

International Council on Archives

Committee on Appraisal

Guidelines on Appraisal

Framework

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II. 1

Strategic Approaches to Appraisal

by Tom Mills

INTRODUCTION

Appraisal is the process of evaluating records to determine how long to keep them, including to decide if the records have sufficient long term value to warrant the expense of preservation in an archives. Appraisal is fundamental to the archival endeavor, because appraisal determines what records will be kept and what records can be disposed. An appraisal program is essential for organizations seeking to conform to the international standard for records management, ISO 15489.

Appraisal is a modern notion. In the mid twentieth century, modern organizations began producing far more records than could possibly be preserved. Appraisal, to determine what to keep permanently, requires that we understand an organization's universe of records or its universe of records producers- or both. Managing the appraisal of an organization's universe of records is a crucial strategic decision. It is important because there is enormous amount, perhaps an overwhelming amount, of records that must be appraised. Archivists must do as much as possible with the available resources. Therefore, the approach we choose – how to organize, plan and allocate resources for appraisal work – is a strategic decision.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES

There are five basic approaches that are used to manage appraisal. It is possible to “mix and match” from among these five, thereby creating many variations on the basic approaches.

Prioritizing by records inventory

A first approach, inventory and scheduling records, involves a thorough survey and description of all records created by an organization or one of its units. The description, or data collection, includes information about who created the records and why, as well as information about the uses and contents of the records. Once described, the information is analyzed in the context of primary and secondary needs (administrative, fiscal, legal needs) to define minimum retention periods and to identify records of potential enduring value. The latter records are then “appraised” in more depth.

In theory and often in practice, routine business records are quickly dispatched in this process, and obviously important records are also quickly identified and placed under schedule control. After these “easy” decisions are made, resources can be focused on more difficult appraisal decisions. The use of “general schedules” covering records common to many agencies is often used to simplify the inventory and schedule process. This approach

was developed largely in the United States during the last half of the twentieth century. The focus is typically on the records themselves. The records are evaluated as products of administrative entities and operations. A prerequisite of the American system is that agency staff, not archives staff, has primary responsibility for conducting the inventories and preparing proposed schedules. The proposed schedules are then reviewed, modified if necessary, and approved by the archival entity. During the archives review, appraisal of potentially valuable records occurs and final appraisal decisions are made.

The inventory and scheduling strategy has several shortcomings. First, it requires an enormous amount of work to keep up with the massive quantity of records and the continuous changes in recordkeeping systems. It tends to result in passive setting of priorities, because appraisal usually occurs only after an agency requests or proposes a schedule. It also tends to ignore relationships among separate agencies and their records. The archivist is also dependent to a great extent on the quality of descriptive information received from an agency. Of course, there is one very important strategic advantage to this approach – agency staff carries out much of the information gathering.

Prioritizing by functions

A second approach is functional appraisal. Rather than immediately inventory and evaluate records, an effort is first made to assess the relative importance of the business functions and resulting activities of the government organization. The outcome of this assessment is a set of priorities for applying appraisal (and scheduling) resources. Functional appraisal begins at the highest level of an organization and looks across the organization at functions regardless of administrative boundaries. The ultimate result is the identification of functional business units that carry out the core or most important work in the organization, and whose work has the greatest impact on the population served by the entire organization. The archivist then proceeds to identify and evaluate the record keeping systems in only the most important functional business units.

Functional appraisal seeks to understand the inputs, transactions, and outputs of records and information systems, and how records provide evidence of an organization's business transactions and activities. The archivist is also much better informed about records and information systems that are, or could be, shared between agencies or business units. Ideally, all or most of this work can take place without spending much time actually looking at the physical records themselves. Decisions about what to keep are made on the basis of information about functions and the record keeping processes that support the functions.

A possible weakness of the functional approach is that it sometimes neglects or misses records that have secondary value beyond the organization. In many cases, the records have secondary "informational" value that is entirely unrelated to the original business function that resulted in records creation.

Variations on the functional approach. In a recent article, Barbara Reed traced the functional approach back to nineteenth century Prussian traditions. A functional approach was refined in Germany in the 1950s and was adopted by many Eastern European countries in a variety of forms. In this tradition, the functional approach was sometimes extended beyond functions of an organization to assess the importance of a function to society in general. This "extended" functional approach could lead to greater attention to secondary value, and thereby offset the weakness mentioned above.

In the 1990s, some countries became disenchanted with the Inventory and Scheduling strategy because of increasing work backlogs, an “excessive” volume of records designated as permanent, and the failure to appraise records in electronic information systems. As a result, several variations of functional appraisal emerged, including Canadian “macro-appraisal,” the Netherlands PIVOT project, and the Australian records management standard and its accompanying Design and Implementation of Record Keeping Systems (DIRKS) methodology.

The Australian DIRKS approach differed from the others in that it was designed as a tool for the design, development and management of record keeping systems. It had a purpose that included, yet went beyond, scheduling and appraisal. This approach has the strategic advantage of increasing the value of the archivist’s contribution to the organization. The DIRKS approach places records analysis and appraisal firmly at the beginning rather than at the end of the records life-cycle. It also integrates records analysis work with the information systems development life cycle.

Macro-appraisal variations in Canada, the Netherlands, and Australia are works in progress. As they evolve, they show a tendency to combine of the inventory and scheduling and the functional approaches, and to maximize their benefits and minimize their shortcomings. In other words, they aim to combine the best of both strategies.

