

Interoperability – Not just a word for the technical

“Interoperability” is a rather awful word initially coined in the 1970’s by the IT/Defence industries to describe the capacity of systems to play nicely with other systems. But it can mean so much more. Looking at the derivation, it comes from “inter” and “operate”. Work together, in other words. From the point of view of information and records management, this is about the two arms operating reciprocally to their mutual benefit and being the natural precursor to the ultimate goal of integration.

This article was inspired by the interesting and informative articles from Steve Neilsen and Robine Polach in previous editions. I found them to be an insightful commentary on the development of the information management industry and the emergence of the roles within it. But as with everything that discusses interesting and complicated subjects, I found that as well as answering many questions there were many related issues raised.

My background is not one of a records management or information management professional, but I’ve been guilty of that by association with EDRMS projects over a number of years. Just to complete the picture, my working life has been almost exclusively in the government sector, so this article is written largely from that perspective. Hopefully, some of my observations will have relevance to the commercial and non-government sectors too.

The main thrust of this article is to look at the connections between records management and information management and the emergence of the new (as yet unnamed) discipline that is a fusion of both. Many would say that this is not news. Perhaps not, but in what I have read, heard and seen I perceive that the establishment of this new discipline is still hindered by the retention of old bias from both of its parents. This is, of course, understandable. We all take much from our parents and some of those things we never leave behind. The trick is to know which bits to keep and to recognise those areas where we need to strike out on our own.

Recordkeeping in its formal sense is obviously a long established tradition, having its roots in clay tablets thousands of years ago. Even from the perspective of modern recordkeeping in large organisations, the fundamentals have been in place for many years. In the Australian Public Service context, we have a robust framework and Australians are rightly considered to be at the cutting edge of both theory and practice. The importance of the recordkeeping function has always been acknowledged, although often this acknowledgment has not always been accompanied by practice. This is changing, however, after recent examples of serious consequences of poor recordkeeping being played out in courts and parliaments, both here in Australia and overseas.

Information management is a much newer industry, but despite its relatively tender years, it is also mature and sophisticated, although individual organisations still struggle to come to grips with its challenges. And individuals too, if one can judge by what passes for my own personal filing system!

In the past ten years especially, records and information management have been converging to the great benefit of organisations that can do this well. The collaboration of Steve and Robine in their recent articles is illustrative of this. In that article, they pointed to examples of the kind of convergence I am talking about. Things such as the possible use of information available in datamarts to provide an enhanced range of transactions at ATMs and the importance of stakeholder management systems (or CRMs¹) as business underpinnings were highlighted.

OK, this has all been good news so far. So where is the “yes, but” in all of this? There are two major “buts” that I see. The first, as I alluded to before, is that there is still an inherent bias of perspective that arises from the history of both professions.

The second is the effect this has on operations. This aspect is an extensive topic all on its own and will be the subject of a future article.

Records management has been traditionally more interested in what is seen as the essential corporate record, generally things of medium to long term value, for example: the record of what has occurred and the maintenance of the corporate memory. Complex frameworks and processes have been developed to manage this considerable task in a way that can be managed within finite resources and keeps focus on the things of real and significant value. With the continual and voluminous additions to the corporate record that occur naturally everyday and the limitations of the essentially hard copy environment we have had for many decades, this was manifested by a focus on deciding what to keep and what to dispose of. Indeed, I’ve heard the observation that perhaps recordkeeping might be more accurately labelled “recordgettingridof”.

Information management too has its built-in bias. From a technology perspective, its tools grew out of data processing that had its first flush of growth in the 1960’s. However its real birth as a concept was in the 1980’s. This was when the potential of technology to deal with information requirements, especially strategic, of large organisations began to be realised. Not surprisingly, this closely paralleled the emergence of a multitude of large, trans-national entities where the flood of information began to assume Biblical proportions. Equally unsurprising, the focus was on reporting, especially at strategic level. After all, with an organisation of thousands of employees, operating in many locations or even countries and involving millions or even billions of dollars, talking about the importance of “the Big Picture” is not just rhetoric. And when it gets down to it, it is the most senior levels of management that have the greatest need to see the big picture and it is they who sign the cheques to develop the kinds of systems that are needed.

From my observations, the people who have been forgotten somewhat in this have tended to be the operational level people, the workers themselves. Operational level information is frequently ephemeral and while it forms the basis of what is fed into strategic level reporting, it is not of itself strategic in nature or focus. In the need to meet strategic level reporting requirements and discharge recordkeeping obligations, there has been a lessening of focus on how the jobs of workers can be made easier and more efficient. More traditional records management environments have had their eyes more firmly fixed on what is needed in a year or ten’s time than on what a worker at the desk needs right now. This is not as severe in

¹ Customer Relations Management

commercial customer-focussed organisations, but the negative effects of it still occur with tedious regularity.

This after-the-event mode of recordkeeping is in large part a natural consequence of the hard copy medium and the reality of what can be reasonably achieved within the available resources of people and time. It is better to create the record after the piece of work is complete and not include things that are temporary or in a state of change because the effort involved can be considerable and we should devote no more resources to the task than what is strictly necessary.

