Great Expectations

A Discussion of the Challenges of Managing Information in a Rapidly Changing Digital Environment

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The progression from paper-based to digital forms of recorded information has caused a number of changes for professionals in the fields of records and information management. These changes bring with them a series of challenges, in addition to numerous opportunities. These challenges include everything from the increased quantity of digital information created (Bailey, 2009; McDonald, 2010; Lappin, 2010) to the challenge of ensuring information preservation in a world of ever-changing technologies (Bailey, 2009). The purpose of this discussion is to highlight three of those challenges – technology, user’s roles and expectations, and organizational needs and responsibilities – by drawing ideas, concepts and theories from literature produced by international experts on this subject. Throughout this discussion, I will comment on how these challenges can be overcome and hold the potential for information management professionals, users, and organizations to interact with recorded information in ways we never have before – generating greater support, validation and growth for this field.

I will begin this discussion by summarizing the article that I have founded this paper on: Joseph, Debowski and Goldschmidt’s Paradigm shifts in recordkeeping responsibilities: implications for ISO 15489’s implementation, which was published in Records Management Journal in 2012. In my opinion, this article not only provides a thorough survey and analysis of changes that have occurred with regards to recordkeeping, but also groups these challenges in a clear and logical fashion under three drivers: “technology”, “user expectations of how they manage and access corporate information”, and “organisational expectations” (Joseph, Debowski & Goldschmidt, 2012, p.61-63). In my discussion, I will adopt these groupings to discuss three of the challenges currently facing information management professionals.

As the title of the article suggests, the authors plant their discussion in the context of the International Standard for Records Management, ISO 15489. However, for the purpose of this discussion, I will not be concentrating such a great emphasis on this. In addition to describing the three drivers outlined above and providing an overview of ISO 15489 (p.58-60), Joseph, Debowski
and Goldschmidt (2012) discuss the theory of a record (p.60-61) and outline in great detail how the aforementioned drivers with affect records management concepts and tools, classification schemes, auto classification, folksonomies and taxonomies and the semantic web, metadata, retention and disposal schedules, and security and access (p. 64-69). These principles will be discussed in greater detail further in this discussion.

My review of literature produced by international experts on records management also included McDonald’s *Records management and data management: closing the gap*. Although this article was published in 2010, it is taken from a speech delivered in 1988 and provides an interesting perspective given it was written almost thirty years ago. McDonald’s piece presents the challenges of records and information management within the framework of records management against data management (or Information Technology). As will be exhibited further in this discussion, many of the challenges McDonald brings forward are similar to those raised by the other authors, writing over two decades later.

McDonald (2010), however, focusses his piece on the dangerous misunderstanding between data management and records management – the differences in education, qualifications, remuneration and prestige of the professionals who practice data management and those who are responsible for records management (p. 55-56) and the differences in systems and techniques employed by those who conduct data management and those who perform records management (p. 56). He argues that this misunderstanding is further complicated by users who are unsure of their role (p. 54), a misrepresentation of a difference between the terms data and record (p. 54), and a “fragmented legislative and policy framework that governs the management of information in organizations” (p. 55) which results from these divisions. According to McDonald (2010), all of these factors make up an organization’s landscape (p. 54). He recommends that before undertaking an information management initiative, it is crucial for information professionals to understand this landscape (McDonald, 2010, p. 54). Furthermore, McDonald (2010) predicts “that the sheer
necessity of users” will require players from both sides of the data and records management table to combine their tools, concepts, and practices in order to respond to users’ needs (p. 58). This is, of course, a prediction that has been proven true and remains an ongoing challenge for information management professionals.

In his article — What will be the next records management orthodoxy? — published in 2010, Lappin (2010) points to some of the challenges that McDonald and others over twenty-five years earlier may not have anticipated, such as “the increased choice as to how and where [users] keep their records (p. 254) and how the switch from paper to digital documents remains on-going (p. 255). Additionally, nearly a decade after they were introduced, Lappin conducts a review of two records management theories — the Design and Implementation of Record Keeping Systems (DIRKS) and the Records Continuum) — that came out of the electronic document and records management system (EDRMS) model introduced in 2001 (p. 252). The purpose of his piece is to question the validity of these two theories, given the withdrawal of the EDRMS model (Lappin, 2010, p. 252) as well as answer the question which is the title of his piece: What will be the next records management orthodoxy? (Lappin, 2010, p. 252). In addition to responding to these questions, Lappin also points to a number of challenges that remain, some of which will be discussed in greater detail further in this piece.

The final piece I reviewed is Bailey’s 2009 article entitled, Forget electronic records management, it’s automated records management that we desperately need. Bailey’s work provides a comparatively novel perspective by suggesting that we extend our view by looking beyond the theories, concepts, practices and standards of records management to the IT industry and automated information management systems. Like McDonald (2010) does with data management and records management, Bailey (2009) claims that electronic records management and records management are one and the same (p. 92-93). However, Bailey (2009) argues that all we have done is changed the
name, since processes and systems to manage electronic records continue to reflect those that were designed for paper (p. 93).

Rather than be disappointed by the little progress we have made in response to the demands caused by technological advances, Bailey suggests (2009) that we “look to trends and developments in the IT industry for the inspiration and ideas that we can then amend and utilise for our own records management-related purposes” (p. 94). In order to illustrate how we may proceed to do that, Bailey (2009) outlines some of the record keeping and information management features of Amazon: qualitative information garnered through reviews (p. 95), quantitative data of statistics (p. 95), and features that add context by linking users to similar products (p. 95-96). It is certainly plausible that each of these processes could be applied and scaled to an information management system and context, if, as Bailey (2009) suggests, we come to terms with the limitations of current systems given the quantity of information now produced, and turn to an automated records management approach (p. 96).