A simple variation of functional appraisal is to prioritize among all administrative units of an organization. This can be implemented easily at a variety of levels. The approach has been used with modest success in some US state governments and several manuscript repositories. By setting priorities at this level, the archives aims to mitigate the problems of overwhelming volume and of passively responding to agency requests.

Prioritizing by documentation of a theme or a territory

The third major approach is a documentation strategy, which focuses primarily on a subject or topic. A documentation strategy is an effort to place appraisal in a broad context. Documentation strategies seek to identify and evaluate the roles of all organizations and individuals in a subject or sometimes a geographic area. For example, the environment and the history of physics are two topics where documentation strategies have been used in US. A documentation strategy seeks to first identify all the likely owners of relevant record keeping systems and to involve all the owners, as well as potential users, in the identification and appraisal process. One major benefit of documentation strategy is to identify all interested parties and, theoretically, to apply all available expertise to make an informed decision. Documentation strategy in theory has many benefits and can incorporate, as needed, parts of the inventory and scheduling and the functional appraisal approaches. However, in practice, it is very difficult because so many people are involved and because the process is thorough and therefore slow and resource intensive.

Prioritizing by risk assessment

An emerging strategy is to use risk assessment to help set priorities and make decisions. Risk assessment is often used in business and in other disciplines to make essential strategic decisions. Managing risks requires a methodical assessment of the potential for problems to

occur across the entire spectrum of an organization, and then taking steps to neutralize or reduce the risks where the danger is greatest. For archivists, it can help answer two questions:

- What are the risks and potential costs to an organization if we fail to appraise records of a particular function or jurisdiction within an organization?
- Based on the potential for adverse consequences to our organization, what are the priorities for ensuring that records are properly managed?

For example, the US National Archives and Records Administration instituted a “resource allocation” system that helps to measure risk and set priorities for assisting agencies by conducting appraisal work as well as providing technical assistance and training services. The resource allocation system assesses (a) the likelihood that functions have importance for ensuring individual or governmental rights and accountability, and for documenting the national experience and (b) the extent to which organizational units responsible for the function have scheduled records and transferred records to the Archives. The system also provides for special attention to reports of records in danger or reports of failures in information systems. The system, now in prototype testing, uses an extensive series of questions to gather data and weigh risks. As employed by NARA, the resource allocation system combines a functional approach and a records-centric approach.

Prioritizing by business systems design

Another strategy is to focus records management resources on the design or re-design of business systems, especially electronic systems. The international standard for records management, ISO 15489, provides guidance to ensure that adequate records are created, captured and managed to meet the operational needs of an organization in accordance with the regulatory environment. According to ISO 15489, a records system should have functionality to carry out and support records management processes, including retention and disposition. Therefore, ISO 15489 suggests that recordkeeping requirements be defined during the design of business information system. At a general level, defining requirements includes “determining retention periods and making decisions about records which have continuing value.” Appraisal decisions must be made early enough to inform systems design.

Following ISO 15489 guidance is especially valuable when defining recordkeeping requirements for electronic information systems. If retention and disposal requirements are not defined as part of systems design, it is difficult and costly to later revise the system to meet these needs. In addition, by defining retention and disposal requirements during system design, it can “also be possible, where appropriate, for disposition to be activated automatically.” In order to implement this strategy, the records management authority must work closely with the information technology office in developing information systems that incorporate recordkeeping requirements. The business system design strategy is a key component of the Australian DIRKS method, and, in fact, the international standard is based on an Australian records management standard.

CHOICE OF AN APPRAISAL STRATEGY

The five strategies described above share a basic objective to obtain and organize information about the “records universe” so that archivists have sufficient information to conduct systematic analysis and make decisions. The strategy establishes a plan for

collecting and analyzing information and for managing resources so that we can make sound, defensible appraisal decisions. There is no single right or wrong strategy. In fact, there are many options and the “correct” choice depends on the circumstances and needs of the specific organization and the regulatory environment in which it operates.

The strategy selected by an archival jurisdiction will, of necessity, reflect the mandate, mission, values, operating environment, and social concerns that impact the archival enterprise. By selecting a strategy the archives defines the broad intellectual framework and the rules that will guide the appraisal process. The choice of strategy will likely have a considerable influence on all appraisal decisions. Therefore, selecting the strategy requires great care. In fact, the choice of strategy may determine if the archives is able to appraise most records at all. There have been cases where the strategy is overwhelmed by the enormous quantity of records, most of which are never appraised. And there are cases where appraisal decisions are made but there is no ability or resources to effectively carry out the decisions. Increasingly, archivists are discovering that appraisal decisions need to be made early enough to inform and guide the design of electronic information systems. If retention and disposition requirements are not part of design, the system will have major deficiencies which will adversely impact the business operation the system is intended to support.

CONCLUSION

Before embarking on an appraisal program, the archival authority must develop a plan and a strategy for accomplishing the program objectives. The five suggested approaches offer a menu of ideas from which to design a strategy to meet the needs in a particular place and time. These approaches should be considered within the context of ISO 15489, so that an organization can conform to the international standard for records management.

II. 2

SELECTION CRITERIA

par Vincent DOOM
(traduction en anglais par Patrick Cadell)

The Appraisal Committee at its previous meetings in Andorra (2001), France (2002) and Poland (2003), discussed the formulation of criteria for the selection of documents and their contents. It appeared that these appraisal criteria were determined by different appraisal strategies, characterised by two principal approaches: *macro-appraisal*, and *context-based micro-appraisal*, depending on whether one appraises the function or the document it produces. More generally the importance of a document is determined according to two important theoretical models developed in the course of the 20th century, by general guiding principles, and by key factors which underpin general criteria separated into categories.

