

## International Scene

# Revolution in Records: A Strategy for Information Resources Management and Records Management

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**Abstract:** This article summarizes the main features of a Dutch study, *Omslag in Opslag*, published in 1991. The study presents a relatively new approach aimed at the improvement of records management within Dutch agencies. The authors argue that information is preserved and managed *because* users have specific reasons for and interests in doing so. This is important because there are different reasons and interests and because each reason and interest has its own demands on records management methods and techniques. The intensity of the several interests and reasons varies with each business process. For effective and efficient records management it is therefore necessary to know the weight of each relevant interest. That can be done only by analyzing the business process. The consequence of this study is that the ratio of uniform records management methods and techniques disappears and that pluriformity of methods and techniques must be accepted. The article ends with activities planned by the Dutch government to implement this new paradigm. The authors are grateful to Tora Bikson for suggesting *Revolution in Records* as the English translation of *Omslag in Opslag*, and to Rick Barry for his suggestions for improving the clarity of the text.

**About the author:** Peter M. H. Waters is head of the Coordination of Documentary Information (CDI) division of The Netherlands Ministry of the Interior. Henk Nagelhout is senior policy official in the Administrative Coordination and Information Systems Department of the same ministry. With Max Beekhuis of the State Archives and Pieter Wisse, an external consultant, they formed the project team which drew up *Revolution in Records*. The CDI division is charged with stimulating the implementation of the new paradigm explained in this article. To achieve this end, new methods and instruments are under development and a training program is in place. Both Waters and Nagelhout advise ministries and their agencies on issues related to electronic records, business process re-design, and archives.

IN 1991 THE STATE SECRETARY for the Interior published a new strategy for records management in the Dutch civil service in a document entitled *Omslag in Opslag* (Revolution in Records).<sup>1</sup> This strategy differs fundamentally from previous policy, its key element being that records management forms part of information resources management as a whole, and should therefore no longer be approached on the basis of separate rules and terminology. Second, information resources management—including records management—should be brought into line with the requirements imposed by the critical business processes of the civil service. Since such requirements vary, depending on their nature, diversity rather than uniformity should be the hallmark of information resources management. Civil service managers who are responsible for particular business processes should also bear responsibility for the management of the information resources related to those processes. *Revolution in Records* provides managers with guidelines for discharging that responsibility. The notion of interests and reasons plays a key role. The aim of *Revolution in Records* is thus to provide civil service managers with a framework within which they can shape information resources management and develop methods and techniques for general use. This paper summarizes *Revolution in Records*, section by section.

## Background

The formulation of a new policy strategy was prompted by a 1988 report from The Netherlands Court of Audit, entitled *The Management and Conservation of Government Records*. The Court of Audit took the existing regulations and specialist standards applying to records management as

the basis for a summary of a considerable number of problems:

- a. The vast quantities of records housed in government ministries (300 to 600 linear km) and substantial backlogs in processing these records and transferring them to the State Archives (the National Archives of The Netherlands)
- b. Inadequate instruments for managing the records creation process
- c. Poor discipline among civil servants (i.e., civil servants were negligent when it came to storing original documents, or they created personal archives, thus rendering central records collections incomplete and unreliable)
- d. The absence of a policy on the management of data stored on carriers other than paper
- e. The low levels on which records management staff were placed, leading to high staff turnover and the recruitment of less well-qualified staff

In The Netherlands, every minister is responsible for the proper, well-organized management of the records of her or his own ministry. In addition, the Minister of Education, Culture, and Science (OCW) and the Minister of the Interior are also responsible for coordination in this field.

The Minister of OCW is guardian of the procedure for the appraisal of records and is responsible for the preservation of records that have been transferred to the State Archives. The key element here is the cultural and historical importance of the records. Relevant legislation includes the Archives Act of 1962, regulating public access to public records following their transfer into the care of the State Archives and the procedure for appraisal. Currently, records are transferred to the State Archives after fifty years, although the time limit will soon be reduced to twenty years.

The Minister of the Interior is responsible for the coordination of information re-

<sup>1</sup>*Omslag in Opslag: terugkeer naar informatievoorziening* (Ministry of the Interior, The Hague, 1991), ISBN 90-5414-003-8.

sources management within the civil service and for the efficient functioning of the civil service in general. Records are an important area here. An example of a regulation arising out of this responsibility is the Civil Service General Secretariat Affairs Decree of 1980, which prescribes highly detailed, binding rules on how ministries should register and store their records and designates a senior official in each ministry with responsibility for the management of the archives created in this way. The aim of the decree is to centralize and harmonize work in this field.

