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From records to information management: the experience of a young professional in the United Kingdom

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Professional path and formative experience abroad

CD: My first question is if you could introduce yourself as a young professional, if you can tell us a bit more about your background, your studies and your various jobs in records management.

WM: I completed an MA in Records and Archives Management at University College London in 2006–7. Prior to that, I had worked in a range of roles in information, archives, library management. Following completion of the MA, I worked as a records manager for a local government borough for six months. Subsequently I worked for one year with the International Records Management Trust (IRMT), a specialised consultancy focusing on improving records management mainly in developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Following that, I worked for the UK's leading international cultural relations organisation as a records manager and around that time I also started carrying out consultancy for the European Commission as a trainer for their document management system. I recently started a new job as information and knowledge manager for a UK Government organisation.

CD: Tell me about your path to the profession?

WM: My first job in records management was for an international development NGO in Cambodia. Prior to this I had some experience of working in libraries and archives in the UK. I was quickly convinced of the need for and value of records management and following completion of my work in Cambodia I enrolled for the internationally focussed Records and Archives Management MA at University College London.

Post-qualification employment

CD: How did the course prepare you for your first experience as a records manager? After one year of hard work, how did you feel when you started your job for the London borough?

WM: I felt overwhelmed; it was a definite shock to the system. I wouldn't say that I was well prepared for the reality of the situation that I faced. It was nothing like what I had been led to expect by the course. The borough has a massive number of Freedom of Information [FOI] requests, something like six hundred a year, among the highest for local government. Since its introduction in 2005 FOI had become the main focus and records management was the bit that got to be done when there was time. I was recruited to develop policies, an organisation-wide retention schedule and classification scheme and I was also resourced in order to respond to various requests that came in for assistance. The aim of the corporate records management function was to create a single, consistent approach to records across the organisation.

CD: How did you go about your shock to the system? After six months, did you feel more confident about your future input in records management?

WM: I think the big shock was that from the MA we learned the good practice, what organisations are meant to

do to best manage their records and the underlying theory. This ideal system is completely unapplicable to any sort of large scale bureaucracy where people don't follow policies and procedures. In reality it is very difficult to implement policies, there are multiple systems in place, there are competing agendas, and there are divisions and silos. I was trying to convince six thousand people to follow corporate policies for managing information – that was the shock. At the end of my time, I was less shocked. I definitely became more of a realist, more pragmatic, but I still have a belief that we can change things and I certainly saw the value of records management and that I was going to be in the job for a very long time! There was just so much to do, with multiple competing priorities combined with a lack of resources – a frequent issue for the information management function. I also saw the importance of stepping back and taking a corporate wide overview of what can be done through changing the organisation's working practices. This was a massive learning curve and I benefited hugely. I learned to do all sort of things, and was involved in a wide range of projects. The work was very interesting and I was supported by an excellent manager.

Misgivings on Electronic Documents and Records Management Systems (EDRMS); the importance of working with IT

CD: You mentioned before that you maybe were not so keen on EDRMS. Could you mention an experience where EDRMS were not working effectively?

WM: Yes, I think that this touches on the question of how to measure and demonstrate the benefits of records management. In short, I have seen no evidence to demonstrate that EDRMS, so largescale, corporatwide, complex, systems for managing documents and information, are good value for money. The UK public sector has spent millions and millions of pounds on these systems. There have been some largescale implementation failures, multiple successive failures in some cases. Even for those systems that are now in place and are judged to be successful, when you talk to users in those organisations, they don't like those systems and avoid using them wherever possible. Given the user resistance I am not convinced that those organisations are systematically and consistently capturing their most important information. The technology is juvenile, the systems are slow, clunky, not user friendly. They are massively expensive to implement, require huge investment in terms of IT resource, development, financial investment, training, change management, system development and process analysis. Despite the vast expense I have yet to see an EDRMS that I think is entirely successful. Having said that, I don't know what the alternative is for those organisations that need to demonstrate a flawless audit trail, perhaps the answer is to wait for the technology to mature.

CD: You don't go as far as to say we need to abandon completely EDRMS. I quite like your expression "juvenile systems". So maybe we can hope that developers will get better at it and will improve their products?

WM: I think developers do have to raise their game because of MS Sharepoint and other competing, lowcost, offthe shelf document management systems which do not have the functionality of a full EDRMS but can be implemented quickly. The other challengers are the relatively cheaper and customisable open source products such as Alfresco and webbased document management systems including Google Docs. These kinds of systems have differently structured licence models, may be webbased or virtually hosted, reducing infrastructure costs. However, for many government organisations the security and information risks of these systems are too great, meaning that they can't be used. There remains a need for EDRMS. However, if I were going to an organisation which wasn't working in a highly regulated environment, I would look at other, better value solutions. The running costs of an enterprisewide EDRMS in a large organisation would pay for a team of information managers, who could be on the floor within departments, providing effective, business-focussed advice and tools. This might be a more efficient use of resources.

CD: I share your views but I believe that it is easier to get budget to buy something technical, which sounds more like a new solution . . .

WM: IT is seen as an immediate answer to the information overload problem faced by organisations. An IT solution can improve already good information management practices. However, if you add an IT solution on top of poor practice, you simply compound the existing problems. In the worst case scenario you are spending huge amounts of money on a system that is not fit for purpose and that people don't want to use. For EDRMS you've got to think very carefully not only about the cost of the software, user licences, training support and administration, but also the user resource time used when asking people to carry their own filing and document management and the potential resistance. This can be very costly.

CD: In this context, what would you say about your collaboration with the IT department? I mean not only in your current position but in your career so far?

WM: IT normally understand the role of the records manager and are natural allies. In several of my roles I have been based within IT departments, which I think is a good place to be, it allows easier collaboration on projects and sharing of experience and means that you are more aware of new developments and can provide a records management steerage from the early stages of proposals.

Demonstrating the benefits of records management

CD: Finally, one remark and my last question. For the two of us, I think that records management is obvious, the need and the benefits of it are obvious. Why do you think it's not so obvious for people around us?

WM: You say it's obvious to you that records management is a good idea and once you know a bit about it, you realise "yes, it's obvious, clearly we should be doing this". Records managers have for years been saying it's important and has lots of benefits, however, we have no empirical evidence! Records managers are not effective at providing evidence that their role is good value for money and it addresses a clear business benefit. As a profession we need to do more. Projects are underway at the moment in the UK and elsewhere trying to do just that. Records management also has an image problem, people don't know about it. While they know they've got a problem in managing their information they don't know who should solve it – often, they think IT should provide the solution. So it's about saying "your e-mails are in a mess, you've got 7,000 emails in your Inbox and you've got information overload . . . a records manager can help you with that!", "you've got 20 versions of the same document and you don't know which one is right or the one that's up to date, records management can help you with that." It's up to records managers to reach out to people, provide solutions, and make that link. That is one of the most effective ways of demonstrating the benefits.



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