1. Theoretical Models.

1.1. The User Theory

The user theory dates from the 1950s. It is the work of the American archivist R. Schellenberg.¹ It is a major contribution to modern archive work, and still remains today a basic point of reference. This theory takes in Hilary Jenkinson's institutional approach, by combining the needs of record creators with two technical concerns well recognised by professionals – the primary value and the secondary value of the document.

Part of this model is now once more under discussion and considered too subjective. If primary value is set by law, the archivist will be hard pressed to establish the secondary value determined by research demands, and will simply be interpreting and applying the wishes of others.

1.2. The Society Theory

In the Society Theory, archivists have a fundamental role, that of preserving the memory, the heritage and the myths of the society within which they work. Archives should reflect the values of each generation. Above all it is a matter of giving an accurate and up to date image of society, while taking account of what its structure may actually obscure, such as unrepresented fringe groups.² The viewpoint and the values of contemporary society are thus raised to the level of selection criteria. The context in which it was created and its immediate use establish the value of a document.³ A document is thus the product of the interplay

¹ Theodore R SCHELLENBERG, *Modern archives. Principles and Techniques*, Chicago, University press, 1956, 248pp (2nd ed, 1957, reprint by Midway Reprints, 1975); *Management of Archives*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1965, 353pp.

² Terry COOK, 'Mind over matter: towards a new theory for archival appraisal' in Barbara L. GRAIG (ED), *The Archival Imagination :essays in honour of Hugh A. Taylor*. Ottawa, Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992, p.50

³ Terry COOK, 'Macroappraisal and Functional Analysis: Appraisal Theory, Strategy, and Methodology for Archivists, *L'évaluation des archives: des nécessités de la gestion aux exigences du témoignage*, 3rd archive symposium, Gira, University of Montreal, 27 March 1998, p.30.

between the functions which society gives to institutions, the administrative structures which these functions produce, and the citizens/clients/users which they may or may not represent.⁴

2. Guiding Principles

Carol Couture suggests five guiding principles which help to give appraisal a proper theoretical basis. When he or she appraises, the archivist should make sure:

- that archives are evidence of the activities of society as a whole,
- that any judgement he or she makes is truly objective and up to date,
- that he or she respects the links between appraisal and other archival processes,
- that there is a balance in his or her work between administrative and heritage-based decisions,
- that there is a balance between considerations based on the context of record creation and those based on their use.⁵

3. Key Factors

Whatever theoretical models are used, appraisal criteria contain two basic elements: the context in which documents were created, and their content. These factors determine the broad lines of appraisal used throughout the world. They are indissolubly linked, and ever more so in the context of electronic documents where data and metadata have no separate existence.

3.1. Production Context

The production context brings one back to the fundamental archival principle of the 'respect des fonds', a proper respect for the source of archives and for their original arrangement; but a principle which has been renewed, which one might describe as a *principle of practicality*, which transcends the interests of the creating body to the advantage of those functions which reflect the needs of society, and are thus the 'evidence of governance rather than of government alone'.⁶ For the archivist, the production context, bringing together the function and the context within which archives were produced, gives archives their full significance. It is part of what gives them their authority and sets their value.

3.2. Content

Content allows for both the physical and the intellectual transmission of information: physical because it is carried by a physical object: the document; intellectual because it has developed organically from the activities of a person or organisation.⁷ It is the archival object par excellence: the result of action and the object which records it.

4. Appraisal Criteria

The criteria to be used in measuring the importance of documents can be arranged hierarchically:

Values

Business

Heritage

⁴ Margaret CROSS NORTON, for the functional approach, Hugh TAYLOR and Hans BOOMS for the interplay of functions, structures and the citizen/client/user, Helen SAMUELS for documentary strategy.

⁵ Carol COUTURE and collaborators, *Les fonctions de l'archivistique contemporaine*, Presses Universitaires du Québec, 199, p.110.

⁶ Terry COOK, 'Archival science and postmodernism', *Archival Science*, Vol.1, No1, 2001, p.21.

⁷ Jean-Yves ROUSSEAU and Carol COUTURE, *Les fondements de la discipline archivistique*, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1994, pp. 43-46.

Function	Evidence	Information	Testimony	Information
Criteria	Administrative	Legal	Financial Risk Assessment	Research or use Conservation

At the highest level there is *archival significance* which combines the needs of the producing organisation, as governed by legal and functional requirements, with the need to preserve memory. *Primary or direct value* relates to the initial purpose for which the document was produced, and the *secondary value* to a further significance acquired by the document when used for purposes other than those for which it was created. The Appraisal Committee wanted to define these ideas so as to make them more intelligible to the non-archivist. The expressions *business value* and *heritage value* will be used.

Values are linked to *functions*. These *functions* are distinguished by *criteria*. *Business value* includes *evidence*, which can be *administrative, legal or financial*, and *information*. *Heritage value* has traditionally two corresponding functions: *testimony* and *information* to which are attached two criteria relating to *conservation* and *use* of which academic research is an element.

These criteria cannot be set out in a universally applicable diagram. However Carol Couture and Jean-Yves Rousseau have listed the factors which determine business value, while Franck Boles and Julia Marks Young have developed an interesting classification of those relating to heritage value,⁸ on which the Appraisal Committee began to reflect at its most recent meeting.

