should come as a second step. Too often, primary concern for the media results in compromises that affect the value of recorded data and restrict their use. Determine data needs first, and then design the system.

What are the trends in techniques and aids that the county government may use in designing a records system?

First, we have the electronic, mechanical, and photographic devices. There is an ever-increasing use of machines to solve the problems of mounting record volume and demand for speed. This use will grow. Future development will bring about startling and undreamed-of ways of handling information. But we do not have to wait for the future. Present equipment will meet the needs of government for years to come and most manufacturers have designed their products to accept improvements as they arrive. Here is a word of caution, however, and I am sure the machine people will agree with me. Machines are not "brains" in themselves, although they are often referred to as such. The "magic" that appears to exist in the machines is only for the uninformed. The human mind is still necessary. Machines are no substitute for good planning and effective administration. They are, however, excellent tools. In fact, there would be no solutions to many future problems without them.

Record services is an area that is developing rapidly. By record services, I mean the commercial recordkeeping facilities available to both government and industry. The idea of service operations is not new, but the variety of services now offered spans much of the recordkeeping spectrum, from microfilming to underground storage. It may be more economical to have small, specialized, irregular, or one-time records activities performed by service centers than to tool up your own shop for them. Comparative cost and speed are the controlling factors in making such a decision. There is also the relatively new technique of having several governments (city and

county) share common facilities for similar records activities. This often makes possible the use of machines that the cooperating governments could not afford individually. Such arrangements also lead to uniform and interchangeable record structures for the participating governments—a definite step forward in designing systems to meet the forces of the future.

Finally, but no less important, the records management profession is growing in experience and skill. The supply of people trained in planning effective and economical records systems is increasing. Sound management advice is available from consultants paid by the job or the day, or skilled assistance can be assured by adding a full-time analyst to your staff. A seasoned records manager can provide the professional planning skill needed to develop the records system that is most suitable to your particular needs.

Now that we have reviewed the various trends affecting, in one way or another, our concepts of recordkeeping, can we put into a few words what they tell us? I think we can.

First, there will be an ever-increasing pressure on government records systems to do more, do it faster, and do it at no increase in cost. Second, we have a pretty good idea of the basic qualities for a system to meet these demands. Third, there are excellent tools at our disposal to develop systems with the desired basic qualities. Sounds simple, doesn't it? It would be but for one missing factor in the formula—the "x" factor. The "x" factor is government itself: in this case, county government. County government must recognize that the trends do exist and take the initiative to design the systems to meet the anticipated demands.

Unless there is recognition followed by action, it is quite probable that the wave of the future will swamp unprepared recordkeeping systems. In this age there is no place for the status quo. We exist only through progress.

There is one obvious conclusion. The future of county recordkeeping rests in the hands of county government itself. We have the opportunity to establish a trend, a needed trend, a trend forecasting growing strength and importance for county records. The shape of the future is in your hands.

Provenance—Space

I made reports back to earth, made entries of these observations in my log book and recorded them on a tape recorder.

—Maj. Yuri A. Gagarin at a news conference in Moscow, Apr. 15, 1961,
as reported by the Associated Press.