In practice, the two ministers divided their responsibility according to the date of the document. As stated above, the Ministry of the Interior was responsible for documents while they were still in the keeping of the originating ministry, and, as a rule, while they were less than fifty years old. OCW took responsibility once the documents were transferred.

As is customary in The Netherlands, the Lower House of Parliament questioned the two ministers on the Court of Audit's report. The ministers joined forces and, in accordance with sound civil service practice, set up a project group to seek solutions to the problems.

### **Analysis of the Problems**

The Court of Audit concluded that the main cause of the problems it had identified was failure to comply with existing regulations when creating records, which implies poor official discipline. As a solution to this problem, the court advised to tighten the rules and the standards in question. The project group had grave reservations about this analysis. In its view, compliance with the rules could not be enforced because many users of records could not see the point of the regulations and the prescribed procedures, which indeed often presented problems in their day-to-day work. Tightening the rules, as rec-

ommended by the Court of Audit, would thus be counterproductive, and evasion would increase.

The project group believed it more advisable to focus on the needs and wishes of the staff who were engaged in the organization's critical business processes. After all, every organizational unit in the civil service has an objective, which is the reason for its existence. On the basis of that objective, certain duties are assigned to the unit. Together, the objective and the duties form the unit's political mission. Performance of the duties should result in products, and, if all goes well, an assessment of the products can establish whether and to what extent the objective has been achieved. Only if it contributes to this cycle can there be a point to records management—or to administrative support in the wider sense. The project group examined the critical business processes of the organizational unit rather than the records procedures. The group's basic premise was that if users find the support services convenient they will automatically adhere to the procedures. Seen from this angle, civil service discipline is a result rather than a precondition, a consequence rather than a cause. The project group therefore emphasized the question of the purpose and value of records creation and administrative support. This would help to ascertain the information needs of users, to serve as a basis on which to shape the support services and their working methods.

### **The Abstract Approach**

The project group was charged with devising a long-term strategy, which meant taking full account of organizational and technical developments. It is a truism to say that the pace of change is fast. Yesterday's modern techniques are today's outdated methods. The idea was to ensure that the new strategy could not be immediately overtaken by developments. To that end,

the project group opted for a structure that was fairly abstract and that would therefore apply for a longer period.

The second reason for adopting an abstract strategy was to ensure independence of the information carrier. The focus on the critical business processes ensures that it is no longer the form but the content of the information that matters. Whether the information is carried on paper or in electronic form, whether it arrived by mail, fax or electronic mail is thus irrelevant. The framework proposed by *Revolution in Records* applies to every medium of information transfer and storage.

### Interests and Reasons

The emphasis on the purpose and value of administrative support soon gave rise to the question of why information is stored in the first place. The answer is obvious: because someone has an interest in its preservation or because there is some reason for preserving it. Conversely, that means that if no reason or interest can be demonstrated, there is no need to store the information.

*Revolution in Records* states that the main reason for establishing collections of information is the organization's need to fulfill the responsibilities with which it has been charged and for which it requires information. The first and most important commandment laid down in *Revolution in Records* is: "Thou shalt organize information resources management in accordance with the requirements imposed by running thy business processes." The second, of almost equal importance, is: "In organizing information resources management, thou shalt take account of external interests." In other words, information gathering should serve both internal and external interests, which vary from one situation and time to another.

Two external interests appear relevant in every case. The first is accountability,

which in turn can be divided into four sub-interests. The civil service cannot hide from scrutiny. Every government agency should be able to account for its activities, as follows:

- a. To its superiors within the relevant ministry, up to the minister in person, who, after all, is accountable to Parliament
- b. To the Court of Audit, which has both a right and a duty to scrutinize government activity to determine whether it is efficient and lawful
- c. To Parliament
- d. To the public, which has a right to know about the activities of the government and to call it to account for a particular decision.

In organizing information resources management, the civil service should at all times take full account of the requirements stemming from accountability. For the most part, civil servants are well aware of these requirements.

The second external interest that comes into play, although civil servants are often not aware of it, is the interest of the cultural heritage. Information collected on paper and in electronic form is a record of government activity and hence forms part of the cultural heritage of a society. Interested individuals and professional researchers can use the records to determine which course of action a government took in the past and why. To fulfill this cultural obligation to future researchers, the Archives Act stipulates that—after fifty years, soon to be twenty years—government records be transferred to the State Archives, where they will be open to public scrutiny.

