

Back to the Future:

Time-Tested Fundamentals Meet Challenges of Technology

By sticking with long-established fundamentals of records and information management (RIM) practices and basing their RIM programs on well-established standards, RIM professionals will be able to adapt to changing technologies and the issues that arise with them.

Alexandra “Sandie” Bradley, CRM, and Uta Fox, CRM

The theme for this article could be – in the English translation of French writer and critic Jean Baptiste Alphonse Karr’s famous observation about the French Revolution – “the more things change, the more they stay the same.”

For, despite the changes in technologies for preparing and maintaining records, the vital role of recorded information management in organizations has remained constant through time. The fundamental practices of records management remain the same and bring stability to organizations that value their information assets. (For an historical look at the records management tradition, see the sidebar, “The Roots of Records Management” on page 35).

‘Records’ and ‘Records Management’

Each organization must define its records management program to suit not only the professional practices required of records, but also the specific context in which the organization operates. So, an initial step in establishing a program is to determine what information assets are defined

as records. This may not be as simple as the statement implies.

As an example, public bodies may operate with a definition of a record that covers *any* document that is created or received by the organization. Also, with concerns to legal and regulatory requirements, organizations may determine that, for discovery purposes, *every* document is considered a record.

In its *Glossary of Records and Information Management Terms, 3rd edition*, ARMA International defines *records* as “the evidence of what an organization does” and *records management* as “the systematic control of records throughout their life cycle.”

An expanded definition of *records management* is provided within the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standard *ISO 15489-1:2001 Information and Documentation – Records Management – Part 1: General* (ISO 15489-1) as the “field of management responsible for the efficient and systematic control of the creation, receipt, maintenance, use and disposition of records, including processes for capturing and maintaining evidence of and information

about business activities and transactions in the form of records.”

These definitions provide the basis for determining the records within an organization, as well as:

- The location of the organization
- General laws of applicability
- Specific laws
- Legal or professional jurisdictions
- Industrial codes of practice
- External governing bodies that may have an impact on an organization’s scope in determining what is considered a “record” to be managed

Program Fundamentals as Described by ISO 15489-1

Although formal records management was defined in the late 1940s, it was not a new management system. Rather, it was the collection and articulation of thousands of years of practice in managing records.

The most recent significant event occurred in 2001, when, as mentioned above, ISO produced the first international standard for records management, ISO 15489-1.

In the July 2001 *Information Management Journal* article “The World’s First International Records



Management Standard,” David O. Stephens, CRM, CMC, FAI, proclaimed ISO 15489 to be the most significant thing ever to happen to international records management because it has the effect of legitimizing records management as a global management discipline.

ISO 15489-1 provides the essence and framework of a systematic RIM program while documenting the fundamental principles of RIM, all in an effort to standardize international records management. The subsequent technical report, ISO 15489-2 *Information and Documentation – Records Management – Part 2: Guidelines* (ISO 15489-2) provides guidelines for implementing the information in Part 1.

The key elements of records and information management are defined and reviewed within the standard. Foremost is the requirement that organizations should have a records management policy.

RIM Policy

In Section 6.2, ISO 15489-1 recommends that the organization defines and documents a RIM policy with the objective of creating and managing “authentic, reliable, and useable” records that will support its business functions in terms of evidence, accountability, and information about its activities.

This requires a thorough evaluation of the organization’s business activities, including any legislation (national and international), regulations, standards, or best practices that may apply to its business actions.

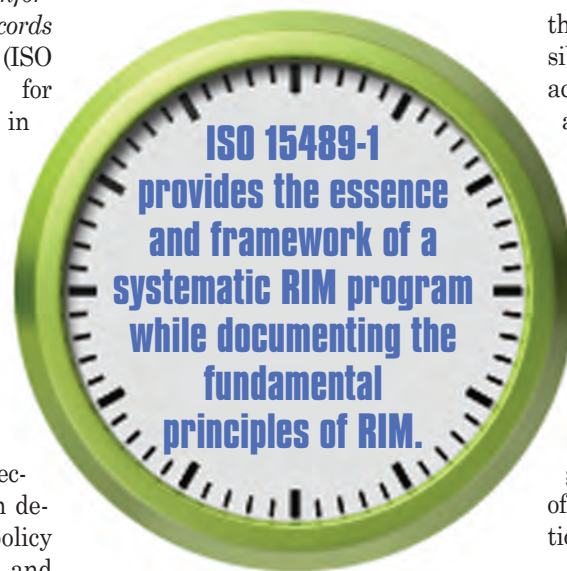
The standard also says the policy requires the approval of the organization’s senior management, and that approval should be communicated to all employees.

