



Information compliance and archives legislation in government departments and agencies

In every nation in the world, national, state and local government departments and agencies will have a variety of information management strategies which can range from leaving it to the organization to decide what gets kept through to complex document, records and knowledge management systems that will be designed to essentially capture the knowledge of the nation according to a formula.

Never before in history has information been so disposable and yet it would seem that everything should be there to make it easy to collect and store it. Historians and political commentators are concerned by the loss of a great deal of knowledge which having been generated in the digital world is not valued or retained as relevant to the history of the nation.

It is because information is generated in the digital world that anyone who looks at the issues has to be content with the claim that archives are intact. Archives legislation was designed to protect historical content but few government employees either know or are responsible for this. Checking the integrity of archives does not appear to be either possible or desirable.

Sadly, the only ones who will learn that important information has not been retained are those who will be looking for it. Those scholars and researchers will be the only ones to realise that it is missing. On the other than, it may be there but being able to access the information using the new search technologies will be a matter of getting inside the minds of those who created it and described it in the metadata or labels,



The problem with archives

The crucial role that information plays in the work of the organization will usually have been judged according to the needs of the creator and not on what might be its use at any other time and by any other person or group.

Authorities such as those appointed to maintain and monitor the archives legislation may have developed a set of guidelines or even a methodology for marking materials of significance and required to be archived according to the legislation. It is not surprising that given the high costs of applying the methodology, very few agencies and departments are compliant with the records retention and disposal policies at any given time.

This paper argues that all difficulties in dealing with the matter of information collection for use some time in the future begin with the way that information is organized in the first place.

When there were filing cabinets, most materials on the same topic were in the same place. Archives were made of this.

Technology offered a new freedom to create, collect and store information anywhere and everywhere and there arose a new set of claims that everything could be found and would be found anytime in the future.

There have been few challenges to this idea mainly because those who forward this claim are technology experts and with weight of the information technology industry behind them.

It is time to challenge this theory of circumventing the chaos and to ask what are the economic benefits of chaos on computer networks and its resulting chaos in information management.



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The economic benefits in chaos prevention

To deal with the chaos the IT industry has come up with document and knowledge management systems designed to collect this information. They are complex and designed by information management experts who have complete faith in these systems but no control over how they will be used.

For those who use these systems well, it works. For others it may be a complete waste of time and nobody really knows for sure what is collected and what is lost forever.

This paper is not arguing against these systems but it is arguing that it is time to look at preventing the chaos through information organization and to look at what it will mean for protecting the information assets for another time.

Before considering the benefits to archival policy of the eradication of chaos it is important to outline how that eradication can occur. This involves exploring a number of information management principles. There is no value to any organization in its information being located in folders in the name of people, departments, places or in 'my documents'. There is no value in information being located anywhere and everywhere and being tagged with metadata which must be used to find it again. There is great value in information being located (rather than labelled) according to the needs of the organization to its particular functions and to reflect its core and non-core business activities.



Best practice in information management

Organized information based on the functions of the organization is always going to be

- a blueprint for projects and processes
- secure and able to be supervised and monitored
- economically sound with benefits in productivity and use of time
- an index to the work of the organization
- the foundation for activities in retention and disposal
- permanent and not affected by organizational changes

The structure of information as a strategy makes available to the department or agency a place for management to:

- locate policy and compliance information
- provide a focus for delivering training
- locate information about access to all resources
- collect business knowledge as work is done
- provide a focus for links to all other relevant knowledge

Structured information management through an organized computer network is the foundation of the electronic office. Employees who trust the structure to provide security of information are less likely to use paper copies to provide security. Without the structured approach to computer networks the electronic office is just a myth.



Archives compliance at little cost

Ultimately, structured information may be archived according to the functions of the organization

- for information subject to archives legislation
- with no extra work by any personnel
- with an index available for later use
- at no extra cost to the organization or the government
- dealing with both digital and non-digital information

Business Information Organization is a strategy for managing information in any business. BIO is the structure that supports Ten Steps to Best Business.

This strategy is presented in the book, *Sleepers: the world's best-kept business secret*, and *Business Information Organization: 21st century best practice*, both by Kirby White, Melbourne, Ten Steps Business Publications, 2007 and 2008. The author has been an information management consultant over 18 years working in government, business and education. B Kirby White is a former national president Australian Library and Information Association.

Details of the strategy and information about the book and other materials are available from Ten Steps Business Publications at

<http://www.tensteps.com.au/>