

The Metes and Bounds of Records Management

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I AM here to talk about a number of aspects of records management. To give this talk more meaning, I shall ask five questions and then proceed to answer them. Please bear in mind that these answers represent my personal views. The questions are:

1. What are the metes and bounds of records management; or what is its scope?
2. Where should the function of records management be placed in the organization?
3. How should the program be operated?
4. How can top management support be obtained for records management?
5. What does the future hold for records management?

Before answering the questions, I should like to summarize the essential elements of the Army Records Management Program. This, I think, will help you appreciate the reasoning used in formulating my answers to the five questions.

The Army's program began in 1943. Yes, we were pioneers in the truest sense! Today the Army maintains 3,600,000 linear feet of files or 13 percent of all Federal records—the equivalent of 450,000 filing cabinets of records. We create annually 900,000 feet and we destroy about the same amount. Thus, volumewise, we completely turn over our records every four years.

Annual cutoff of all Army files is mandatory. No records program is worth much without this cutoff feature. We have adopted decentralized filing in the Army. Each organizational element is required to publish its files plan showing the proper organizational location of all records.

We have appraised and "price-tagged" about 99 percent of all Army records. These "price tags" are our records retention stand-

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ards. We married our filing system to our retention system and derived The Army Functional Files System (TAFFS). We now file, find, and dispose of records under the one system. The life of a paper is determined automatically at the time of filing.

The adoption of TAFFS was one of the most significant developments in our program. Since 1950 we had gradually broadened it to include correspondence management, mail management, office equipment and supplies, and files procedures and documentation systems. On my staff I have ten records analysts and two clerks. We are a division of the Adjutant General's Office, which is a part of the administrative staff of Headquarters, Department of the Army. We are pretty low on the headquarters totem pole.

Now for the first question: *What are the metes and bounds of records management?*

Without any reservation I feel strongly that records management should cover the entire gamut of paperwork from birth to death. This includes such specific areas as the quality and quantity of records generated, the way they are prepared, the number of copies made, the movement of records (mail management), the determination of custody (files planning), the systems and procedures used to maintain records, the files equipment and supplies used, the movement of records to low-cost equipment and space, the disposal of temporary records systematically, and the preservation of the valuable documentation. In summary, records management should encompass records creation, records transmission, records maintenance, records utilization, and records retention.

Although desirable, the total sphere of records management need not be made the responsibility of a single organizational element. The division of the records management function between two or more elements need not be a handicap to the program provided that each element manages its portion actively and that effective cooperation exists among all paperwork managers.

The Army Records Management Program started first in records retention, or disposition as we call it, then moved to maintenance, and lastly entered the records creation area. Most Government agencies followed this reversed sequence and, I believe, so has private industry. This is a logical pattern, for the records retention area provides us with an effective proving ground in which there is room for quick savings and promotional splashes. Let me add one note about our collective experience in this segment of records management. We tend to stay in it too long; we get bogged down here. As a result we are tagged as records disposal clerks—

and that is bad. Rightly, we should be known as management analysts, records executives, records administrators, or records managers—partners in the larger field of administrative management. Records management is much broader than records retention.

The second question is: *Where should the function of records management be placed in the organization?*

In my opinion, the organizational location is not of overriding importance. More important is the authority vested in the individual or office charged with this function. Even though low on the organizational totem pole, we in the Army have a broad charter in records management to act *for* the Secretary of the Army. This is good! Only in this way can we operate an effective program.

Even with the best of charters from the highest authority, however, the way is far from smooth. In spite of our charter the old-line Army elements told us early in the life of the program that they had no intention of allowing us to tell them how to keep their records or what to do with them—and certainly they would not let us take custody of their records. We had to prove ourselves. This we did over the years and today no one challenges our authority. The Adjutant General is simply the recognized authority in records management throughout the Army. This, then, should be your goal—to win the recognition or professional status that is so essential for success in records management.

You know the organizational peculiarities of your firms or agencies. Try to influence, if you can, the placement of records management within an office that has status and prestige—an office that will lend support to the program. Since records management is part of the larger field of administrative management, I believe you should normally be a part of the comptroller's office or the office of the corporate secretary or some similar type of office.

Before leaving this question of organizational location, let me stress a negative but vital point. Don't, if you can possibly help it, let the records management function get wrapped up with an organization that is primarily performing mail, file, or similar operations. Records management is a staff function. Keep it that way! If you become tied into an operating organization, your staff responsibilities will suffer; the day-to-day operations will take precedent over your management duties.

The next question is: *How should a records program be operated?*

Your program should be comprehensive and cover all aspects of records management, even though you may be able to work on

only one aspect at a time. You cannot move effectively on all fronts simultaneously because you will diffuse your efforts and there will be little or no tangible results. As a first step in your program, you should prepare a program-guidance document for yourself, listing the projects you intend to undertake and the priority for each. This program document will aid in directing your efforts into meaningful accomplishments. It will also show your boss the businesslike approach that you have toward your job.