This approved written RIM policy is an organization’s authority to manage its records from creation to dispo-

sition and is not only the foundation of the RIM program, but also a springboard for its further development.

And, while the policy encompasses and reflects the laws, statutes, regulations, standards, and best practices that govern or impact the organization, its compliance to that policy provides the validation for the RIM program.

ISO 14589 recommends that a RIM policy devised through an analysis of its business activities will result



in the RIM program’s integration into the business of the organization, demonstrating that RIM is not a stand-alone initiative, but a responsibility for all employees of an organization.

RIM Responsibilities

Section 6.3, defines employee RIM responsibilities as part of the RIM policy.

All job descriptions should identify RIM responsibilities. To accurately perform their RIM duties, employees need to be aware of and know who is responsible for all aspects of the RIM program throughout the organization, including the RIM staff, the records manager, and any employees as-

signed RIM responsibilities.

Additionally, employees need to know:

- How departments, such as legal and information technology, impact the RIM program
- The individuals in those departments who are responsible for performing RIM duties
- What their RIM duties are

The policy should identify who trains employees and writes the procedures to manage records and information.

Finally, the policy should specify that all employees have RIM responsibilities, as well as responsibility and accountability for keeping complete and accurate records.

Definition of “Record”

Another important fundamental principle of RIM, and a challenging aspect for organizations today, is how they define a record. ISO 15489-1 defines a *record* as “information created, received, and maintained as evidence and information by an organization or person, in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business.”

A record’s content is evidence of and reflects business activities, events, actions, operations, transactions, and processes. It supports decision-making and operational management, and it provides accountability. It is also a business asset and resource.

To be considered authoritative, records must contain the following characteristics noted in ISO 15489-1.

Characteristics of a Record

Section 7.2 describes *authoritative records* as those that possess these characteristics:

- **Authenticity** – There is evidence that the record is what it purports to be.
- **Reliability** – There is confidence that the record’s content is a full and

The Roots of Records Management

“The profession of keeper of records is as old as the first societal groups, because the need of a memory arises naturally in any organization,” the noted records management educator Luciana Duranti, Ph.D., wrote in the July 1989 *Records Management Quarterly* article “The Odyssey of Records Management Part 1 – From the Dawn of Civilization to the Fall of the Roman Empire.”

In this and her Part 2 article in the October 1989 issue, Duranti traces the history of records management from ancient to modern times and documents the practices through the ages with which people performed functions very similar to records managers today in capturing and maintaining information about activities and transactions on behalf of their creators.

The systematic management of records became evident during the 15th to 18th centuries. In Western European governments, Duranti wrote in a similarly named essay in *Canadian Archival Studies and The Rediscovery of Provenance*, bureaucracies had instituted “...an ordered production and maintenance of records,” documentation became more precise, and records repositories (similar to records centers) stored such records as notarial deeds which “...had, by law, to be filed, classified, and indexed.”

With the growth of such social institutions as hospitals, universities, banks, and charitable organizations that were connected to the state, Duranti wrote, these institutions felt compelled to conform to the state’s systematic way of managing records “...according to the methods used in the government bureaucracy.” Thus, the systematization of records management had begun.

The definition and practice of records management itself occurred just following World War II. The U.S. government defined records management in the late 1940s, however, as illustrated in the research cited, the practice of managing records has been a societal, business, and government function since antiquity.

While the tools for creating records have advanced from oral to diverse recorded forms, the techniques have followed a familiar pattern of collecting, organizing, cataloguing, retrieving, disposing, or preserving the materials as presented.

In modern organizations, information is at the center of all business functions, whether for daily decision making, future planning, regulatory compliance, or history. How this information is managed has a direct impact on the organization’s ability to operate currently and into the future.

accurate representation of the actions, activities, and transactions that created the record.

- Integrity – The record is complete, unaltered, and protected from unauthorized alteration.
- Usability – The record can be located, retrieved, presented, and interpreted.

To ensure authenticity, records must be created and managed as a result of the organization’s usual and ordinary course of business, and a documented control system to manage the creation and management of records (e.g., policies, procedures, and guidelines) needs to be maintained.