4.1. Business value criteria

The points for consideration set by Carol Couture and Jean-Yves Rousseau focus on *evidence* which divides into *administrative, legal or financial evidence* according to the use made of the documents.

Criteria linked to Administrative evidence	Criteria linked to legal evidence	Criteria linked to financial evidence
Function or activity of which the document is evidence	Law of which the document is evidence	Financial activity of which the document is evidence
Administrative decision of which the document is evidence	Enactment and regulations bearing on the preservation of the document	Duration of the accounting & financial cycle of the organisation
Position of the function or activity in the general structure of the organisation	Legally prescribed preservation period	Duration of the accounting & financial cycle of the governing body
Audit trail through the administration of information and the document which holds it	Need, if necessary, to obtain official permission before elimination	

4.2. Heritage value criteria

⁸ Franck BOLES and Jukia Marks YOUNG, *Archival Appraisal*, New York, Neal-Schuman, 1991, 118pp.

The appraisal model set out by Franck Boles and Julia Young contains three categories of heritage value criteria: information based criteria, criteria linked to the preservation costs of the document, and criteria linked to the consequences of appraisal decisions. Only the first two have been considered by the Appraisal Committee. The following elements emerged:

Information based criteria	Cost criteria
Functions of the organisation	Acquisition
Position of a unit within an organisation	Purchase
Activities of the unit	Transfer
Link between the document and the unit function	
Content analysis	Professional treatment
Importance of the subject in archival terms	Level of expertise
Period covered by the information relative to the chronological limits of the subject	Equipment
Completeness of information on the subject	Work
Credibility	
Link between record creator and subject	
Relationship with other documents	Preservation
Physical criteria	Level of expertise
Rarity	Equipment
Original/copy	Work
Format	
Intellectual content	
Copy within the fonds	Storage
Copy within the repository	Quantity of documents
Other copies	Particular medium or format
Use of the information	
User interest	
Long term legal value	
Long term administrative value	
Current usage	
Potential usage	Reference systems
Usage limitations	Information retrieval
Ease of understanding	Level of expertise
Consultation restrictions	Work
Emotional or symbolic associations	

4.3. Risk assessment

Appraisal is also based on the assessment of the risk involved in a decision, and of its scale. Risk is a common feature of both administrative and heritage value.

5. Criteria relating to function

Criteria based generally on the document can be supplemented by special criteria based on a functional approach to *macro-evaluation*. This maximalist process, in which context is more important than content, relies entirely on the society theory. A document is considered to be the result (the product) of a decision (the intellectual process).⁹ Functions, structures and their relationship to the citizen are what is important. Record appraisal comes later.

Functional analysis consists in the first place of the process of determining the most stable functions or broad responsibilities of the state, and of society in general: heritage and culture, science and technology, industry and economic development...along with their associated management structures. It is a difficult process which requires collaboration from numerous

⁹ Terry COOK, 'Mind over matter: towards a new theory for archival appraisal', in Barbara L.GRAIG (ed), *The archival imagination: essays in honour of Hugh A. Taylor*, Ottawa, Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992.

experts, commentators and social analysts. Functions and structures can then be given an order of priority.

Function and structure related criteria¹⁰

Link to law and regulation
Extent of the influence of the function on the organisation, on government or on society
Number of staff and size of budget
Relationships with other structures
Structural hierarchy
Structural remit
Functional autonomy
Work processes
Extent of programme responsibilities
Interaction of people and programme
Unique characteristics
Influence of official policy

Documentary analysis comes last. It is an aspect of *micro-evaluation*, and has as its only purpose the corroboration of choices made based on a functional hierarchy. The criteria used are those of traditional record appraisal, uniqueness, completeness, extent, physical condition, ease of handling, outside dates, duplication...

The tools are there; others are being made: above all the law which allows for an objective assessment of the management value of documents, and determines their preservation period; as well as record creators' memory of functional needs. Heritage value is based for its part on law and archival regulations, which are used in some countries to authorise disposal,¹¹ as well as on the development and application of objective criteria for establishing the materials for historical research, and for the transmission as faithfully and as accurately as possible of the memory of society. Three possibilities emerge from the application of these criteria: permanent preservation, complete disposal, which implies the preservation of specimen documents, and partial preservation/ disposal accompanied by a process of selective appraisal. This selective appraisal can be on the basis of quality, alphabetical order, chronology, topography or random selection, and can be carried out cumulatively or not,¹² so as to become 'a selection which represents the content of everything'.¹³

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¹⁰ 'Méthodologie d'évaluation: macro-évaluation et analyse fonctionnelle. Partie A: concepts et théorie. Partie B: lignes directrices pour l'évaluation archivistique des documents gouvernementaux, *Internet site of the National Archives of Canada*, http://www.archives.ca/06/0611_f.html

¹¹ In France: Law no.79-18 of 3 January 1979 on archives, and decree no.79-1037 of 3 December 1979 relating to the powers of public archive services, and to co-operation amongst administrations for the collection, preservation and availability of public archives.

¹² Olivier GUYOTJEANNIN, 'Tris et échantillonnages: empirisme et théorie', *La Gazette des archives*, no. 124, first quarter of 1984.

¹³ P. BOISARD, 'Pour une politique des éliminations: réflexions sur la pratique des Archives départementales de la Seine', *La Gazette des Archives*, no. 59, 4th quarter 1967, p.220.

SAMPLING OF RECORDS

par Markku LEPPANANEN

Sampling is a form of appraisal/disposal (a sort of compromise) which is used especially in connection with large series or other groups of records. Sampling aims at securing a sample the quantity and quality of which enable, with regard to the whole population, inferences (whether using statistical methods or not) about the records creator, its duties and tasks, its operational setting as well as about the form, functions and content of records.