The advent of technological developments, particularly sophisticated EDRM systems, means that the ideal of integrating recordkeeping at the beginning of the life cycle of a transaction is now feasible. Features such as version control combined with the fact that so much of our work is created electronically means that our approach can now be “file first and then work” rather than the other way around. Documents can be created where they will reside long term. Files can be created on the spot as a transaction commences without waiting for the inevitable delay inherent in a hard copy environment. The biggest risk to any record, that of never making it into the recordkeeping system, is avoided because the record is effectively filed on creation, even from the first draft if that is required. Many records management professionals have already seen the opportunity for this paradigm shift, but there is much still to be achieved.

We can all think of situations where our customer experience has been adversely affected by what we see as fundamental deficiencies in the information systems available to customer service staff. In the public service context, this problem is severe and widespread. As someone who has been a clerical worker in many Departments over the years, I can attest that this problem has become worse rather than better with the advent of information technology. Even customer-focussed organisations such as Centrelink or State housing authorities that might be expected to be expert in this area still struggle, with the cost falling heavily on their customers. Anecdotes abound of people in difficult circumstances, often without much sophistication in dealing with bureaucracies, finding it horrendously difficult to obtain access to services as a result of inability to make use of known information already in the possession of the organisation. This might be procedural and policy material, information on related services or information relating to the customer themselves, especially where that information was obtained and acted on by a different function.

From the perspective of knowledge workers in areas without direct customer contact, an example of the bias of the information management professionals affecting the lives of the daily workers is the organisation and retrieval of the information that constitutes the inputs to their work. Let's use the organisation of information on shared networks as an example. There is always a folder structure of some sort to manage this. The recordkeepers' natural suggestion is to have the folder structure, if not exactly mirror, then be heavily influenced by the organisation's classification scheme. This is an attractive idea, but so often proves to be unworkable for the user at the desk. Why? Because the design of the classification scheme is influenced by factors that don't contribute to actually doing your job on a day to day basis². Organising work according to a functional classification scheme starts to break down when a single worker's responsibilities span many functions and their caseload is organised by other business priorities. This is especially true in a customer service environment when the aim is to provide an holistic service. The dreaded "one-stop shop". Of course, it doesn't have to be that way and there are techniques to ensure the design of a classification scheme takes account of this, but sadly it is rarely the case that those designing the scheme, the records management professionals, have the requirements of the worker uppermost in their mind.

The part of information management that grew from the technology side of the industry does this somewhat better, but even here the bias of the immediate past is evident. Apart from those who specialise in EDRM, organisation of data in documentary form has a way to go before it reaches the level of conceptual understanding that is inherent in the records management arm. I have encountered more than once a complete disdain for records management principles on the part of the technocrats. Who needs files when a big bucket and a decent search engine can do the job? "Google is king, the geek shall inherit the earth". There is limited understanding of the distinction between discovering anything that will do, discovering something specific and discovering everything.

The foregoing might give the unintended impression that all the work that remains to be done is the responsibility of information and records managers. This is far from being the case. Those at all levels of an organisation have their part to play and are equally at risk of being bound by the past. Slow acceptance of such things as digital signatures, use of electronic workflows and a recognition that a digital record can in most cases have the same forensic value as a piece of paper, as that was after all only a printed version of a born-digital document anyway. These are all things that must be resolved if the staff of an organisation are to truly benefit from the emerging technologies and throw off the shackles of history.

The major impediment I see to correcting this is again something that Steve and Robine referred to; "blinker vision", especially among those who should be leading the charge, our information and records management professionals. Having said that, it is in one sense understandable that blinkered vision should be a side effect of developing expertise. The more one becomes expert in one's field, the sharper is one's vision in that field to the detriment of leveraging that expertise in new ways.

² This is also a large topic in its own right. This will be covered in more detail in the follow-up article referred to earlier.

In my view, although the technology still has a way to go, it is already sophisticated enough to make a major contribution to addressing the problem. To be sure it is difficult and expensive, but the returns are enormous, both from a customer and an organisational point of view. The things we need to do to address our vision problems are:

- a preparedness to look behind mechanisms that we have mistaken for principles by virtue of long usage;
- a constant alertness to new opportunities and innovative ways of applying our expertise to operational business problems;
- combining this with a clear understanding of the opportunities afforded by technological developments
- making the clear distinction in the minds of those who set directions and pay the bills that information management and recordkeeping systems are not business applications but infrastructure and should be funded and developed as such;
- an enterprise-wide commitment to information architecture and meaningful action to ensure standards are set and maintained; and
- integration of our data sources to the maximum extent possible, taking account of limitations imposed by privacy and similar considerations.

In a real sense, our very experience and maturity is our greatest vulnerability. To quote one of my favourite aphorisms, “when you’re green you grow, when you’re ripe you rot”. A little over-dramatic perhaps, but the point is that we need to ensure we maintain a sense of the wide-eyed youth about our industry, despite the fact that we have so many of the wise and experienced among us.