To supervise your program effectively you must provide your people with written program guidance (policies, procedures, guides); you must promote and train people; and you must survey and audit your program to see if it is being carried out.

To provide written program guidance is one of the hardest jobs in records management, but such guidance is essential if you wish to bring your program to a systematic and orderly level. You should give your full attention to preparing the written policies, procedures, and instructions that every man in your organization is to follow. Just as a building needs blueprints and specifications, so does records management need written program guidance. Without it, your program cannot be truly effective.

Records executives must make themselves the world's best salesmen. You must promote the program all the way. You must be on the alert for the slightest opportunity to push your program; when that opportunity comes—pounce on it! When you get a new chief or some new top executive, arrange to give him a briefing on records management. During the briefing, work hard to create an impression that he will retain in his memory. This is part of the job of establishing the necessary confidence and a professional reputation—both so essential to a successful program.

Training is one of our biggest jobs, and it is difficult because there are so many ways to go about it. You, the records executive, must first of all identify your training requirements. Then you must decide how to satisfy them. You may train operating personnel to train their subordinates, do the training yourself, or invite outsiders to help train your people. If your organization is a large one, perhaps you should establish a records management school or run workshops in certain areas of records management. We have trained thousands of Army middle managers in effective writing, and similarly thousands of clerks, secretaries, and typists in files procedures and systems.

There are many training techniques. The main point is to recog-

nize your requirements, to provide for training at all organizational levels, and to refuse to let ignorance defeat your program.

The last element of program supervision—surveys and audits—is considered by many to be the most important of the three. You must go out and see what is being done in records management in your organization. This cannot be determined by sitting at a desk. The best blueprint is valueless if it is not followed.

For the first few years of our program we did little or no surveying of any type. During this incubation period we visited our people, trained and assisted them, gave advice—in effect, spoon-fed them—and helped them to learn to crawl and then walk. When we felt that our program was solidly established and our policies and procedures were reasonably fixed, we initiated a formal records audit program. Under this program our aim is to analyze thoroughly the status of all components of records management and tell the head of the organization concerned what is good and what is bad about his program. We render formal reports signed by the Adjutant General—the head of our office. Formal reporting is an essential feature of audits.

In operating your records program keep things from settling down too completely. Keep records management in the limelight. Hold an organization-wide conference of records personnel. Put on a workshop in effective writing and get an individual of considerable stature to break the champagne bottle over the endeavor. See that your program is given publicity in your house news organs. Do anything that is good and that will keep the dust from settling on your program.

One last point on records operation. Establish a close working relationship with the personnel who carry out the records program at the grassroots level. Your program is only as good as are these people. Full-time records personnel may be needed in each major organizational element in some business firms or other agencies. In a small organization your grassroots people are the secretaries, stenographers, and clerks. Whoever they are, do not neglect them.

How should you maintain effective relations with these people? Visit them from time to time. Write them informal newsletters and give them the latest “inside” information. Get their opinions on proposed changes in policies and procedures. These and other means will help you establish a firm relationship with those who, in the final analysis, can make or break your program. Even though they may have another supervisor and are subject to his instructions, you can develop in them a sense of loyalty to you and to the

records program. These people will not forget you if you work with them and for them.

Our next question is: *How can top management support of records management be obtained?*

Those of you in business would not be on your company's payroll if top management did not support you to some extent. No doubt there are exceptions to the validity of this statement. It may be that your firm considers it fashionable to have a records man on the staff—to keep up with the Joneses. In most instances, however, you are hired because your superior feels he will get a fair return on his investment. Thus, we assume that you have support. The question is: What is the nature and extent of the support? Is it enough to ensure an effective company program?

If support is adequate we must keep on the move, expand into other areas of records management, and continue to prove to our superiors that the support is justified. If the support is inadequate we have to buckle down and do such an outstanding job that we earn the respect and support of management. Support in depth is earned, not given.

My last question is: *What is the future in records management?*

"The harvest truly is plenteous but the labourers are few." In the Government we have positions of records administrator that go begging for varying periods of time because there are so few qualified people to fill them. The demand for qualified people exceeds the supply. I understand that the same is true in industry.

If this situation exists we are partly or largely to blame. We should not merely develop and provide records executives for our own organizations. We should think in broader terms. We must turn to the universities in our area and support better and fuller academic programs in the total field of records management. Rather than taking satisfaction in the handful of universities scheduling one or two courses in records management, we should support a full curriculum in records management in many universities. Professional associations of records managers should support and encourage broader instruction programs. Records managers, themselves, should go to school and get more formal and systematic training, and we should insist that any person now entering our profession receive formal training unless he comes to us fully qualified in education and experience.

