

THE LIBRARIAN AS RECORDS MANAGER: DIVERSIFICATION IN THE LIBRARY WORKPLACE

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Although the vocabulary of Records Management may differ from that used in the library, the concepts and methods of both sectors of an organization are basically the same. If the library is to keep pace with modern management innovations, librarians must give consideration to making the library a multifaceted information facility; this will have far reaching implications for the traditional library functions.

Records management represents an opportunity that is within the librarian's range of knowledge and expertise. Classification and retrieval of files are allied to the information handling of cataloguing and reference in a close affinity to methodical collection weeding and rare book selection in the traditional library scenario.

Librarians are capable of handling a diversity of responsibilities. As part of their mandate, librarians manage personnel, including interviewing and training. They plan and project budgets and administer financial allotments accordingly. They are responsible for public relations in the library, having contacts with national and international agencies in the course of providing information. They acquire materials for the library, not just books and periodicals, but also stationery supplies, microform readers, CRT's, videotapes, slides and audio-visual equipment. In an age of specialization, the librarian is a universal specialist. And yet, apply for a prominent administrative position! The reaction - "But, you're a librarian!"

This unfavorable stereotyping of librarians

is a genuine hindrance to advancement in any area, and it is difficult to overcome. The reason why we have such a poor image fascinates me. In ancient times, the librarian was a respected scholar - a learned man who was a "keeper of knowledge". At the end of the eighteenth century a number of events contributed to the transformation of the librarian scholar into a less revered figure; the evolution of the popular press, the increase of literacy, mass papermaking and printing techniques and - alas - the proliferation of women workers, all played a part in the evolution of librarians "as others see us". You will be happy to know that there is, however, one occupation with an even duller image, and that is the profession of an accountant. Pauline Wilson in her book Stereotype and Status: Librarians in the United States writes that "...the accountant is the antihero of the occupational world. He is low in status, not well-to-do, and unsuccessful. He has little power in public affairs, not much opportunity for advancement, and his job is lowest of all the occupations studied in providing personal satisfaction. He is a conformist, with a minimum of social skills, limited intelligence, and inadequate personal and aesthetic sensibilities. He is rated as passive, weak, soft, shallow, cold, submissive, unsure of himself, and evasive in meeting life. His positive characteristics of caution, stability, conservatism and calmness rest upon a shaky emotional interior."¹

Librarians do not have a favorable image either, and administrators seem reluctant to look beyond this unfavorable stereotype at abilities. The way out of this dilemma is to seize any opportunity that presents itself. Be ready to diversify if you are given the

chance and accept the challenge of new ground! There are many areas peripheral to the library, especially in the information field, that are applicable to library experience - information management, computer applications, systems analysis, and PR jobs. Wherever the basic commodity is information we can make ourselves comfortable and productive.

My opportunity for diversification came when I was given a chance to manage a Central Records Office as part of my administrative responsibilities. My first reaction was "what goes on there?" "What are Records?" My acquaintance with records and files was limited to Corcoran's Law of Packrattery which states that "all files, papers, memos, etc. that you save will never be needed until such time as they are disposed of, when they will become essential and indispensable."²

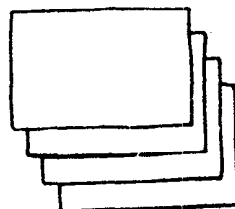
Most people think that Records Management involves mail and correspondence only. A more detailed look at Records shows that the area and the concept are broad in scope and far-reaching in their implications. The Federal Government of Canada defines Records as "any physical medium containing and capable of preserving information in the form of written words, numbers, symbols, images and sounds. Records include the original and any copy of correspondence, memoranda, forms, directives, reports, drawings, diagrams, cartographic and architectural items, pictorial and graphic works, photographs, films, microforms, sound recordings, video-tapes, -disks and -cassettes, punched, magnetic and other disks and drums, holographs, optic sense sheets, working papers and any other documentary material, regardless of physical form and characteristics".