By the concept of *sample* is meant that part of a population which is separated, on the basis of some sampling technique, from the records designated to be destroyed. A sample is meant for permanent retention and it is supposed to serve as a basis for inferences about the characteristics and content of the totality of records; it is judged to be appropriate as regards the objectives and methods of future research and to be generally interesting from the research point of view.

Sampling is an option when:

- the information content of records is relatively thin and/or the amount of unique information is small
- the volume of records is great and/or
- the records are relatively uniform as regards form and partly as regards content, too.

Provided that *sampling methods* are appropriate, researchers can rely on samples (usually varied between 5 and 20 percents of the population) and at the same time one saves a lot of money due to the fact that it is not necessary to preserve all of the records in archives rooms to occupy space.

The basic problem of sampling is to choose the right technique and to determine the size of sample to guarantee sufficient representativeness and many-sided research possibilities. The size of sample must be determined individually case by case. While making decisions on methods and the size of sample one should aim at taking into consideration the different branches of research. While planning sampling one ought also to take into consideration the filing order of the records (e.g. chronological, alphabetical or numerical order). By this way one can reject too labour intensive sampling procedures.

Different sampling methods

There are dozens of different sampling methods to be applied when appraising records that cannot be retained permanently completely. The sampling method may be e.g.:

- systematic (or numeric) sampling method
 - one of the most used sampling methods due to its mechanical simplicity

- is based on the internal order of pieces; e.g. if the size of the sample is 10 percent, every tenth piece (record, file or box etc.) of all records are retained permanently
 - the internal order of pieces should be, if possible, a random order
- chronological sampling (periodic or time-series sampling)
 - often used for sampling of chronological series of records
 - e.g. records of the early or final phases, clearly perceptible (in retrospect) periods of change, crises either in the own activities of records creator or in its operational environment (war, period of depression); in many countries they have fixed a certain year prior to which all records are to be kept permanently
 - e.g records for years ending with zero or number five
- 2(2)
- topographical (geographical) sampling method
 - techniques based on the types of archives, types of series or areas
 - for archives and series of a given group of records creators functioned at the same administrative level and having same kind of tasks
 - qualitative (or purposive or selective) sampling method
 - techniques which aim at having a representative sample or model reflecting a given factor (or factors) in the whole population
 - characterized by subjectivism which is a weakness; however, these sampling techniques are widely applied in the archival context
 - alphabetical sampling method
 - used for sampling of files of clients
 - simple and useful technique if the records are in alphabetical order
 - samples can be biased by the fact that the letters, as an initial letter in family names, relate heavily to cultural and linguistic factors
 - random sampling method
 - techniques based on the use of the tables of random numbers or some such method
 - characteristic for the samples that every piece of the basic population has an equal chance to be included in the sample
 - obviously not widely used in the archival context
 - birthday sampling method
 - used for sampling of files of clients
 - only records connected with people born on the certain days (e.g 8th, 18th and 28th) of each month are to be retained permanently
 - often used the same cohort in several kind of governmental and municipal offices and institutes, which guarantee an extensive pool of information of the persons in the cohort and make it possible to follow people's activities throughout life

In the appraisal and disposal of records one can use more than one method at the same time.

There is no one method that could serve all possible purposes. When a sampling decision has been made and a method fixed one should not change it lightly: certain

conservatism is a virtue here.

February 2005

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II. 4 The Process of Appraisal

Par Cassandra Findlay,

The process of appraisal consists of three steps:

1. Gather and consider all available information
2. Make appraisal decisions based on this understanding of the context of the appraisal, including the identification of records for 'permanent' or 'archival' retention
3. Document appraisal decisions, communicate them to stakeholders and implement them.

Step 1: Gather and consider all available information

A number of factors that will have a direct effect on the method of appraisal that is used. These factors are:

- the records (if they exist)
- the business or affairs that the records document
- the regulatory framework in which appraisal occurs
- the timing of the appraisal, and
- the appraiser's position and responsibilities.

The records

Records are usually examined as part of the appraisal process in cases where there is little or no contextual information about the people or processes that created them. This may have been caused by the passage of time or the way in which the records came to the appraiser. The examination of the records may occur in varying degrees of detail.

For example

A Government Archives may acquire a collection of records by donation that have been out of government custody for some time.

While it is clear that they are official records, they appear to have been created for different purposes and managed under different systems. In order to identify those records warranting continuing retention as archives under their current appraisal policy, the archivists must examine the collection item by item.

The business or affairs that the records document

Archival institutions and others responsible for appraisal are also increasingly making appraisal decisions based on an understanding of the role and purpose of records either prior to the creation of the records themselves or while they are still being created, but without examination of the records.

For example

Cases where appraisal occurs where records do not exist include decisions taken about records retention as part of the design of new business systems.

These cases (where appraisal decisions are made as part of a systems design process) highlight the importance of having an understanding of the business or affairs that the records document in order to make sound appraisal decisions. However, regardless of whether an archivist has access to actual records, appraisal must always be conducted with a good understanding of the functions, activities, transactions and processes that records relate to, the risks associated with the business they document, the people and organisations involved and their requirements for records to be kept.

For example

In developing a new disposal schedule for the Municipality of Smithtown, the Municipal Archivist arranges the schedule according to the functions of the Municipality.