If collections are to continue to play this cultural role in the future, however, they will have to satisfy certain criteria relating to perishability and retrieval. As it costs less to meet these criteria while the collection is being assembled, the requirements of the cultural heritage should be known

and complied with at that stage. This does not apply to all the information that is collected. No more than a small proportion of the total qualifies for long-term preservation in the State Archives. To ensure that cultural heritage requirements are not imposed on every record generated, the collections that do qualify for preservation in this connection must be so designated by the State Archives at an early stage.

In addition to accountability and the cultural heritage, other interests may be relevant in particular cases. State security has to be taken into account in relation to secret information, as does the importance of personal privacy with regard to collections of personal data. Dutch law stipulates, for example, that personal data may be used only for a predetermined purpose and prohibits the registration of more data than are necessary for that purpose. It is interesting in this connection to note that the question of whether the ethnic origins of employees should be registered is currently being debated in The Netherlands. If employers are obliged to employ a certain percentage of members of ethnic minorities, employees' ethnic origins must be registered to enable officials to determine whether employers are fulfilling this obligation. On the other hand, such registration may carry a certain stigma, which explains the doubts felt about it.

### **Relative Importance**

There would be no problem if the same importance could be attached to all the individual interests and reasons listed above for every business process. In that case, uniform rules and methods would be sufficient. However, this is not the case. Depending on such factors as political and social priorities, the political damage that can be caused by unsatisfactory products and procedures, the frequency of business processes, and the commotion surrounding the development and implementation of

policy, the importance attached to each reason or interest could be different every time. This is relevant because the importance attached to a reason or interest affects the length of time for which information is kept and, to some extent, the way it is preserved. It could be said that different requirements are imposed as regards preservation in respect to every interest or reason. Great variations can provide grounds for organizing and managing the relevant part of the information collection in a way different from the rest. For example, a series of licenses might be stored for twenty years on microfilm, while other data stored on disk could be deleted after two years once the representatives of the cultural heritage have indicated that they see no reason for storing them permanently.

If weighing the reasons always produces a different result, the response is to determine what form of support is most effective in relation to each business process. That means abandoning uniformity in favor of diversity.

Privacy is a prime example of how the importance attached to an interest can change with the passage of time. The importance of privacy has emerged into the foreground only recently in The Netherlands and, as a result, it has been recognized and afforded statutory protection. However, the value attached to privacy now seems to have peaked. For political reasons, privacy has taken second place to the importance of crime prevention in the debate on introducing compulsory identification. The Dutch public now appears willing to allow some infringements of their privacy in the interests of combatting crime and improving public safety.

Not only can the importance attached to different interests vary, but the requirements relating to those interests can conflict. For example, the conservation of certain information might serve the interests of the cultural heritage, while its de-

struction might serve the interests of personal privacy or state security. An example is the debate currently being conducted in The Netherlands about the records of the security services. It is proving impossible to reconcile the interests of the cultural heritage, personal privacy, and state security in deciding what information should be kept permanently and, hence, in due course transferred to the State Archives for public access. Choices will have to be made, choices that will be determined by contemporary political attitudes, and will thus undoubtedly be different from choices that might have been made before the collapse of the Berlin Wall.<sup>2</sup>

### Logical and Physical Collections

How do these interests act as guidelines for information resources management in an organizational unit? As stated above, every reason or interest generates requirements of its own. The first step is therefore to determine which information relates to the various interests. There should virtually be one collection per interest. This is referred to as a "logical" collection in *Revolution in Records*. If a unit has to serve several interests, as is usually the case, it will create several logical collections. One piece of information can form part of more than one logical collection. This means that various, possibly even conflicting, requirements can be imposed on it. A choice must therefore be made as to which requirements are to be applied. This brings us to how information collections are arranged physically.

Theoretically, it would be possible to establish a separate physical collection for each of the reasons listed above, each with its own regime of requirements. Logical

and physical considerations would then coincide. However, an item of information may belong to more than one logical collection. If a physical collection were established for each of these, several copies of the item would have to be preserved. That can be useful. In large-scale processes, such as the award of a subsidy, for example, if only a fraction of the information involved qualifies for longterm preservation on cultural grounds, it may be useful to keep that information separately, in accordance with the requirements imposed by the State Archives in terms of classification, retrieval, and condition. The bulk of the information can then be arranged in line with the management requirements of the organizational unit.

Often, however, it is impossible—i.e., far too expensive—to establish a separate physical collection for each reason or interest. If several logical collections are combined to form one physical collection, a decision must be made as to which requirements are to be applied. As a rule, this will mean adding together all the requirements applicable to all the information in question. If requirements conflict, however, a choice will have to be made or separate collections formed. It should be apparent by now that, according to *Revolution in Records*, the rational way to organize information resources management is on the basis of the information needs that have been identified for the business process. Accordingly, it may differ for every business process. Only in this way will users derive the maximum benefit from the databanks established by and for them.