Problems associated with the proliferation

of records have been with us for some time. Ira Penn, writing in a recent article about Records management in the U.S. Federal Government describes the trials and tribulations of Records in 1780: "as the Government was moved its records were moved also. Often these records were kept in boxes and trunks - in attics and basements. The movement, the constant use, and the inadequate storage in places that were too hot, too cold, or too wet, resulted in loss or damage to many Federal documents."³ This does not sound unlike similar situations prevalent today. And yet, how can this be allowed to happen? The reason is simple but devastating. The paper whirlwind of modern business is out of control. "One twenty-ton aircraft generates 60 tons of paper from the beginning of its manufacture to the end of its operating life."⁴ The only solution to the paper overflow is the strict organization of records - not to stem the flow (that is another problem) but to store and access information in existing files.



**60
tons**



Records management procedures are designed to do just that - to store, access and discard files in an orderly, planned and systematic fashion. The components of Records in the Federal Government of Canada involve mail distribution and dispatch, courier services, telecommunication facilities, classification of records, routing of correspondence, filing, scheduling, and disposal or archiving. Each of these facets of Records was a learning experience for me and required the acquisition of new expertise. Mail despatch necessitated my inquiry into the details of the postal service. Mail distribution internally occasioned time-motion studies, traffic and use pattern determination, as well as a systems analysis approach to mail procedures. Telecommunication facilities are essential for rapid exchange of information (especially by telefacsimile) and an administrator must have some grasp of the technologies in order to determine compatibility between machines, and upgrading demands to keep current, and ensure standardization across the country.

The heart of the Records operation is paper in various forms - controlling this paper in an orderly way occupies the time of most of the staff in a Central Registry. Incoming correspondence is opened, logged in, classified according to a subject file classification system placed on a file folder with like material, signed out to the addressee and routed through the internal mail distribution service. Incoming correspondence, usually between 70 and 150 items a day, goes through this process in a maximum time span of 24 hours - with the target being same day routing and receipt of all incoming items. Copies of outgoing and internal correspondence are also classified and filed according to subject, although this

category of material takes second priority to incoming material.

Files must be recalled when required by another user or when held for an unreasonable period of time. Returned files are shelved on a regular basis and staff do housekeeping chores such as replacing torn folders and closing filled volumes. Records operations have a schedule for the disposition and disposal of files. Such a schedule divides the subject files into various categories which, according to law or departmental requirements, must be maintained as active for a predetermined period of time. In a properly run Records office, files are methodically examined in the context of this schedule, kept on active shelves, stored in a dormant holding area or destroyed. A well-written schedule removes guess-work and judgment calls from file disposition and makes standard handling of records possible throughout an entire department. In Canada, Bill C-118, was passed to give official guidance in matters of records scheduling and retention. By this act of Parliament, Records have been divided into seven categories with stipulated retention periods for each. The guidelines show that, for example, financial records must be kept for six years and short-term health or safety records need be kept for two years only. This kind of legislation enables business and government to justify a departure from the "never throw anything away" syndrome and makes feasible the physical accommodation, in a practical sense, of records material. Proper scheduling of records in accordance with such legislation also has a very important effect on information retention for historic purposes, enabling staff to separate the wheat from the chaff in an impartial, unbiased way. Thus, records deal-

ing with government policy, international treaties, and other matters of historical importance are sifted from the routine flood of documents, destined for archival preservation at the end of their active file life.

My sorties into Records management have proved to be challenging and thought-provoking. Studying a new application for information has enabled me to take a fresh look at library problems which had become jaded through over-analysis. Many old solutions to library problems were novel approaches to Records issues. The similarity between these two information areas was remarkable when compared on a task by task basis.

In both Records and the library, classification of information by subject categorization forms the basis of our access mechanisms. Records routes correspondence via internal mail delivery in much the same way as the library routes current journals and publishers catalogues to internal users. Records signs out files on request the same as a library circulates material, using a card file for control. (Oddly enough, the idea of having a card and pocket attached to each file and used as the control in a procedure parallel to book circulation is quite foreign to Records, although feasible.) One of the primary tools used in Records classification is an alphabetically arranged card file with subject annotations, cross-indexed by numerical digit, very similar in concept and use to the public catalogue subject approach in libraries. The daily, unending housekeeping chores of recall, overdue, shelving and repairs are endemic to both areas. Records staff answer telephone (and in person) requests for information, and, like their library reference counterparts feel honour bound to produce results, leaving no