In determining retention periods for the records of the Municipality's policing function - in particular, the activity of incident reporting - she identifies the risk associated with this activity as being high because of past litigation, and accordingly assigns longer retention periods to records of this activity.

An understanding of the function the records document is important because relationships with other records can then be identified and considered. The appraiser may be appraising records of a function that exists only within a single organisation or authority, such as a government department, they may be appraising a function that exists across a number of authorities such as several government departments, or the appraiser may be involved in the appraisal of records of a function that crosses Government and non-Government boundaries at different levels.

These three types of functions could be described as:

- 'Single authority functions' – these are functions that are performed by one organisation only within a certain jurisdiction, and so appraisal of the records of these functions is done by the organisation and/or the archival institution for that jurisdiction, without the need for co-ordination with other bodies or consideration of other functions outside of the organisation. Sometimes referred to as 'agency' or 'organisational' functions. An example of a single-authority function would be the processing of driving licenses by the driving license authority for a Government.
- 'Multi authority functions' – these functions exist in several organisations within a jurisdiction and so appraisal can be done by the organisations or the archival institution with these relationships in mind. An example of a multi-authority function would be the administrative function of personnel management that is performed by all organisations in a Government jurisdiction, or the management of a parkland that is the responsibility of several Municipalities
- 'Societal functions' - are functions that cut across the public and private sectors and may be performed at different levels in governments. For records of these functions, appraisal could be done by a partnership of appraisers in the private and public sectors who have a stake in the documentation of this function. An example of this type of function would be the protection and management of the environment, where different levels of Government as well as lobby groups such as Greenpeace may create relevant records.¹⁴

By understanding these different types of functions and the other parties that are conducting appraisal of the related records, better co-ordination and comparison may be achieved to ensure that the body of records being retained is not duplicated and does not contain gaps.

¹⁴ The Committee's work on these concepts owes much to the ideas of Australian Archivist Chris Hurley. For a discussion of how functions may be understood in the context of the organisations, Governments, and societies that they operate, see Chris Hurley's article 'Ambient Functions - Abandoned Children to Zoos'. Available online at: <http://www.sims.monash.edu.au/research/rcrg/publications/ambientf.htm>.

For example

An archival institution can see how records of the governmental function of 'law and order' are being appraised across a government, and influence those decisions as part of the selection of Government archives, to avoid duplication or gaps in their collection. This is an example of a 'multi-authority function' appraisal.

The regulatory framework in which appraisal occurs

The appraiser must also conduct appraisal with an understanding of laws, regulations and other authority sources that affect not only the business that the records document, but also the appraisal process itself.

For example

In developing their disposal schedule, and making the appraisal decisions that it documents, the Municipal Archivist and the records staff must take account of the relevant laws governing the operation of municipalities and the documentation of municipal business, but also the 'Archives Act' that directs the selection and preservation of archives.

The timing of the appraisal

Appraisal may occur:

- before records creation
- at 'transfer' – eg. out of active use in an office to a storage facility or an archival institution, or
- as part of a re-evaluation or review previous appraisal decisions – at any stage in a record's existence.

The appraiser's position and responsibilities

The appraiser's role and responsibilities will also affect the nature and scope of the appraisal work.

For example

If you are an archivist working for the National Archives the only type of appraisal you might conduct will be the selection of records as archives, for continuing or permanent retention, in accordance with the objectives listed in the Archives' appraisal policy.

As an archivist in a local government authority, you may work with records staff to develop disposal schedules that cover all the authority's functions and assign appropriate retention periods and disposal decisions, including preservation as archives.

Step 2: Make appraisal decisions based on this understanding of the context of the appraisal, including the identification of records for 'permanent' or 'archival' retention

Once all the necessary information is gathered, appraisal decisions may be made. This is the point at which the information gathered can be assessed against the appraiser's criteria. Our committee has developed a sample set of criteria for appraisal drawn from a number of published works and our own experiences. This set of criteria will be described separately in this session.

Some types of appraisal decisions may be straightforward: for example, retaining a particular series, class or group of records for long term or permanent retention in its entirety, or they may require an understanding of selection techniques such as sampling. This technique will be also discussed separately in this session.

Increasingly, consultation with stakeholders has a role to play in the appraisal process, Stakeholders may include groups such as:

- records users (current records or archival records)
- records managers, archivists
- business managers, accountability stakeholders
- experts (legal, scientific, other specialists)
- historians
- community / interest groups, or
- the general public.

Consultative approaches to appraisal will be addressed separately in this session.

Importantly, appraisal decisions should not be influenced by improper political or personal pressures. There are too many examples from around the world where this has occurred, and it is the responsibility of both archivists and the lawmakers to ensure that necessary safeguards against these events, such as codes of ethics and legislation, are in place and adopted in individual jurisdictions.

Step 3: Document appraisal decisions, communicate them to stakeholders and implement them.

The documentation of appraisal should include:

- the appraisal decisions (retention periods, transfer rules, destruction authorisation, requirement to retain as archives)
- the reasons for appraisal decisions
- the authorisation of appraisal decisions (who authorised the decision, when, under what authority).

Appraisal decisions are usually, but not necessarily, documented in a disposal schedule or authority.

Once they have been finalised, appraisal decisions and/or the reasons for them may be communicated some or all of the stakeholders mentioned previously. It is increasingly common, for example, for Government archives to publish their appraisal policies on the World Wide Web.¹⁵

The implementation of appraisal decision occurs as disposal. Disposal involves:

- referring to authorised appraisal decisions (such as those documented in a disposal schedule)
- identifying records that are / will be covered by those appraisal decisions, and
- putting processes in place to ensure the records are retained for the necessary period of time, then destroyed or retained as archives. These processes may also involve transferring custody of records from one organisation to another.

