

ICA/CER - Committee on electronic and Other Current Records

NETWORKED ELECTRONIC INFORMATION IN THE INTERNET AND INTRANET ENVIRONMENTS

Perspective of the ICA Committee on Electronic and Other Current Record

1. Purpose

1.1 The purpose of this document is to present a perspective on the management of electronic information in intranet and internet environments from a record keeping perspective. As government information is being recorded increasingly in electronic form and exchanged on networks, questions have emerged concerning the “archiving” and long term access of information as well as the roles and responsibilities of archives. As government institutions become more concerned about the management of information in these complex environments, they are asking about the approach they should be using to address questions such as the following:

Is information stored on an internet or an intranet web site a “record” or is it a “publication”?

If it is a “record”, how should it be managed?

How should “records” managed in a web site be linked to related records created elsewhere in the organization?

What role should an archives play in the management of records managed in internet and intranet web sites.

This document seeks to provide a perspective on these questions.

2. Scope

2.1 While this document addresses the internet and intranet environments, its focus is on the management of information in the government managed web sites supported in both environments.

2.2 In the internet environment, publically accessible web sites generally store information about government programs and services as well as documents that have been prepared for access by and dissemination to the public. Many sites also provide an e-mail capability to permit the public to communicate with the institution (generally the communications or public affairs office).

Increasingly, web sites are being used as portals to support the transaction of government business on-line (e.g. processing applications by citizens for licenses or benefits; processing tax claims; ordering government publications; etc.).

2.3 The concept of the intranet is evolving rapidly. An intranet is based on one or multiple web sites which are generally restricted to a defined group of individuals (e.g. the employees of the institution; clients; large work groups; etc.). Based on the use of web technologies (e.g. browsers, etc.), an intranet typically contains information (e.g. procedures manuals, policy documents, glossaries; document libraries; etc.) commonly used by a defined group and provides the members of the group with the capability of accessing other relevant information sources (e.g. records systems, library catalogues, gateways to the internet; etc). Increasingly it also enables members of the defined group to carry out certain transactions on-line (e.g. processing leave applications; procuring goods and services, processing correspondence, etc.). In order to maintain the integrity of the Intranet, access is normally secured through the use of a firewall.

3 The Perspective

For the purposes of this document, the perspective of an archives with respect to electronic information in both the internet and intranet environments is based on the definition of “record” contained in the ICA’s Guide for Managing Electronic Records from an Archival Perspective (International Council on Archives: Paris, 1996):

A record is recorded information produced or received in the initiation, conduct or completion of an institutional or individual activity and that comprises content, context and structure sufficient to provide evidence of the activity.

In answer to the question, is information posted on a web site a “record” or a “publication”? It all depends upon the perspective (i.e. an information object stored on a web site can be both a “publication” and a “record”). From one point of view, a given information object posted on a web site can be viewed as a self contained unit of information produced for the purpose of being accessed and retrieved by others (i.e. it can be considered to be “publication”). From another point of view, the object can be viewed as one of a series of information objects documenting a series of actions supporting a business activity (i.e. it is one of a series of “records” documenting a given activity including the act of publishing). The outcome of many business activities may be the publication of the results of its activity on a web site. The actions involved in “publishing” an information object on a web site generate records which document the overall business activity. It follows, therefore, that all information objects on a web site are “records” because all emerge from actions connected to the business activities of the organization.

Examples of these perspectives are as follows:

An environmental agency publishes a strategic directions document on the web site for public comment. The briefing notes, correspondence, reports on consultations and the minutes of meetings as well as significant drafts leading to the environmental strategic directions strategy (including a copy of the consultation draft published on the web site) are maintained as records in the records system of the environmental agency.

A finance agency publishes its debt operations reports available on the Internet where they can be accessed by a variety of audiences. The records associated with the preparation of the debt operations reports together with copies of the debt operations reports themselves are managed in the records system maintained by the Finance department.