We are in a worthwhile and fertile field—a relatively new field. It is a real challenge to any young warrior. It is a field in which we can harvest the fruits of our efforts. Our salaries compare

favorably with those of our colleagues in related professions. Yet, it takes time to develop an effective records management program; we in the Army have been in this business since 1943, and we still have much to do. And so, to anyone who really wants to go places and do things—in industry or Government—I say: GO RECORDS MANAGEMENT, YOUNG MAN OR WOMAN!

Advice

Furthermore, the archivist should not be disturbed by the distorted ideas of the unenlightened part of the public. It knows as much about archival work as a watchman about Newton's theory of light, and both may be pardoned for prattling about things they do not understand.

—KARL FRIEDRICH BERNHARD ZINKERNAGEL, *Handbuch für angehende Archivare und Registratoren*, p. 108 (Nördlingen, 1800). Translation by Ernst Posner.

Analysis of the Parts

The preparation of a descriptive Index or Synopsis of Treasury Instructions and Decisions, in execution of the Revenue Laws, as expressed in *Circular Letters* addressed to Collectors of the Customs and other officers of the Treasury, having been put in my charge without definition or limitation *as to the plan or mode of executing the work*, I not only felt fully authorized, but deemed it proper and expedient, in the absence of all restrictions, to avail myself of the confiding liberality of the Department, by adopting such a plan as would suggest itself in the course of its prosecution—which was commenced by examining and collating the materials, restoring copies from the records and all other available sources, and arranging them in chronological order for binding. Such, necessarily, was the *first step* taken in this intricate enterprise, in order to redeem these invaluable archives from the dilapidated condition into which most of them had fallen, perhaps unavoidably, through a long course of years—the same having been but very imperfectly reclaimed by the praiseworthy efforts of the Department, in making special calls on officers of the Customs and others to replace them, since the conflagration of the Treasury building in 1832. This compilation being thus perfected, as far as was practicable from all available sources, consists of two series, of six quarto volumes—three of Secretaries' and three of Comptrollers' Circulars, interspersed with others, from other officers, on subjects of kindred bearing. The instructions in execution of the Revenue laws being thus embodied, it was now determined to make a separate *abridgment* of each series, taking the volumes of the Comptroller's Circulars first in order, being more in detail, and those of the Secretaries of the Treasury next—making specific references, at the end of each item of instruction, to the original circulars corresponding with the items so abridged: and this was the *second process*, which was executed with the greatest possible exactness and care, making the abridgments, in certain cases, more

literal and full than in others, according to the greater importance of the particular subject. Finding that the Instructions of the Secretaries and the Comptrollers, from beginning to end, with very few exceptions, related to the same subjects, often making repetitions, confirmations, or references to each other, and in some instances those of the former rescinding those of the latter, and of their respective predecessors, it was, in the next place, necessary to *incorporate* the two sets of abstracts or abridgments, according to the *date* and *subject-matter* of each item, that they might throw reciprocal light on each other, as well as to form a continuous and unbroken whole of Treasury Instructions, according to chronological order: and this was the *third process*. Having thus completed the incorporation of the two masses, though their comingled subjects began now to assume more form and consistency, yet, being only in the sequence of dates, serious breaks, or separations of important instructions on the same subject, would occur at short intervals throughout, which would be but imperfectly remedied by an alphabetical index of references to them, as they would still be contemplated in more or less isolated condition when consulting those references. Under these circumstances, a CLASSIFICATION RAISONNÉ next appeared to be indispensable, in order to impart perspicuity and the greatest practical utility to the whole system. To accomplish such a classification, the whole consolidated abridgment of the two sets of instructions was subjected to thorough and repeated revisions, in all the mazy details of its miscellaneous, and in many instances seemingly heterogeneous contents, noting at every moment whatever susceptibility the different items possessed of being grouped under general heads, according to their respective affinities—more or less obscure in some instances, and latent or difficult of detection in others—until at length the most *isolated* and *dubious* gradually assumed, with the rest, their appropriate places, in juxtaposition with their nearest of kind, under their proper chapters, sections, and classes, which respectively had, in the same process, somewhat more readily taken their range of precedence or sequence, according to their more obvious and natural order of development. Thus, the classification which I ultimately, after great labor and intense scrutiny, succeeded in producing, gradually emerged out of the chaos of documents, which had never been framed with any view to method, and had fallen into a state of still more hopeless confusion: and this was the *fourth process*—the intricacies and difficulties of which, alone, can hardly be estimated, even by the seemingly apt comparison of it to an attempt to re-produce the several orders of Grecian architecture by collecting and arranging their minute fragments from ancient ruins; simply because the existing models of those orders would afford a guide to the proper and scientific disposition of their respective fragments; whereas, in the present case, instead of having any model for a guide, *the whole classification of this Synopsis had to be constructed according to the indications of the analysis of the parts, as developed step by step simultaneously with the examination and disposition of the materials of which it is composed.*

—ROBERT MAYO, *A Synopsis of the Commercial and Revenue System of the United States* . . . , p. ix (J. & S. Gideon, Washington, D.C., 1847).