Over time, appraisal decisions should be monitored for their currency and reviewed. This requires a return to the first step of the process (gathering and analysing information).

¹⁵ See, for example, the State Records Authority of New South Wales, Australia's appraisal policy *Building the Archives: Policy on records appraisal and the identification of State archives* (2001), at: <http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/publicsector/disposal/appraisalpolicy/forewordandtoc.htm>

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II. 5

The Appraisal of Electronic records

par Stephen Twigge

The appraisal process has traditionally focussed on accumulations of non-current records. This approach has largely ignored electronic records believing that strategies developed for paper records are transferable to electronic environments. It is now apparent that the appraisal of electronic records requires new thinking.

In comparison with conventional paper records, the timescale in which effective action can be taken to select and preserve electronic records is considerably shorter. This is due to three main factors:

- the pace of technological change in the systems which create, store and access records
- the instability of the media on which records are held
- the danger of technological obsolescence.

To avoid the risk of records becoming incomplete or unreliable, early appraisal is essential and should occur within five years of creation of the earliest records within a system. Ideally, an initial appraisal of the records likely to be created should be conducted at the time of system design and installation.

As with conventional records, electronic records fall into broad categories:

- many electronic records will only have an ephemeral value and will not need to be kept in the long term
- others will need to be kept for legal and business reasons
- some will be needed for operational reasons and the administration of the department in the longer term
- a proportion will need to be safeguarded for eventual transfer to the archives.

Early appraisal will identify and safeguard those records of long term value by ensuring they are migrated into replacement systems. Early appraisal will also enable the identification of records with only short-term value. These records need not be migrated to a new system offering cost savings as a return on the earlier appraisal work.

Selection criteria

Archival records are selected according to an agreed set of criteria. The elements in the inventory of electronic records that describe the subject, theme or documentation

role of the record collections will be of value in assessing the degree to which records meet the selection criteria.

Whilst business-oriented perspectives identify operational and business needs, relying on a functional analysis alone may lead to aberrant decisions when considering candidate electronic record collections for permanent preservation; content-based criteria will also be needed to determine appraisal decisions relating to particular sets of records. In some cases, it may be possible to identify future research value - for example, in documenting an aspect of the interaction of the state with its citizens - which is not readily evident from a purely functional or operational viewpoint.

A detailed assessment of electronic record groups will involve asking questions such as:

- what are the legal and operational requirements which must be satisfied by record-keeping for the business activity to which these records relate?
- are these electronic records likely to have long-term evidential value?
- are these electronic records likely to have future research value, bearing in mind the strategic objectives and collection themes?
- are there any other electronic records that should be kept for accountability or other specific reasons, which are related to these records?
- are there any related paper records, in hybrid electronic/paper collections, which should be treated alongside these electronic records?
- are the records in this collection created (in whole or part) by information flows from another source?
- do the records in this collection contribute (in whole or part) to the information contained in records in another collection?
- what are the relationships within and between these records and other record series?

Although the principles remain the same as for conventional paper records, the approach will be different and it will take some time before those appraising records have sufficient experience in reviewing electronic records to develop confidence in their application. One outcome of this appraisal exercise might be to review the record-creating system or record collection at a later date, where there is a possibility of change in the way it is used or the records that are produced. This can be done on an ad hoc basis or as part of a wider-ranging systems review.

Appraisal strategy for electronic records in existing systems

The majority of electronic records created to date are stored in systems which possess little or no records management functionality. To deal with these records, the following requirements must be addressed:

- identify which records should be appraised, and why
- develop a strategic plan for appraisal

- develop a mechanism for conducting appraisal appropriate to the circumstances in which records are kept
- record any actions which are taken on the records, as a result of the appraisal.

In devising an appraisal strategy, consideration may be given to:

- an organisational, or process-oriented perspective, primarily concerned with the business context and operational needs of the department
- a functional perspective, identifying the main business functions, activities, and transactions which produce records
- a subject, or documentation-oriented perspective, which will be informed by selection policies.

For each government department, the appropriate balance between these (and other more specialised) aspects will vary according to the local situation. To develop an understanding of the roles and relationships of electronic record collections much can be gained by drawing on systems portfolios, business information systems charts and procedure manuals. In certain circumstances, appraisal of legacy systems may lead to an early transfer of electronic records into the National Archive for managed preservation. An early physical transfer to the archive will not, in itself, affect the timescales controlling release of records to the public.

Appraisal of poorly structured collections

Where electronic documents exist with little organisation or structure linking them together in meaningful collections or groupings, appraisal will be difficult. This will be the case where, for instance:

- electronic documents are held on a shared local network drive with no systematic organisation or structure in the filing or folder hierarchy
- files and folders are created directly by end users with no established naming conventions, resulting in names that are ambiguous, mysterious or misleading
- electronic documents are held in a document management system that relies upon search technology alone to bring together sets of related records.

Poor structuring in collections of electronic records prevents the consistent development of collections of records that can be managed as a group. It also prevents the easy allocation of individual documents to collections on creation by the end user. In such circumstances much of the context of an electronic record will be lost. If individual documents are appraised in isolation from their original context, consistent appraisal will not be possible.