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RECORDS

LIBRARY

Classification	Classification
Routing	Routing
Sign-out	Circulation
Subject files	Public catalog (subject)
Filing	Shelving
Scheduling	Collection development
Disposal	Weeding
Storage/recall	Storage/paging
Requests for files	Reference
Statistics	Statistics

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stone unturned in the quest. Of course, statistics are the bane of our existence, regardless of our station. Both Records and the library are no exception: we collect them to prove and disprove theories and trends, depending upon the occasion. Sir Josiah Stamp, who was a collector of inland revenue for Her Majesty in the late 1800's said, "The government [is] extremely fond of amassing great quantities of statistics. These are raised to the nth degree, the cube roots are extracted, and the results are arranged into elaborate and impressive displays. What must be kept ever in mind, however, is that in every case, the figures are first put down by a village watchman, and he puts down anything he damn well pleases".² Statistics are more often used in defense than in offense.

The only aspect of Records which does not have an analogy in library operations is the process of scheduling and disposal of files. Few pieces of information in a library are ephemeral in nature. Weeding of

collections, when done at all, is done in response to a space pinch and then it is carried out with reluctance. Book knowledge, even in our scientific fields, has a capricious quality. If a book is new it is "current," then it goes through an indefinite period of time when it is non-current or out-of-date; then it attains an aura of being historic or archival. The value of book information is difficult to quantify in the same terms as Records information. However, I suspect this is a failure of librarians to address the problem of book obsolescence, in a structured manner, instead of on an ad hoc basis.

The staff of both the Records and Library operations suffer from the same handicaps imposed by their users - people are under the illusion that librarians "stamp out books" and Records staff "open mail". Our duties and responsibilities are misunderstood or, more accurately, under-rated. The PR function of the administrator or manager, therefore, takes on a new importance and must serve to educate as well as illuminate.

Records offices, like libraries, have severe space problems. Microform is seen as the ideal solution to Records space problems and, teamed with microcomputer technology, is heralded as the modern, efficient way to cope with the paper deluge. The selling point of micrographics is compactness. The replacement of a three drawer filing cabinet with three microfilm cartridges is, indeed, a strong incentive but caution should be exercised. The legal status of microform copies for Records operations is still unclear. Originals are still necessary in most financial and legal situations, so revolutionizing your office by a complete change to microform is unwise. In addition to these legal ramifications, we must realize that Records of historical signifi-

cance will be kept in their original form through to the archival stage. In these cases, microform is useful only as a duplicate working device while the original Records must be maintained in an accessible, but perhaps low-cost area off-site. The values of microform as space-savers are clear but conversion of Records operations from hard copy to microform must be approached with caution.

Both microform conversion and automation have the same high-technology attraction for modern offices. Unfortunately, the technology is seen as the solution to many problems which may be more simply cleared up by an analysis of manual procedures and work habits. When you automate a chaotic Records operation, the result is automated chaos. Marshall McLuen maintained that "the medium is the message"; however, in the context of Records, the message (or the information) is of paramount importance while the means of access is secondary.

The office of the future is leading us irretrievably toward the automation of many Records related functions. High speed telecommunication devices are replacing traditional methods of correspondence. Indeed, electronic mail between CRT's or word processors makes it possible for a "written" communication to pass from the sender's finger-tips to the receiver's eyes without ever touching paper or being recorded in the usual sense. The implications of such technology for Records operations are devastating - many records being produced are not even recognized as records.

Our technologies are out-running our records methodologies. Once, a typewritten original and a carbon copy would suffice. Now, in seconds a photocopier can produce dozens of copies and, better still, a word processor

can produce a dozen originals in almost the same time. We need a fresh approach to Records to enable us to cope with these machines and their consequences. The new information Acts may give us the incentive we need to begin and the support we need to be effective. The Access to Information Act in Canada provides "a right of access to information with the principles that government information should be available to the public..."⁵ Notice that the act covers "records" - not just published or unpublished information, but memos, drafts and all other correspondence as well. If government is to answer requests under this Act, and answer them fully in the spirit and letter of the law, efficient, speedy access to Records must be possible. A combination of the technologies with sound organizational structures is now called for to meet this requirement.

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