### Responsibility

Because different interests come into play in relation to every business process, each imposing its own requirements, specific decisions on how to organize information resources management can only be made at business process level. This inev-

<sup>2</sup>These examples illustrate the point that retention scheduling is time sensitive. The weighting of importance criteria may change over time or with different political administrations.



itably leads to the conclusion that the manager responsible for the business process must also be responsible for information resources management. In deciding how this is to be done, managers' prime consideration will be the running of their own processes. In addition, however, they will have to ascertain what other interests are involved, specifically interests that have been recognized in legislation. Interests that have not been so recognized should not be taken into account until they have been recognized or the requirements arising from them have changed.

Managers may take the advice of experts, but the ultimate decision on how to organize information resources management rests with them alone. That is a considerable responsibility. Managers not only have to identify all the interests involved, they may also encounter conflicting interests or rules. If, for example, the State Archives claims the preservation of a certain piece of information in the interests of the cultural heritage and other groups claim scheduling in the interests of privacy, the manager has to weigh these interests and decide between them. What guarantees does the public have that a manager will take external interests into account and not simply give pride of place to the interests of running his or her own organizational unit? Although such a danger exists, the *Revolution in Records* project team does not believe it is very significant. Since recognized interests are protected by legislation, civil service managers must respect the rules. After all, they live in glass houses, as it were, and are accountable to a number of different authorities for their actions, including how they strike a balance between conflicting interests. Such accountability is well regulated within ministries. The minister is accountable for policy. Under the relevant legislation, the secretary-general is accountable for the actions of civil servants. The legislation refers explicitly to the secretary-general's

responsibility for good information resources management. How he or she guarantees it is up to them. In other words, despite the trend towards self-management and decentralization, a considerable measure of internal control is still in place, concerned not so much with details as with the broad outlines of how civil service managers fulfill their responsibilities and exercise their powers.

### Integration

A focus on primary business processes reveals the extent to which the support provided for such business processes has become fragmented over the years. The increased division of labor and complexity of the work done has gradually given rise to specialized forms of work performed by closed groups of specialist staff.

When computerized information resources management appeared on the scene, computer systems were primarily designed to meet the information needs of functional area or staff specialists, examples being systems for financial administration, personnel administration, and mail registration. Such systems are also largely concerned with the allocation of staff and other resources, and are therefore of little value to the staff engaged in critical business processes. Their basic concern is how to ensure that the product is of a high quality, produced on time and delivered to the customer at the lowest possible cost. They and their immediate superiors do not care what kind of system produces the information, provided they obtain the information they need.

When it comes to support for primary business processes, a distinction between financial, personnel, or documentary information or records is less relevant, and indeed is of importance only to staff specialists. According to *Revolution in Records*, existing procedures constitute a hindrance to civil servants engaged in these

critical business processes, because staff support services take account of interests other than those of running the critical business processes. *Revolution in Records* assumes that only if information resources management centers on the latter can other interests be served by what will then be improved—i.e., more complete databases.

Advances in information management and technology make it possible to eliminate fragmented information resources management and thus to ensure integrated information provision. Such a trend is already under way in a number of ministries, quite independently of *Revolution in Records*. The provision of personnel and financial data and documentation has been decentralized to line departments, which have clearly had problems with existing information systems in these fields that did not meet their information needs.

## Terminology

If a strategy aims to make information resources management more relevant to users, users should be central to the strategy. This also applies to the terminology in use. The average user does not care about the subtle difference between a folder and a dossier, a distinction which is of interest only to specialists. For users, records are documents that have been dealt with and stored somewhere in a cabinet. While specialists are aware that messages received moments ago by electronic mail are also record material, this fact escapes most users.

The term *documentary information* can also be confusing. This is defined as information in textual form which is not structured information. It does not therefore include financial, staff, and generally process-related information. The scope of documentary information is therefore more restricted than the term *record material* indicates and the end-user regards as useful.

Giving terms, which specialists under-

stand, a different meaning that also makes sense to users only adds to the confusion. If integrated information management and technology are the thing of the future, specific terms should be left to the specialist, and users should be addressed in terms of information resources management and related terminology. Information resources management may thus be defined as “the entire array of activities which provide an organizational unit (an official, company, division, ministry or the civil service as a whole) with the information it needs to fulfill the responsibilities assigned to it.”