The characteristic of reliability

also speaks to the recordkeeping system’s ability to capture and organize records required for the organization while protecting the records from unauthorized modifications or dispositions and providing access to those authorized to view the records.

RM Processes and Controls

Section 9 of ISO 15489-1 focuses on records management processes and controls. Of particular interest are registration, classification, and disposition.

Registration – Section 9.4 requires evidence that a record has been created or captured by the recordkeeping system. Not only does registration assist retrieval, but it provides metadata unique to the record.

Classification – Section 9.5 describes classification as a powerful tool to assist the conduct of business and in many of the processes involved in the management of records, including assisting in the retrieval of records, allocating user permissions for access to or action on particular groups of records, and determining appropriate retention and disposition actions.

Classification involves not only the system of arrangement of information, but also the vocabulary, allocation of coding, and levels of security. The development of records classification is a specialization within the professional practice of records management, and there are a wide number of professional sources and standards for users, including the ARMA International guideline *Establishing Alphabetic, Numeric and Subject Filing Systems*.

Disposition – ISO 15489-1’s Section 9.9 stresses that disposition should be systematic, routine, and part of normal business activity. For disposition to take place, retention requirements must have ceased, and disposition must be authorized. If litigation is pending, foreseen, or occur-

ring, disposition is suspended for any records associated with the litigation.

Other RIM Program Guidance

ISO 15489-2

Reinforcing the descriptions of the RM program components above, ISO 15489-2 further expands the requirements and methodology for the development of policy and the “principle instruments used in records management: a) a classification scheme that is based on business activities; b) a records disposition authority; and c) a security and access classification scheme.”

All aspects of the records management processes must be documented for standardization, as well as to provide staff guidance and training. Whether the documentation consists of one procedure manual or several devoted to specific aspects of the records management program will depend on the nature and complexity of the records management program.

In whatever format or content, the records management manual will become the organization’s eyewitness to the comprehensiveness of the RIM program. The manual should be considered a permanent essential record and be protected accordingly.

GARP®

ARMA International’s Generally Accepted Recordkeeping Principles® (GARP®), which evolved, in part, from ISO 15489, embed the standard’s program elements with additional statements on accountability and transparency that define how programs will be operated. The GARP® principles, maturity model, and other resources are available at www.arma.org/GARP.

In a December 2010 *Information Management* magazine web-exclusive article, “Ten Years After: RIM Standards Evolve Slowly,” Gordon E.J.

Hoke, CRM, provides a useful comparison of ISO 15489-2 and GARP®. It is available at <http://content.arma.org/IMM/online/InformationManagement.aspx>.

People Fundamentals

As clearly identified in ISO 15489-1 and in the GARP® principles, the success of a RIM program depends upon a number of different staff members in an organization.

Going beyond the statements within ISO 15489-1, organizations must identify the responsibilities



for records creators, custodians, and users, and they must provide training to ensure that all individuals are aware of their requirements.

At minimum, training programs should encompass the roles and responsibilities of all members of management, employees, contractors, volunteers, and other individuals responsible for creating or receiving records.

Frequently, “end users,” or staff members, are the key to program success, as most staff create, receive, and use recorded information in their work. Consequently, most RIM programs achieve success through cooperation.

According to author Bruce Dearstyne in *Managing Records and Information Programs: Principles, Techniques, and Tools*, “One of the tasks of the RIM manager is to figure out ways of working with and through other offices in the organization.”

A partnership with information technology staff is also mandatory when the information formats are electronic and the systems and tools are managed by the technology sector of the organization.

Future Fundamentals

In the article mentioned above, Hoke described records management as “wearing technology like a runway model at a fashion show,” who models dress after dress, but never changes her walk.

He uses this analogy to make the point that records’ value is in their content, not in their visible format or medium. Nevertheless, it is easy to be distracted by the dress the model is wearing.

This refrain about current technology challenges circles back to the theme for this article: the more things change, the more they stay the same.

While the technologies used in RIM have changed considerably throughout the years, the fundamentals of records management and its practices have remained constant. So, although new formats for creating and managing information will continue to be created, sticking with the fundamentals and following the standards-based approach described above will enable RIM professionals to analyze any new format or tool and devise a process strategy for addressing what information management issues may arise. **END**

Alexandra “Sandie” Bradley, CRM, can be contacted at harwoodinfo@telus.net. Uta Fox, CRM, can be contacted at ufox@calgarypolice.ca. See their bios on page 46.