Now that I have provided a brief summary of each of the articles I reviewed, I will outline three major challenges that sprung from this review: technology, user’s roles and expectations, and organizational needs and responsibilities. These challenges are broad in their scope and encompass many smaller difficulties in terms of records and information management. Additionally, none of these challenges exist in a vacuum and each one is linked to the other in either one or many ways. However, for the purpose of this brief discussion, I will look at these challenges individually.

It should go without saying to state that changes in technology have caused challenges for records and information management. This statement certainly would not add much to this ongoing discussion. However, looking more closely at the ways in which these technological challenges have presented themselves can hopefully help records and information management professionals resolve these obstacles and become better aligned with the possibilities presented by these technologies.
The challenges for records and information management associating with technology are numerous. Joseph, Debowski and Goldschmidt (2012) point to the increase of social media platforms and other Web 2.0 applications that are now widely used and, perhaps more importantly, financially invested in by organizations (p. 61-62). As new Web 2.0 tools become available and usage continues to increase, there is now a recognized need to integrate the approaches and principles of records management with these platforms (Joseph, Debowski & Goldschmidt, 2012, p.62). Lappin (2010) outlines how organizations and users are faced with many options for how and where they store the information they create (p. 254). Building on this notion, he points to the need develop systems that can function across and between numerous platforms, whether these are web-based or if information is from shared network drives, e-mail, SharePoint, or other systems (Lappin, 2010, p. 258); a notion also recommended by McDonald (2010, p. 58). However, even with systems in place, Bailey (2009) notes the problems associating with the versioning of records, duplicate records, and the issues with preserving and providing access to these records in an ever-changing technological setting (p. 92). These are only a small sampling of the technological challenges presented in the literature produced by international experts on this subject.

Linked to changes in technology, there have also been a number of changes to user’s roles and expectations, which have resulted in a number of challenges. According to Lappin (2010), “what happened with the switch over from analogue to digital record keeping was that the barriers between record keeping systems and other types of systems […] collapsed” (p.256), causing the record creating systems to become the record keeping systems. With this change, users responsible for creating records have now become responsible for keeping those records, and therefore practicing records management (Joseph, Debowski & Goldschmidt, 2012, p.64). Many challenges have come out of this shift, including users’ difficulty in applying information management practices, such as classification schemes, metadata, and taxonomies (Joseph, Debowski & Goldschmidt, 2012, p.64-66). However, this change in users’ role also presents a unique opportunity to engage with users in
new ways and develop systems that are more responsive to their needs. With regards to expectations, challenges include satisfying users’ needs for dynamic, aesthetically-pleasing, and accessible records and information management systems (Joseph, Debowski & Goldschmidt, 2012, p.64-66). Since records and information management professionals are no longer the only users of these systems, there is a great need to understand all users, their needs and their abilities, and then design systems according to these specifications – all of which present significant challenges.

Finally, I will outline some of the challenges that relate to organizational needs and responsibilities. Joseph, Debowski and Goldschmidt (2012) draw attention to an organization’s need to comply with legislation as well as be transparent and accountable in their operations (p. 62). As discussed earlier in this piece, MacDonald (2010) argues that organizations are also challenged by a “fragmented legislative and policy framework” (p. 55). All of these certainly provide challenges for our field and require not only an understanding of legislation and its ongoing developments, but also the ability to produce evidence (in the form of records) to prove the organization’s actions. How effectively an organization’s records are maintained will certainly affects its accountability in this regard.

In addition to the challenges associated with these needs, there are also numerous challenges related to the responsibilities of records and information management professionals within an organization. As previously discussed, McDonald (2010) outlines these in terms of data management versus records management and claims that a lack of clear definitions of roles and responsibilities will create numerous challenges for an organization (p. 55). These roles and the responsibilities within an organization continue to require further definition and remain a significant challenge in preventing the management, preservation and accessibility of records. Joseph, Debowski and Goldschmidt (2012) recommend, and I would agree, that “perhaps it is time to include recordkeeping responsibilities in the twenty-first century’s knowledge workers’ job description” (p. 69). This would not only draw attention to the importance of this practice, but would also require both
organizations and its employees to develop an understanding of records and information management within the context of their organization.

In closing, drawing from the literature produced by international experts on this subject and outlined in this piece, I would argue that there are a number of ways to face these challenges. It could be looking to the world of IT, as suggested by Bailey (2009). Or perhaps, as recommended by Lappin (2010), it is time to develop a new convention for records management given the new needs of electronic document and records management. Back in 1988, McDonald (2010) suggested a more comprehensive approach by linking tools, involving users, changing policies, and widespread planning. In addition to these solutions and numerous others, Joseph, Debowksi and Goldschmidt (2012) recommend, we develop a stronger understanding of our users’ needs as well as their abilities and be proactive rather than reactive in terms of technologies.

It is quite likely that all of this is required in order for records management systems to work, work for its users, and continue to work for some time. However, rather than attempting to implement all of these strategies at one time, records and information management professionals must assess the needs and capacity of their organization, develop a comprehensive plan, strategy, and system for records management — with the needs of and abilities of users as well as technology available in mind — and, most importantly, be flexible in terms of changing any part of this if it is no longer working. This flexibility will allow records and information management professionals to apply new technologies as well as better respond user and organizational needs.
Reference List