An internal newsletter, for and about the staff of a government institution is made available through its publication on the institution's intranet site. Electronic copies of departmental newsletters placed on the intranet web site are stored as records on files in the Communications area and in the record keeping system. Significant drafts and the final versions of individual articles included in newsletters are filed by the author in his or her own electronic space, but they are also stored in the record keeping system in order to document the activities of the Communications area.

Highlights of the meetings of a senior government-wide executive committee meeting are made available (i.e. published) to all public servants on a central agency's web site. The minutes of the senior executive committee meetings, together with the "highlights" themselves are stored as records in the departmental record keeping system;

Patents are issued through the web based on a secure channel and based on information provided by the applicant for the patent. All of the information objects associated with the processing of the patent are electronic and all are records. Those records which are necessary to document the patents applications process (including emails generated as a result of processing the application) are captured in a record keeping system.

Based on these examples it should be clear that a web site is not a static "bulletin board". It is really a portal that supports the business activities and processes of the organization. Some of these activities support process steps called "publishing". Others support process steps which may be involved in processing applications for benefits, licenses, etc., or in processing requests for information, or complaints, etc., or in carrying out the myriad other activities supported by

government programs and services. In all of these cases, including the point at which the business process is linked to the web site, records are generated.

As with any business activity or process, archives must be in a position to reflect their interests at the front end even before the records are generated (i.e. the "conception" stage). In analyzing given business processes, archivists may identify records posted on a web site as being part of the documentary record of the business activity or process. The fact that these records are on a web site, however, should not alter the overall approach archivists use in appraising the records of the given business activity. It should also not alter the overall approach taken to ensuring the ongoing accessibility and preservation of the records of the business activity (i.e. the accessibility and preservation requirements may cause certain steps to be taken to ensure the web based records are properly managed but they are always addressed within the context of the other records that document the given business activity). It is the business activity or process and its relationship to the web site and not the web site itself, which should govern the approach archivists take to the appraisal and ongoing preservation of records in web environment.

3.4 The perspectives described above are based on the following considerations:

Government institutions should be expected to keep a record of items placed on a web site or in an Intranet in order to document their actions (i.e. copies of significant items placed on a web site or intranet are also stored in a secure record keeping system). Unfortunately, many have yet to implement record keeping systems for electronic records which means that the version placed on a web site or intranet may be the only "record". Institutions will need to establish policies, systems and procedures for ensuring that records of actions that result in the placement of items on web sites or intranets are captured and maintained;

E-mail messages communicated via a publically accessible web site (e.g. inquiries, electronic commerce transactions) or an intranet (e.g. discussion lists; electronic conferences or consultations) should be considered to be records of actions and even though they may be transmitted to the desk top of a departmental official or stored in a file server or directory dedicated to a specific group, copies of relevant e-mail should be captured in a record keeping system based on established policies and procedures. Similarly, the institution may choose to capture a copy of the e-mail message requesting the web administrator to load a specific item onto the web site along with the attached item itself (i.e. the version attached to the e-mail message forms part of the record).

Questions have been raised about the degree to which a web page is a record. According to the approach used in this document, web pages are produced as a result of certain actions (i.e. producing drafts of a web page, receiving approval for the web page, loading the web page onto the

web site, updating the web page by changing its design and attributes, etc.) These actions (and the web pages which result) may not be associated with any single business activity. On the other hand, they may reflect the approach to which the organization has presented itself and its activities to its clients (in the case of the internet web site) or to its employees (in the case of an intranet). Care must be taken to examine the nature of the actions involved in producing and updating web pages and determining the extent to which the actions are associated with individual business activities or with the overall communications activity of the organization. Regardless of the activity, consideration must be given to determining the extent to which web pages (and their various iterations through time) are necessary in documenting the activity.

Additional information

A number of jurisdictions have begun to issue guides on the management of information in a networked environment. One of these was produced by the National Archives of Canada through the Canadian Government's Information Management Forum. Please refer to:

An Approach to Managing Internet and Intranet Information for Long Term Access and Accountability, unpublished guide prepared by the IM Forum, Ottawa, 1999.

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