For electronic records, a document-by-document review is very time-consuming and resource-intensive and is unlikely to be cost effective. While a paper folder can easily be viewed, the physical necessity of opening and scrolling electronic documents is far more problematic. Where appraisal has to be undertaken of unstructured records, three main options present themselves:

- appraisal undertaken on a document by document basis
- appraisal undertaken by document originators or desk officers
- appraisal undertaken with some form of software support.

Most commonly available software support is limited to simple keyword searching and retrieval, and is unlikely to be effective beyond grouping similar titled documents together (in which circumstances, naming conventions will clearly be useful). While more sophisticated forms of software support are emerging, it would not be wise to rely on untested future developments to solve the problem.

Appraisal undertaken at the file/directory level may be assisted by using standard file manipulation tools to provide a basic analysis of document characteristics, by pre-sorting documents within the disk directory according to various characteristics. For example: sorting documents by date order can help to assess patterns of activity within a relevant date range; and sorting by creator application (such as text document, spreadsheet, etc) will indicate activity that has generated particular presentational patterns.

Some consideration must be given to those documents that have not been preserved as records by the authors and users and where a number of attributes will either be missing or, if present, may not comply with records management procedures. Consideration should be given to the following:

- authenticity – (is the document as stored the one that was used in the first place?)
- have features been used such as dynamic dates that might undermine the value of the documents as records?
- version control – has any mechanism been used to manage the different versions of a document and can this be preserved with the document as a record?
- audit trails – can the history of this document from creation through to archiving be traced?
- can the documents held in computer file store be mapped onto a corporate records structure, possibly as represented by paper based registered files?
- has only one copy of a document been preserved and, if not, can the primary version readily be identified?
- has the designed file structure been adhered to or are files distributed in an idiosyncratic fashion?

Building appraisal into new systems design

The appraisal of electronic records in existing systems parallels the process which has traditionally been adopted for paper records in that appraisal takes place on sets of records which have already been created and accumulated. The major difference is that, in the case of electronic records, appraisal decisions must be implemented at a much earlier date to ensure safeguarding of valuable records. The development of new information systems offers an opportunity to build initial appraisal decisions, into the design of record-keeping systems.

By linking records management to the business aims and structure of the organisation, initial decisions on retention and scheduling can be made before creation of the records. The use of a file plan will enable records to be managed consistently and effectively as required by business need, and appropriately disposed of afterwards. In this sense, appraisal becomes part of the design (or conception) phase of the record-keeping system. There will be a significant proportion of records for which such early appraisal decisions cannot be made, and others in which it will be desirable to revise the initial decision as the long-term value of the records emerges. Systems designers should be careful to ensure that the records manager takes no automatic actions on scheduled records without offering the opportunity for confirmation or revision.

Conducting appraisal at the creation stage will involve:

- identifying the business functions that will generate records
- identifying the IT systems that support these business functions, and which will physically produce the records
- identifying the record series to be captured
- assessing the characteristics and record-keeping requirements of each series
- allocating initial disposition decisions derived from these record-keeping requirements
- designing electronic record management systems to support these requirements.

Where plans for upgrading or replacing systems require decisions to be made on whether or not data should be migrated to the new system, appraisal should attempt to identify record collections that meet previously established criteria. Reference can be made to the business purpose of the original system, and to the business case and project initiation documents produced for the new systems. Plans should be evaluated against any record-keeping policies and requirements established by the department. Where semi-active or inactive records (together with their metadata) are not migrated to the new system, they should be transferred to a maintained electronic archive within the department, if they are required for business reasons or for selection by the National Archive.

Disposal

The value of certain categories of records can be reasonably predicted. Examples include those:

- that require retention for a specified period on legal grounds
- that merit permanent preservation, and which will eventually be transferred to the archive in one of the approved formats
- that merit early destruction once no longer needed.

In addition, there will be categories where only an initial disposal can be allocated, which will have to be reviewed at a later date. For electronic records, however, this is likely to be after a much shorter period than has usually applied to paper records.

Electronic records of continuing value will need to be migrated through successive upgrades of hardware and software in such a way as to retain the full content and context. This should include the records themselves together with record metadata, and any other contextual information which affects the meaningfulness of the records and their relationship to each other. Migration should be carried out in such a way as to maintain and demonstrate the authenticity and integrity of the electronic records themselves. Planning of such migration activities will provide an opportunity to re-appraise the decisions to retain or delete electronic records in those categories where only an initial disposal has been possible. This will reduce the unnecessary migration of records which are to be destroyed at a later date.

Electronic records should not be kept longer than the official approved retention period. Once allocated to an appropriate category, they will inherit the scheduling characteristics of that category. Guidance should be developed that will enable users consistently to identify records which merit disposal in accordance with the established criteria, and to understand the mechanisms by which they can be allocated to the appropriate category.

The management of all corporate records should be subject to corporate rules and procedures. Electronic records are no exception to this and should be organised, maintained, stored and protected according to agreed procedures and disposal schedules. It is impractical in most cases to adopt a document level approach. Decisions will normally be made at series level (groups of records or groups of folders). These decisions must be documented and preserved with the records themselves.

Destruction of records

A record should be kept of the destruction of electronic records after this has taken place. In a well managed electronic record-keeping system, this can be achieved by retaining relevant parts of the metadata such as destruction date and authorisation for the disposal actions.

The deletion of a document from disk storage is not equivalent to destruction. Potentially, the document is still retrievable unless a complete reformatting of the media has taken place. For sensitive records there will be security implications that may demand assurance of destruction (by low-level formatting, or destruction, of the physical media) rather than merely deletion of records.