## Regulations

A central theme of *Revolution in Records* is that acknowledged interests must be safeguarded. Much legislation exists for this purpose. However, there is no need for regulations that are not based on a particular interest and/or aim to impose an excessively uniform, detailed regime. Such legislation would only make it more difficult to coordinate information resources management with the requirements applying to each business process. *Revolution in Records* therefore recommends the repeal of the Civil Service General Secretariat Affairs Decree referred to above. Other existing regulations afford plenty of guidelines for information resources management. Provisions in the decree that serve the interests of the cultural heritage should be incorporated into the Archives Act of 1962 or regulations based upon it. By the same token *Revolution in Records* argues that the demarcation of responsibilities between the minister of the Interior and the minister of Welfare, Health, and Cultural Affairs should be changed. The division in time merely exacerbates fragmentation and adds nothing to the cohesion of policy. A demarcation along the lines of the interests outlined above would be far clearer. The minister of OCW should represent the cultural heritage, and requirements should be



imposed in that connection irrespective of the age of the information. However, it is essential that these requirements are limited to the small proportion of information which is eligible for long-term preservation.

### Instruments

The first aim of *Revolution in Records* is to provide civil service managers with a framework they can use to organize information resources management in their own situations. However, as *Revolution in Records* is a highly abstract document, there is a definite need for specific instruments to facilitate the performance of this task. The Ministry of the Interior is devising a number of instruments, the most important of which are discussed below.

An analysis instrument is in development, which will make it possible to determine the information needs of each business process and to streamline business processes on that basis. The instrument will be based on a typology of the business processes performed by the civil service. For no matter how distinctive a business process may be, similarities can always be found with others, such as in its frequency, the nature of the product, the method of control, or the potential political damage caused by unsatisfactory products and procedures. It may be assumed that there are significant similarities between the information needs of different business processes and thus between the methods that can be used to meet these needs.

If a civil service manager is to take account of the interests of the cultural heritage, he or she must be aware—when the information collection is being formed—that all or part of it qualifies for long-term preservation. The State Archives is currently experimenting with a new selection method, known as PIVOT.<sup>3</sup> Using this

method, the decision about whether to keep information permanently depends not on an analysis of the individual record but on the business processes that led to the record. For the time being, the method is being applied to the immense volume of archive material dating from the period between 1945 and 1990, because it must be transferred in a short space of time because of the reduction in the time limit from fifty to twenty years. However, the lists of duties produced by the institutional surveys on which selection is based could continue to be used in the future, serving to indicate, at an early stage, the records of which civil service activities would qualify for long-term preservation. A booklet entitled *PIVOT, A Turning Point in Appraisal Policy* is available from the State Archives.

The Ministry of the Interior is working with other ministries on implementing an infrastructure for electronic mail in the civil service. The most important element of this project (apart from the technology) is that it will shed light on the organizational and procedural arrangements required for electronic communication. On the basis of experience to date, a manual has been drawn up for civil service managers wishing to communicate by e-mail.

If the strategy embodied in *Revolution in Records* is to be the order of the day in the Dutch civil service, it must be disseminated

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prises (1) a method for institutional studies; (2) aims for selection and appraisal (preserving those information “allowing an outlined reconstruction of government acts in relation to society”); (3) criteria for the appraisal of government acts; (4) a method for analyzing information that results from processes with a high frequency; (5) a method to draw up lists of governments acts with the appraisal decision based on both the institutional study and the criteria. The PIVOT method is based on the institutional studies. These describe the several fields of governmental care, the actors in that field, and their tasks and functions. Any piece of information is thus placed in the context of the functions of government. The institutional studies give a value to a given piece of information. By matching that value and the criteria, information can be weighed and selected.

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<sup>3</sup>PIVOT is a method for functional appraisal developed by the Dutch State Archives. PIVOT com-

to the relevant target groups, perhaps by means of training courses. The Ministry of the Interior, with substantial financial and other assistance from other ministries, headed a project to set up documentary information resources management training courses for civil servants (DIOR). These courses provide staff engaged in documentary information resources management with the knowledge and skills required to render the best possible support to the staff engaged in the critical business processes of the civil service, in line with the *Revolution in Records* strategy.

*Revolution in Records* is a long overdue attempt to recognize the increasing impor-

tance of information and information management in the conduct of government affairs and the associated problems and opportunities afforded by modern information management and technology. It recognizes that the traditional paradigms of archives and records management are not well suited either to the present or the emerging information management and technology environments. Nor do they take advantage of the opportunities afforded by technology to better align information resources with the primary operational purposes for which those resources were created in the first place.